

War by Media and the Triumph of Propaganda

By [John Pilger](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Why has so much journalism succumbed to propaganda? Why are censorship and distortion standard practice? Why is the BBC so often a mouthpiece of rapacious power? Why do the New York Times and the Washington Post deceive their readers?

Why are young journalists not taught to understand media agendas and to challenge the high claims and low purpose of fake objectivity? And why are they not taught that the essence of so much of what's called the mainstream media is not information, but power?

These are urgent questions. The world is facing the prospect of major war, perhaps nuclear war – with the United States clearly determined to isolate and provoke Russia and eventually China. This truth is being turned upside down and inside out by journalists, including those who promoted the lies that led to the bloodbath in Iraq in 2003.

The times we live in are so dangerous and so distorted in public perception that propaganda is no longer, as Edward Bernays called it, an “invisible government”. It is the government. It rules directly without fear of contradiction and its principal aim is the conquest of us: our sense of the world, our ability to separate truth from lies.

The information age is actually a media age. We have war by media; censorship by media; demonology by media; retribution by media; diversion by media – a surreal assembly line of obedient clichés and false assumptions.

This power to create a new “reality” has building for a long time. Forty-five years ago, a book entitled *The Greening of America* caused a sensation. On the cover were these words: “There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. It will originate with the individual.”

I was a correspondent in the United States at the time and recall the overnight elevation to guru status of the author, a young Yale academic, Charles Reich. His message was that truth-telling and political action had failed and only “culture” and introspection could change the world.

Within a few years, driven by the forces of profit, the cult of “me-ism” had all but overwhelmed our sense of acting together, our sense of social justice and internationalism. Class, gender and race were separated. The personal was the political, and the media was the message.

In the wake of the cold war, the fabrication of new “threats” completed the political disorientation of those who, 20 years earlier, would have formed a vehement opposition. In 2003, I filmed an interview in Washington with Charles Lewis, the distinguished American investigative journalist. We discussed the invasion of Iraq a few months earlier. I asked him, “What if the freest media in the world had seriously challenged George Bush and Donald

Rumsfeld and investigated their claims, instead of channeling what turned out to be crude propaganda?"

He replied that if we journalists had done our job "there is a very, very good chance we would have not gone to war in Iraq."

That's a shocking statement, and one supported by other famous journalists to whom I put the same question. Dan Rather, formerly of CBS, gave me the same answer. David Rose of the Observer and senior journalists and producers in the BBC, who wished to remain anonymous, gave me the same answer.

In other words, had journalists done their job, had they questioned and investigated the propaganda instead of amplifying it, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children might be alive today; and millions might not have fled their homes; the sectarian war between Sunni and Shia might not have ignited, and the infamous Islamic State might not now exist.

Even now, despite the millions who took to the streets in protest, most of the public in western countries have little idea of the sheer scale of the crime committed by our governments in Iraq. Even fewer are aware that, in the 12 years before the invasion, the US and British governments set in motion a holocaust by denying the civilian population of Iraq a means to live.

Those are the words of the senior British official responsible for sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s - a medieval siege that caused the deaths of half a million children under the age of five, reported Unicef. The official's name is Carne Ross. In the Foreign Office in London, he was known as "Mr. Iraq". Today, he is a truth-teller of how governments deceive and how journalists willingly spread the deception. "We would feed journalists factoids of sanitised intelligence," he told me, "or we'd freeze them out."

The main whistleblower during this terrible, silent period was Denis Halliday. Then Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and the senior UN official in Iraq, Halliday resigned rather than implement policies he described as genocidal. He estimates that sanctions killed more than a million Iraqis.

What then happened to Halliday was instructive. He was airbrushed. Or he was vilified. On the BBC's Newsnight programme, the presenter Jeremy Paxman shouted at him: "Aren't you just an apologist for Saddam Hussein?" The Guardian recently described this as one of Paxman's "memorable moments". Last week, Paxman signed a £1 million book deal.

The handmaidens of suppression have done their job well. Consider the effects. In 2013, a ComRes poll found that a majority of the British public believed the casualty toll in Iraq was less than 10,000 - a tiny fraction of the truth. A trail of blood that goes from Iraq to London has been scrubbed almost clean.

Rupert Murdoch is said to be the godfather of the media mob, and no one should doubt the augmented power of his newspapers - all 127 of them, with a combined circulation of 40 million, and his Fox network. But the influence of Murdoch's empire is no greater than its reflection of the wider media.

The most effective propaganda is found not in the Sun or on Fox News - but beneath a liberal halo. When the New York Times published claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, its fake evidence was believed, because it wasn't Fox News; it was the

New York Times.

The same is true of the Washington Post and the Guardian, both of which have played a critical role in conditioning their readers to accept a new and dangerous cold war. All three liberal newspapers have misrepresented events in Ukraine as a malign act by Russia – when, in fact, the fascist led coup in Ukraine was the work of the United States, aided by Germany and Nato.

This inversion of reality is so pervasive that Washington’s military encirclement and intimidation of Russia is not contentious. It’s not even news, but suppressed behind a smear and scare campaign of the kind I grew up with during the first cold war.

Once again, the evil empire is coming to get us, led by another Stalin or, perversely, a new Hitler. Name your demon and let rip.

The suppression of the truth about Ukraine is one of the most complete news blackouts I can remember. The biggest Western military build-up in the Caucasus and eastern Europe since world war two is blacked out. Washington’s secret aid to Kiev and its neo-Nazi brigades responsible for war crimes against the population of eastern Ukraine is blacked out. Evidence that contradicts propaganda that Russia was responsible for the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner is blacked out.

And again, supposedly liberal media are the censors. Citing no facts, no evidence, one journalist identified a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine as the man who shot down the airliner. This man, he wrote, was known as The Demon. He was a scary man who frightened the journalist. That was the evidence.

Many in the western media have worked hard to present the ethnic Russian population of Ukraine as outsiders in their own country, almost never as Ukrainians seeking a federation within Ukraine and as Ukrainian citizens resisting a foreign-orchestrated coup against their elected government.

What the Russian president has to say is of no consequence; he is a pantomime villain who can be abused with impunity. An American general who heads Nato and is straight out of Dr. Strangelove — one General Breedlove – routinely claims Russian invasions without a shred of visual evidence. His impersonation of Stanley Kubrick’s General Jack D. Ripper is pitch perfect.

Forty thousand Ruskies were massing on the border, according to Breedlove. That was good enough for the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Observer — the latter having previously distinguished itself with lies and fabrications that backed Blair’s invasion of Iraq, as its former reporter, David Rose, revealed.

There is almost the joi d’esprit of a class reunion. The drum-beaters of the Washington Post are the very same editorial writers who declared the existence of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction to be “hard facts”.

“If you wonder,” wrote Robert Parry, “how the world could stumble into world war three – much as it did into world war one a century ago – all you need to do is look at the madness that has enveloped virtually the entire US political/media structure over Ukraine where a false narrative of white hats versus black hats took hold early and has proved impervious to facts or reason.”

Parry, the journalist who revealed Iran-Contra, is one of the few who investigate the central role of the media in this “game of chicken”, as the Russian foreign minister called it. But is it a game? As I write this, the US Congress votes on Resolution 758 which, in a nutshell, says: “Let’s get ready for war with Russia.”

In the 19th century, the writer Alexander Herzen described secular liberalism as “the final religion, though its church is not of the other world but of this”. Today, this divine right is far more violent and dangerous than anything the Muslim world throws up, though perhaps its greatest triumph is the illusion of free and open information.

In the news, whole countries are made to disappear. Saudi Arabia, the source of extremism and western-backed terror, is not a story, except when it drives down the price of oil. Yemen has endured twelve years of American drone attacks. Who knows? Who cares?

In 2009, the University of the West of England published the results of a ten-year study of the BBC’s coverage of Venezuela. Of 304 broadcast reports, only three mentioned any of the positive policies introduced by the government of Hugo Chavez. The greatest literacy programme in human history received barely a passing reference.

In Europe and the United States, millions of readers and viewers know next to nothing about the remarkable, life-giving changes implemented in Latin America, many of them inspired by Chavez. Like the BBC, the reports of the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Guardian and the rest of the respectable western media were notoriously in bad faith. Chavez was mocked even on his deathbed. How is this explained, I wonder, in schools of journalism?

Why are millions of people in Britain are persuaded that a collective punishment called “austerity” is necessary?

Following the economic crash in 2008, a rotten system was exposed. For a split second the banks were lined up as crooks with obligations to the public they had betrayed.

But within a few months — apart from a few stones lobbed over excessive corporate “bonuses” — the message changed. The mugshots of guilty bankers vanished from the tabloids and something called “austerity” became the burden of millions of ordinary people. Was there ever a sleight of hand as brazen?

Today, many of the premises of civilised life in Britain are being dismantled in order to pay back a fraudulent debt – the debt of crooks. The “austerity” cuts are said to be £83 billion. That’s almost exactly the amount of tax avoided by the same banks and by corporations like Amazon and Murdoch’s News UK. Moreover, the crooked banks are given an annual subsidy of £100bn in free insurance and guarantees – a figure that would fund the entire National Health Service.

The economic crisis is pure propaganda. Extreme policies now rule Britain, the United States, much of Europe, Canada and Australia. Who is standing up for the majority? Who is telling their story? Who’s keeping record straight? Isn’t that what journalists are meant to do?

In 1977, Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, revealed that more than 400 journalists and news executives worked for the CIA. They included journalists from the New York Times, Time and the TV networks. In 1991, Richard Norton Taylor of the Guardian revealed something similar in this country.

None of this is necessary today. I doubt that anyone paid the Washington Post and many other media outlets to accuse Edward Snowden of aiding terrorism. I doubt that anyone pays those who routinely smear Julian Assange – though other rewards can be plentiful.

It's clear to me that the main reason Assange has attracted such venom, spite and jealousy is that WikiLeaks tore down the facade of a corrupt political elite held aloft by journalists. In heralding an extraordinary era of disclosure, Assange made enemies by illuminating and shaming the media's gatekeepers, not least on the newspaper that published and appropriated his great scoop. He became not only a target, but a golden goose.

Lucrative book and Hollywood movie deals were struck and media careers launched or kick-started on the back of WikiLeaks and its founder. People have made big money, while WikiLeaks has struggled to survive.

None of this was mentioned in Stockholm on 1 December when the editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, shared with Edward Snowden the Right Livelihood Award, known as the alternative Nobel Peace Prize. What was shocking about this event was that Assange and WikiLeaks were airbrushed. They didn't exist. They were unpeople.

No one spoke up for the man who pioneered digital whistleblowing and handed the Guardian one of the greatest scoops in history. Moreover, it was Assange and his WikiLeaks team who effectively – and brilliantly – rescued Edward Snowden in Hong Kong and sped him to safety. Not a word.

What made this censorship by omission so ironic and poignant and disgraceful was that the ceremony was held in the Swedish parliament – whose craven silence on the Assange case has colluded with a grotesque miscarriage of justice in Stockholm.

“When the truth is replaced by silence,” said the Soviet dissident Yevtushenko, “the silence is a lie.”

It's this kind of silence we journalists need to break. We need to look in the mirror. We need to call to account an unaccountable media that services power and a psychosis that threatens world war.

In the 18th century, Edmund Burke described the role of the press as a Fourth Estate checking the powerful. Was that ever true? It certainly doesn't wash any more. What we need is a Fifth Estate: a journalism that monitors, deconstructs and counters propaganda and teaches the young to be agents of people, not power. We need what the Russians called perestroika – an insurrection of subjugated knowledge. I would call it real journalism.

It's 100 years since the First World War. Reporters then were rewarded and knighted for their silence and collusion. At the height of the slaughter, British prime minister David Lloyd George confided in C.P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian: “If people really knew [the truth] the war would be stopped tomorrow, but of course they don't know and can't know.”

It's time they knew.

*The above text is the transcript of **John Pilger's** address to the Logan Symposium, “Building an Alliance Against Secrecy, Surveillance & Censorship”, organised by the Centre for Investigative Journalism, London, 5-7 December, 2014. www.johnpilger.com*

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