

Video: We Can Defeat the Corporate Media's War to Snuff Out Independent Journalism

My talk at the International Festival of Whistleblowing, Dissent and Accountability on May 8. Transcript below.

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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I wanted to use this opportunity to talk about my experiences over the past two decades working with new technology as an independent freelance journalist, one who abandoned – or maybe more accurately, was abandoned by – what we usually call the "mainstream" media.

Looking back over that period, I have come to appreciate that I was among the first generation of journalists to break free of the corporate media – in my case, the Guardian – and ride this wave of new technology. In doing so, we liberated ourselves from the narrow editorial restrictions such media imposes on us as journalists and were still able to find an audience, even if a diminished one.

More and more journalists are following a similar path today – a few out of choice, and more out of necessity as corporate media becomes increasingly unprofitable. But as journalists seek to liberate themselves from the strictures of the old corporate media, that same corporate media is working very hard to characterise the new technology as a threat to media freedoms.

This self-serving argument should be treated with a great deal of scepticism. I want to use my own experiences to argue that quite the reverse is true. And that the real danger is allowing the corporate media to reassert its monopoly over narrating the world to us.

'Mainstream' consensus

I left my job at the Guardian newspaper group in 2001. Had I tried to become an independent journalist 10 years earlier than I did, it would have been professional suicide. In fact, it would have been a complete non-starter. I certainly would not be here telling you what it was like to have spent 20 years challenging the "mainstream" western consensus on Israel-Palestine.

Before the Noughties, without a platform provided by a corporate media outlet, journalists

had no way to reach an audience, let alone create one. We were entirely beholden to our editors, and they in turn were dependent on billionaire owners – or in a few cases like the BBC's, a government – and on advertisers.

When I arrived in Nazareth as a freelance journalist, though one with continuing connections to the Guardian, I quickly found myself faced with a stark choice.

Newspapers would accept relatively superficial articles from me, ones that accorded with a decades-old, western, colonial mindset about Israel-Palestine. Had I contributed such pieces for long enough, I would probably have managed to reassure one of the papers that I was an obliging and safe pair of hands. Eventually, when a position fell vacant, I might have landed myself a well-paid correspondent's job.

Instead I preferred to write authentically – for myself, reporting what I observed on the ground, rather than what was expected of me by my editors. That meant antagonising and gradually burning bridges with the western media.

Even in a digital era of new journalistic possibilities, there were few places to publish. I had to rely on a couple of what were then newly emerging websites that were prepared to publish very different narratives on Israel-Palestine from the western corporate media's.

Level playing field

The most prominent at the time, which became the first proper home for my journalism, was Al-Ahram Weekly, an English-language sister publication of the famous Cairo daily newspaper. Few probably remember or read Al-Ahram Weekly today, because it was soon overshadowed by other websites. But at the time it was a rare online refuge for dissident voices, and included a regular column from the great public intellectual Edward Said.

It is worth pausing to think about how foreign correspondents operated in the pre-digital world. They not only enjoyed a widely read, if tightly controlled, platform in an establishment media outlet, but they had behind them a vitally important support structure.

Their newspaper provided an archive and library service so that they could easily research historical and newsworthy events in their region. There were local staff who could help with locating sources and offering translations. They had photographers who contributed visuals to their pieces. And they had satellite phones to file breaking news from remote locations.

None of this came cheap. A freelance journalist could never have afforded any of this kind of support.

All that changed with the new technology, which rapidly levelled the playing field. A Google search soon became more comprehensive than even the best newspaper library. Mobile phones made it easy to track down and speak to people who were potential sources for stories. Digital cameras, and then the same mobile phones, meant it was possible to visually record events without needing a photographer alongside you. And email meant it was easy to file copy from anywhere in the world, to anywhere, virtually free.

Documentary evidence

The independent journalism I and others were developing in the early Noughties was assisted by a new kind of political activist who was using similarly novel digital tools.

After I arrived in Nazareth, I had little use for the traditional “access journalism” my corporate colleagues chiefly relied on. Israeli politicians and military generals dissembled to protect Israel’s image. Far more interesting to me were the young western activists who had begun embedding – before that term got corrupted by the behaviour of corporate journalists – in Palestinian communities.

Today we remember names like Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Brian Avery, Vittorio Arrigoni and many others for the fact that in the early Noughties they were either killed or wounded by Israeli soldiers. But they were part of a new movement of political activists and citizen journalists – many of them with the International Solidarity Movement – who were offering a different kind of access.

They used digital cameras to record and protest the Israeli army’s abuses and war crimes from up close inside Palestinian communities – crimes that had previously had gone unrecorded for western audiences. They then sent their documentary evidence and their eye-witness accounts to journalists by email or published them on “alternative” websites. For independent journalists like me, their work was gold-dust. We could challenge Israel’s implausible accounts with clear-cut evidence.

Sadly most corporate journalists paid little attention to the work of these activists. In any case, their role was quickly snuffed out. That was partly because Israel learnt that shooting a few of them served as a very effective deterrent, warning others to keep away.

But it was also because as technology became cheaper and more accessible – eventually ending up in mobile phones that everyone was expected to have – Palestinians could record their own suffering more immediately and without mediation.

Israel’s dismissal of the early, grainy images of the abuse of Palestinians by soldiers and settlers – as “Pallywood” (Palestinian Hollywood) – became ever less plausible, even to its own supporters. Soon Palestinians were recording their mistreatment in high definition and posting it directly to YouTube.

Unreliable allies

There was a parallel evolution in journalism. For my first eight years in Nazareth, I struggled to make any kind of living by publishing online. Egyptian wages were far too low to support me in Israel, and most alternative websites lacked the budget to pay. For the first years I lived a spartan life and dug into savings from my former, well-paid job at the Guardian. During this period I also wrote a series of books because it was so difficult to find places to publish my news reporting.

It was in the late Noughties that Arab media in English, led by Al-Jazeera, really took off, with Arab states making the most of the new favourable conditions provided by the internet. These outlets flourished for a time by feeding the appetite among sections of the western public for more critical coverage of Israel-Palestine and of western foreign policy more generally. At the same time, Arab states exploited the revelations provided by dissident journalists to gain more leverage in Washington policymaking circles.

My time with Al-Ahram came to an abrupt end after a few years, as the paper grew less keen on running hard-hitting pieces that showed Israel as an apartheid state or that explained the nature of its settler colonial ideology. Rumours reached me that the

Americans were leaning on the Egyptian government and its media to tone down the bad news about Israel.

It would be the first of several exits I had to make from these English-language Arab media outlets. As their western readership and visibility grew, they invariably attracted hostile attention from western governments and sooner or later capitulated. They were never more than fickle, unreliable allies to western dissidents.

Editors as sheepdogs

Again, I would have been forced to abandon journalism had it not been for another technological innovation – the rise of social media. Facebook and Twitter soon rivalled the corporate media as platforms for news dissemination.

For the first time, it was possible for journalists to grow their own audiences independently of an outlet. In a few cases, that dramatically changed the power relations in favour of those journalists. Glenn Greenwald is probably the most prominent example of this trend. He was chased after first by the Guardian and then by the billionaire Pierre Omidyar, to set up the Intercept. Now he's on his own, using the editorially hands-off online platform Substack.

In a news environment driven chiefly by shares, journalists with their own large and loyal followings were initially prized.

But they were also an implicit threat. The role of corporate media is to serve as a figurative sheep-dog, herding journalists each day into an ideological pen – the publication they write for. There are minor differences of opinion and emphasis between conservative publications and liberal ones, but they all ultimately serve the same corporate, business-friendly, colonial, war-mongering agenda.

It is the publication's job, not the journalists', to shape the values and worldview of its readers, over time limiting the range of possible thoughts they are likely to entertain.



Readers to the rescue

In the new environment of social media, that began to change. Not only have some journalists become more influential than the papers they write for, but others have

abandoned the employee-servant model completely. They have reached the conclusion that they no longer need a corporate outlet to secure an audience. They can publish themselves, build their own readership, and generate their own income – freeing themselves from corporate servitude.

In the last few years, this is a path I have pursued myself – becoming mostly reader-financed. For most of us, it is a precarious option. But it is liberating too – in a way that no previous generation of journalists could ever have imagined possible.

We are subject to no editorial oversight or control, apart from our own self-imposed sense of what is right and fair, or in some cases what we think our readers are ready to hear. We have no bosses or advertisers to please or appease. Our owners are the readers. And with an owner that is diverse and diffuse, we have been freed of the tyranny of billionaires and corporations.

This new model of journalism is revolutionary. It is genuinely pluralistic media. It allows a much wider spectrum of thought to reach the mainstream than ever before. And perhaps even more importantly, it allows independent journalists to examine, critique and expose the corporate media in real time, showing how little pluralism they allow and how often they resort to blatant falsehood and propaganda techniques.

The fact that a few journalists and activists can so convincingly and easily tear apart the coverage of corporate media outlets reveals how little relationship that coverage often bears to reality.

Reporters for hire

Corporate media took none of this lying down, of course, even if it was slow to properly gauge the dangers.

Dissident journalists are a problem not only because they have broken free of the controls of the billionaire class and are often doing a better job of building audiences than their corporate counterparts. Worse, dissident journalists are also educating readers so that they are better equipped to understand what corporate journalism is: that it is ideological prostitution. It is reporting and commentary for hire, by an establishment class.

The backlash from the corporate media to this threat was not long coming. Criticism – narratively managed by corporate outlets – has sought to character-assassinate dissident journalists and browbeat the social media platforms that host them. Reality has been inverted. Too often it is the critical thinking of dissident journalists that is maligned as “fake news”, and it is the genuine pluralism social media corporations have inadvertently allowed that is repudiated as the erosion of democratic values.

Social media platforms have put up only the most feeble resistance to the traditional corporate media-led campaign demanding they crack down on the dissidents they host. They are, after all, media corporations too, and have little interest in promoting free speech, critical thinking or pluralism.

Manipulated algorithms

What resistance they did muster, for a short time, largely reflected the fact that their early business model was to replace top-down traditional media with a new bottom-up media that

was essentially led by readers. But as social media has gradually been merged into the traditional media establishment, it has preferred to join in with the censorship and to marginalise dissident journalists.

Some of this is done out in the open, with the banning of individuals or alternative sites. But more often it is done covertly, through the manipulation of algorithms making dissident journalists all but impossible to find. We have seen our page views and shares plummet over the past two years, as we lose the online battle against the same, supposedly “authoritative sources” – the establishment media – we have been exposing as fraudsters.

The perverse, self-serving discourse from establishment media about new media is currently hard to miss in the relentless attacks on Substack. This open platform hosts journalists and writers who wish to build their own audiences and fund themselves from reader donations. Substack is the logical conclusion of a path I and other have been on for two decades. It not only gets rid of the media’s sheepdog-editors, it dispenses with the ideological pens into which journalists are supposed to be herded.

Sordid history

James Ball, whose sordid history includes acting as the Guardian’s hatchet man on Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, was a predictable choice as the Guardian Group tried this month to discredit Substack. Here is Ball ridiculously [fretting](#) about how greater freedom for journalists might damage western society by stoking so-called “culture wars”:

“Concerns are emerging about what Substack is now, exactly. Is it a platform for hosting newsletters and helping people discover them? Or is it a new type of publication, one that relies on stoking the culture wars to help divisive writers build devoted followings? ...

“Being on Substack has for some become a tacit sign of being a partisan in the culture wars, not least because it’s a lot easier to build a devoted and paying following by stressing that you’re giving readers something the mainstream won’t.”

Ball is the kind of second-rate stenographer who would have had no journalistic career at all were he not a hired gun for a corporate publication like the Guardian. Buried in his piece is the real reason for his – and the Guardian’s – concern about Substack:

“Such is Substack’s recent notoriety that people are now worrying that it might be the latest thing that might kill traditional media.”

Notice the heavy-lifting that word “people” is doing in the quoted sentence. Not you or I. “People” refers to James Ball and the Guardian.

Severe price

But the gravest danger to media freedom lies beyond any supposed “culture wars”. As the battle for narrative control intensifies, there is much more at stake than name-calling and even skewed algorithms.

In a sign of how far the political and media establishment are willing to go to stop dissident journalism – a journalism that seeks to expose corrupt power and hold it to account – they have been making examples of the most significant journalists of the new era by

prosecuting them.

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange has been out of sight for a decade – first as a political asylum seeker, then as an inmate of a British prison – subjected to endlessly shifting pretexts for his incarceration. First, it was a rape investigation that no one wanted to pursue. Then, it was for a minor bail infraction. And more recently – as the other pretexts have passed their sellby date – it has been for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Assange could languish in jail for years to come.

Former UK ambassador Craig Murray, a chronicler through his blog of the legal abuses Assange has suffered, has faced his own retribution from the establishment. He has been prosecuted and found guilty in a patently nonsensical “jigsaw identification” case relating to the Alex Salmond trial.

My talk has been recorded too early to know the outcome of Murray’s sentence hearing, which was due to take place the day before this festival [and was later postponed to Tuesday May 11]. But the treatment of Assange and Murray has sent a clear message to any journalist inspired by their courage and their commitment to hold establishment power to account: “You will pay a severe price. You will lose years of your life and mountains of money fighting to defend yourself. And ultimately we can and will lock you away.”

Peek behind the curtain

The west’s elites will not give up the corrupt institutions that uphold their power without a fight. We would be foolish to think otherwise. But new technology has offered us new tools in our struggle and it has redrawn the battleground in ways that no one could have predicted even a decade ago.

The establishment are being forced into a game of whack-a-mole with us. Each time they bully or dismantle a platform we use, another one – like Substack – springs up to replace it. That is because there will always be journalists determined to find a way to peek behind the curtain to tell us what they found there. And there will always be audiences who want to learn what is behind the curtain. Supply and demand are on our side.

The constant acts of intimidation and violence by political and media elites to crush media pluralism in the name of “democratic values” will serve only to further expose the hypocrisy and bad faith of the corporate media and its hired hands.

We must keep struggling because the struggle itself is a form of victory.

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This essay first appeared on [Jonathan Cook’s blog](#).

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