

“A Thought Police” for the Internet Age. Big Brother’s “Progressive Media”

The dangerous cult of the Guardian

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Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Global Research, September 28, 2011

28 September 2011

There could be no better proof of the revolution – care of the internet – occurring in the accessibility of information and informed commentary than the reaction of our mainstream, corporate media.

For the first time, Western publics – or at least those who can afford a computer – have a way to bypass the gatekeepers of our democracies. Data our leaders once kept tightly under wraps can now be easily searched for, as can the analyses of those not paid to turn a blind eye to the constant and compelling evidence of Western hypocrisy. Wikileaks, in particular, has rapidly eroded the traditional hierarchical systems of information dissemination.

The media – at least the supposedly leftwing component of it – should be cheering on this revolution, if not directly enabling it. And yet, mostly they are trying to co-opt, tame or subvert it. Indeed, progressive broadcasters and writers increasingly use their platforms in the mainstream to discredit and ridicule the harbingers of the new age.

A good case study is The Guardian, considered the most leftwing newspaper in Britain and rapidly acquiring cult status in the United States, where many readers tend to assume they are getting access through its pages to unvarnished truth and the full range of critical thinking on the left.

Certainly, The Guardian includes some fine reporting and occasionally insightful commentary. Possibly because it is farther from the heart of empire, it is able to provide a partial antidote to the craven coverage of the corporate-owned media in the US.

Nonetheless, it would be unwise to believe that the Guardian is therefore a free market in progressive or dissident ideas on the left. In fact, quite the contrary: the paper strictly polices what can be said and who can say it in its pages, for cynical reasons we shall come to.

Until recently, it was quite possible for readers to be blissfully unaware that there were interesting or provocative writers and thinkers who were never mentioned in the Guardian. And, before papers had online versions, the Guardian could always blame space constraints as grounds for not including a wider range of voices. That, of course, changed with the rise of the internet.

Early on, the Guardian saw the potential, as well as the threat, posed by this revolution. It

responded by creating a seemingly free-for-all blog called Comment is Free to harness much of the raw energy unleashed by the internet. It recruited an army of mostly unpaid writers, activists and propagandists on both sides of the Atlantic to help brand itself as the epitome of democratic and pluralistic media.

From the start, however, Comment is Free was never quite as free – except in terms of the financial cost to the Guardian – as it appeared. Significant writers on the left, particularly those who were considered “beyond the pale” in the old media landscape, were denied access to this new “democratic” platform. Others, myself included, quickly found there were severe and seemingly inexplicable limits on what could be said on CiF (unrelated to issues of taste or libel).

None of this should matter. After all, there are many more places than CiF to publish and gain an audience. All over the web dissident writers are offering alternative analyses of current events, and drawing attention to the significance of information often ignored or sidelined by the corporate media.

Rather than relish this competition, or resign itself to the emergence of real media pluralism, however, the Guardian reverted to type. It again became the left’s thought police.

This time, however, it could not ensure that the “challenging left” would simply go unheard. The internet rules out the option of silencing by exclusion. So instead, it appears, it is using its pages to smear those writers who, through their own provocative ideas and analyses, suggest the Guardian’s tameness.

The Guardian’s discrediting of the “left” – the left being a concept never defined by the paper’s writers – is far from taking place in a fair battle of ideas. Not least the Guardian is backed by the huge resources of its corporate owners. When it attacks dissident writers, they can rarely, if ever, find a platform of equal prominence to defend themselves. And the Guardian has proved itself more than reluctant to allow a proper right of reply in its pages to those it maligns.

But also, and most noticeably, it almost never engages with these dissident writers’ ideas. In popular terminology, it prefers to play the man, not the ball. Instead it creates labels, from the merely disparaging to the clearly defamatory, that push these writers and thinkers into the territory of the unconscionable.

A typical example of the Guardian’s new strategy was on show this week in an article in the print edition’s comment pages – also available online and a far more prestigious platform than CiF – in which the paper commissioned a socialist writer, Andy Newman, to argue that the Israeli Jewish musician Gilad Atzmon was part of an anti-semitic trend discernible on the left.

Jonathan Freedland, the paper’s star columnist and resident obsessive on anti-semitism, tweeted to his followers that the article was “important” because it was “urging the left to confront antisemitism in its ranks”.

I have no idea whether Atzmon has expressed anti-semitic views – and I am none the wiser after reading Newman’s piece.

As is now typical in this new kind of Guardian character assassination, the article makes no effort to prove that Atzmon is anti-semitic or to show that there is any topical or pressing reason to bring up his presumed character flaw. (In passing, the article made a similar accusation of anti-semitism against Alison Weir of *If Americans Knew*, and against the Counterpunch website for publishing an article by her on Israel's role in organ-trafficking.)

Atzmon has just published a book on Jewish identity, the *Wandering Who?*, that has garnered praise from respected figures such as Richard Falk, an emeritus law professor at Princeton, and John Mearsheimer, a distinguished politics professor at Chicago University.

But Newman did not critique the book, nor did he quote from it. In fact, he showed no indication that he had read the book or knew anything about its contents.

Instead Newman began his piece, after praising Atzmon's musicianship, with an assumptive reference to his "antisemitic writings". There followed a few old quotes from Atzmon, long enough to be intriguing but too short and out of context to prove his anti-semitism – except presumably to the Guardian's thought police and its most deferential readers.

The question left in any reasonable person's mind is why dedicate limited commentary space in the paper to Atzmon? There was no suggestion of a newsworthy angle. And there was no case made to prove that Atzmon is actually anti-semitic. It was simply assumed as a fact.

Atzmon, even by his own reckoning, is a maverick figure who has a tendency to infuriate just about everyone with his provocative, and often ambiguous, pronouncements. But why single him out and then suggest that he represents a discernible and depraved trend among the left?

Nonetheless, the Guardian was happy to offer its imprimatur to Newman's defamation of Atzmon, who was described as a conspiracy theorist "dripping with contempt for Jews", despite an absence of substantiating evidence. Truly worthy of Pravda in its heyday.

The Atzmon article appeared on the same day the Guardian carried out a similar hatchet job, this time on Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks. The paper published a book review of Assange's "unauthorised autobiography" by the Guardian's investigations editor, David Leigh.

That Leigh could be considered a reasonable choice for a review of the book – which he shamelessly pilloried – demonstrates quite how little the Guardian is prepared to abide by elementary principles of ethical journalism.

Leigh has his own book on the Guardian's involvement with Wikileaks and Assange currently battling it out for sales in the bookshops. He is hardly a disinterested party.

But also, and more importantly, Leigh is clearly not dispassionate about Assange, any more than the Guardian is. The paper has been waging an all-but-declared war against Wikileaks since the two organizations fell out over their collaboration on publishing Wikileaks's trove of 250,000 classified US embassy cables. The feud, if the paper's talkbacks are to be believed, has finally begun to test the patience of even some of the paper's most loyal readers.

The low point in Leigh's role in this saga was divulging in his own book a complex password Assange had created to protect a digital file containing the original and unedited embassy cables. Each was being carefully redacted before publication by several newspapers, including the Guardian.

This act of – in the most generous interpretation of Leigh's behaviour – gross stupidity provided the key for every security agency in the world to open the file. Leigh has accused Wikileaks of negligence in allowing a digital copy of the file to be available. Whether true, his own role in the affair is far more inexcusable.

Even given his apparent ignorance of the digital world, Leigh is a veteran investigative reporter who must have known that revealing the password was foolhardy in the extreme. Not least, it clearly demonstrated how Assange formulates his passwords, and would provide important clues for hackers trying to open other protected Wikileaks documents.

His and the Guardian's recklessness in disclosing the password was compounded by their negligent decision to contact neither Assange nor Wikileaks before publication of Leigh's book to check whether the password was still in use.

After this shabby episode, one of many from the Guardian in relation to Assange, it might have been assumed that Leigh was considered an inappropriate person to comment in the Guardian on matters related to Wikileaks. Not so.

Instead the paper has been promulgating Leigh's self-interested version of the story and regularly impugning Assange's character. In a recent editorial, the paper lambasted the Wikileaks founder as an "information absolutist" who was "flawed, volatile and erratic", arguing that he had chosen to endanger informants named in the US cables by releasing the unredacted cache.

However, the paper made no mention either of Leigh's role in revealing the password or of Wikileaks' point that, following Leigh's incompetence, every security agency and hacker in the world had access to the file's contents. Better, Wikileaks believed, to create a level playing field and allow everyone access to the cables, thereby letting informants know whether they had been named and were in danger.

Leigh's abuse of his position is just one element in a dirty campaign by the Guardian to discredit Assange and, by extension, the Wikileaks project.

Some of this clearly reflects a clash of personalities and egos, but it also looks suspiciously like the feud derives from a more profound ideological struggle between the Guardian and Wikileaks about how information should be controlled a generation hence. The implicit philosophy of Wikileaks is to promote an ever-greater opening up and equalisation of access to information, while the Guardian, following its commercial imperatives, wants to ensure the gatekeepers maintain their control.

At least Assange has the prominent Wikileaks website to make sure his own positions and reasons are hard to overlook. Other targets of the Guardian are less fortunate.

George Monbiot, widely considered to be the Guardian's most progressive columnist, has used his slot to attack a disparate group on the "left" who also happen to be harsh critics of

the Guardian.

In a column in June he accused Ed Herman, a leading US professor of finance and a collaborator on media criticism with Noam Chomsky, and writer David Peterson of being “genocide deniers” over their research into events in Rwanda and Bosnia. The evidence was supposedly to be found in their joint book *The Politics of Genocide*, published last year, and in an online volume, *The Srebrenica Massacre*, edited by Herman.

Implying that genocide denial was now a serious problem on the left, Monbiot also laid into journalist John Pilger for endorsing the book and a small website called Media Lens that dedicates itself to exposing the failings of the corporate media, including the work of the Guardian and Monbiot. Media Lens’ crime was to have argued that Herman and Peterson should be allowed to make their case about Rwanda and Bosnia, rather than be silenced as Monbiot appeared to prefer.

Monbiot also ensnared Chomsky in his criticism, castigating him for writing a foreword to one of the books.

Chomsky, it should be remembered, is co-author (with Herman) of *Manufacturing Consent*, a seminal book arguing that it is the role of the corporate media, including liberal media like the Guardian, to distort their readers’ understanding of world events to advance the interests of Western elites. In Chomsky’s view, even journalists like Monbiot are selected by the media for their ability to manufacture public consent for the maintenance of a system of Western political and economic dominance.

Possibly as a result of these ideas, Chomsky is a bete noire of the Guardian and its Sunday sister publication, the Observer.

He was famously vilified in 2005 by an up and coming Guardian feature writer, Emma Brockes – again on the issue of Srebrenica. Brockes’ report so wilfully mischaracterised Chomsky’s views (with quotes she could not substantiate after she apparently taped over her recording of the interview) that the Guardian was forced into a very reluctant “partial apology” under pressure from its readers’ editor. Over Chomsky’s opposition, the article was also erased from its archives.

Such scurrilous journalism should have ended a young journalist’s career at the Guardian. But ridiculing Chomsky is standard fare at the paper, and Brockes’ career as celebrity interviewer flourished, both at the Guardian and the New York Times.

Nick Cohen, another star columnist, this time at the Observer, found time to mention Chomsky recently, dismissing him and other prominent critical thinkers such as Tariq Ali, the late Harold Pinter, Arundhati Roy and Diana Johnstone as “west-hating”. He blamed liberals and the left for their “Chomskyan self-delusion”, and suggested many were “apologists for atrocities”.

Monbiot’s article followed in the same vein. He appeared to have a minimal grasp of the details of Herman and Peterson’s books. Much of his argument that Herman is a “genocide belittler” depends on doubts raised by a variety of experts in the Srebrenica book over the figure of 8,000 reported executions of Bosnian Muslims by Serb forces at Srebrenica. The authors suggest the number is not supported by evidence and might in fact be as low as

Whether or not the case made by Herman and his collaborators is convincing was beside the point in Monbiot's article. He was not interested in exploring their arguments but in creating an intellectual no-go zone from which critical thinkers and researchers were barred – a sacred genocide.

And to achieve this end, it was necessary to smear the two writers as genocide deniers and suggest that anyone else on the left who ventured on to the same territory would be similarly stigmatised.

Monbiot's treatment of Herman and Peterson's work was so slipshod and cavalier it is hard to believe that he was the one analysing their books.

To take just one example, Monbiot somehow appears to be unable to appreciate the careful distinction Herman's book makes between an "execution" and a "death", a vital differentiation in evaluating the Srebrenica massacre.

In the book, experts question whether all or most of the 8,000 Bosnian Muslims disinterred from graves at Srebrenica were victims of a genocidal plan by the Serbs, or casualties of bitter fighting between the two sides, or even some of them victims of a false-flag operation. As the book points out, a post-mortem can do many things but it cannot discern the identities or intentions of those who did the killing in Srebrenica.

The authors do not doubt that a massacre, or massacres, took place at Srebrenica. However, they believe we should not accept on trust that this was a genocide (a term defined very specifically in international law), or refuse to consider that the numbers may have been inflated to fit a political agenda.

This is not an idle or contrarian argument. As they make clear in their books, piecing together what really happened in Rwanda and Bosnia is vital if we are not to be duped by Western leaders into yet more humanitarian interventions whose goals are far from those claimed.

The fact that Monbiot discredited Herman and Peterson at a time when the Guardian's reporting was largely cheering on the latest humanitarian intervention, in Libya, was all the more richly ironic.

So why do the Guardian and its writers publish these propaganda articles parading as moral concern about the supposedly degenerate values of the "left"? And why, if the left is in such a debased state, can the Guardian's stable of talented writers not take on their opponents' ideas without resorting to strawman arguments, misdirection and smears.

The writers, thinkers and activists targeted by the Guardian, though all of the left, represent starkly different trends and approaches – and some of them would doubtless vehemently oppose the opinions of others on the list.

But they all share a talent for testing the bounds of permissible thought in creative ways that challenge and undermine established truths and what I have termed elsewhere the "climate of assumptions" the Guardian has helped to create and sustain.

It hardly matters whether all or some of these critical thinkers are right. The danger they pose to the Guardian is in arguing convincingly that the way the world is presented to us is not the way it really is. Their very defiance, faced with the weight of a manufactured consensus, threatens to empower us, the reader, to look outside the restrictive confines of media orthodoxy.

The Guardian, like other mainstream media, is heavily invested – both financially and ideologically – in supporting the current global order. It was once able to exclude and now, in the internet age, must vilify those elements of the left whose ideas risk questioning a system of corporate power and control of which the Guardian is a key institution.

The paper's role, like that of its rightwing cousins, is to limit the imaginative horizons of readers. While there is just enough leftwing debate to make readers believe their paper is pluralistic, the kind of radical perspectives needed to question the very foundations on which the system of Western dominance rests is either unavailable or is ridiculed.

Reading the Guardian, it is possible to believe that one of the biggest problems facing our societies – comparable to our compromised political elites, corrupt police authorities, and depraved financial system – is an array of mainly isolated dissidents and intellectuals on the left.

Is Atzmon and his presumed anti-semitism more significant than AIPAC? Is Herman more of a danger than the military-industrial corporations killing millions of people around the globe? And is Assange more of a menace to the planet's future than US President Barack Obama?

Reading the Guardian, you might well think so.

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