

Bias Towards Power *Is* Corporate Media 'Objectivity': Journalism, Floods And Climate Silence

By [David Cromwell](#)

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[Media Lens](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The key to what is precisely wrong with corporate journalism is [explained](#) in this nutshell by the US commentator Michael Parenti:

'Bias in favor of the orthodox is frequently mistaken for "objectivity". Departures from this ideological orthodoxy are themselves dismissed as ideological.'

Examples of bias towards the orthodoxy of Western power are legion every day of the week. On January 30 this year, David Loyn reported for BBC News at Ten from Bagram airbase in Afghanistan as US troops prepared to withdraw from a [blood-strewn occupation](#). Standing beside a large US military plane, he intoned:

'For all of the lives lost and money spent, it could have been so much better.'

The pro-Nato perspective of that remark masquerading as impartial journalism is stark. By contrast, Patrick Cockburn [summed up](#) the [reality](#):

'After 12 years, £390bn, and countless dead, we leave poverty, fraud - and the Taliban in Afghanistan...60 per cent of children are malnourished and only 27 per cent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water...Elections are now so fraudulent as to rob the winners of legitimacy.'

The damning conclusion?

'Faced with these multiple disasters western leaders simply ignore Afghan reality and take refuge in spin that is not far from deliberate lying.'

BBC News has been a major component of this gross deception of the public.

The BBC's 'objective' bias in support of power also imbues the 'impartial' stance of alpha-male interviewer Jeremy Paxman, who recently [disparaged](#) 'extreme' WWI conscientious objectors as 'cranks'.

BBC political editor Nick Robinson is another safe pair of hands. He once described his 'objective' role in the run-up to the illegal invasion of Iraq (when he was ITN's political editor):

'It was my job to report what those in power were doing or thinking . . . That is all someone in my sort of job can do.' (Nick Robinson, ' "Remember the last time you shouted like that?" I asked the spin-doctor', The Times, July 16, 2004)

We [tweeted](#) a reminder of this remarkable admission by Robinson of his stenographic role as a channeller of state propaganda:

‘The skewed way in which @bbcnickrobinson sees his role as BBC political editor can only lead to bias towards power.’

US journalist [Glenn Greenwald responded](#) pithily:

‘That’d make an excellent epitaph on the tombstone of modern establishment journalism’

After we had repeatedly challenged Robinson about his bias towards power (see [this](#) recent media alert), he finally responded via email (January 27, 2014):

‘We could have this debate forever I suspect.’

But in reality ‘this debate’ never gets an airing on the BBC. It is simply taboo.

‘It Is Easier To Stay Out Than Get Out’

Pointing out facts such as these is not to ‘attack’ individual journalists; a canard that is all too easily, and lazily, flung at Media Lens. Likewise, Canadian media critic Joe Emersberger has received unfair accusations of a ‘hectoring, self-righteous, fundamentalist and insulting tone’ when challenging journalists. Emersberger’s thoughtful [response](#) to such charges is worth repeating:

‘First, there is always a tradeoff between honesty and civility. If you honestly describe the horrific outcomes that the corporate media produces, then offending some journalists, including the ones you least care to offend, is inevitable. Nevertheless, I think describing the outcomes honestly should be the priority even if it puts off some decent journalists.’

He continues:

‘Second, I do not believe that most corporate journalists are below average in their intelligence or in their capacity to empathize with others. Top-down organizations hire and promote people who make certain assumptions about the world. Even the assumption an internal dissident might make (“I can contribute something positive by working within these constraints, and resigning will do no good at all”) is still a very necessary assumption. There are rotten people in all walks of life, but I don’t think such people are necessarily a majority within rotten institutions.’

Emersberger’s astute observations remind us that ‘good people’ working for corporations do not, and cannot, change the fundamentally destructive and psychopathic nature of corporations. ([‘The Corporation’](#), 2003). The danger of becoming assimilated within a skewed value system that rewards obedient behaviour towards corporate priorities is immense. Barry Eisler [warns](#) aspiring journalists how the process works:

‘Probably the first compromise will take the form of a rationalization. You’ll be pressured to do something you know isn’t quite right. But you’ll be scared not to do it — if you don’t, you’ll alienate someone powerful, your career will suffer a setback, your ambitious goals will suddenly seem farther away. At this point, your lesser self, driven

by fear, greed, status-seeking, and other selfish emotions, will offer up a rationalization, and your greater self will grasp at it eagerly.'

As the journalist's career develops:

'Do you find yourself identifying more with the public figures you're supposed to hold to account than with the readers and viewers you're supposed to serve?'

By this point journalists are consumed, and thus constrained, by the need to maintain 'access' to the centres of power as 'reliable' sources of news and comment, as Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky so powerfully explained in their [propaganda model](#) of the media ('[Manufacturing Consent](#)', 1988). The political editors and high-profile correspondents of the major news media fall into this category. Carne Ross, who was once the senior British official responsible for the [genocidal sanctions regime](#) imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, [described](#) 'how the Foreign Office manipulated a willing media':

'We would control access to the foreign secretary as a form of reward to journalists. If they were critical, we would not give them the goodies of trips around the world. We would feed them factoids of sanitised intelligence, or we'd freeze them out.'

Eisler sums up the whole process that engulfs, not just the unwary journalist, but the wary too:

'when you enter an enormous, shifting system single-mindedly dedicated to beguiling you into surrendering your values and assimilating you, you have to do more than assure yourself you'll practice good journalism. You have to take the threat seriously, consider how many people have succumbed to it before you, and armor up accordingly. If you don't, you don't have a chance. And if you don't think you need to take the threat seriously, you're even more vulnerable, and more likely doomed, than most.'

Or, as Mark Twain [wrote](#) even more succinctly, 'It is easier to stay out than get out.'

A Flood Of Propaganda

The recent media coverage of severe floods in the UK demonstrates this assimilation and herd mentality of corporate media professionals about as well as any other topic today. No matter how extreme the weather, and how awful the hardships endured by ordinary people in the floods, the culpability of corporate-driven industrial 'civilisation', its inherent ecological unsustainability, and the urgent need for radical changes, must not be addressed in any [meaningful way](#).

A careful [analysis](#) by [Carbon Brief](#) of 3,064 flood-related newspapers stories, published between the start of December and 10 February, makes this clear. Their stark conclusion is that over 93 per cent of press stories did not mention climate change (never mind the role of humans in disturbing the delicate balance of climate).



Media Lens does not have the resources to monitor BBC News in its entirety across television, radio and the internet and come up with similarly precise statistics. In fact, perhaps only the BBC has the resources to monitor itself in this way, a form of self-

regulation that has patently failed. But in our experience, BBC News coverage has been similarly woeful.

Consider that on February 10, BBC News at Ten was introduced by newsreader Fiona Bruce:

‘Good evening. The flood waters are stretching further across the UK tonight as the River Thames has risen to record levels, with waters creeping into the London suburbs. Several villages are flooded along the Thames Valley, and hundreds of homes have had to be evacuated. The crisis is only likely to worsen as forecasters are warning more rain and strong winds are on their way.

‘We have three reports: from the Thames Valley where police have declared a major incident; thousands of homes are at risk. We report on the political row and blame game between the government and the Environment Agency. And we’ll also be hearing from Southwest England where David Cameron went to see the transport challenges for himself.’

‘We have three reports’, said Bruce, but not one of them said anything about the role of climate change in the unfolding crisis. The notion that the extreme rainfall and flooding have anything to do with human-induced climate change was buried. One [online BBC story](#) the previous day had noted that Julia Slingo, the Met Office’s chief scientist, had surmised that ‘all the evidence suggests there is a link to climate change.’ But subsequent BBC coverage of the floods proceeded almost entirely as though she had spoken into a vacuum.

The second of the three News at Ten reports on February 10 had the BBC’s David Shukman talking about the ‘blame game’ and London flood defence spending. But what about climate change? Once again, nothing. This glaring omission was especially galling from the BBC science editor. (Belatedly, Shukman did [briefly address](#) the ‘possible influence from us’ on News at Ten two days later, saying with great caution that ‘there are some signs that global warming *may* be involved.’)

We sent emails to Shukman and several other BBC correspondents and editors (February 11, 2014):

‘Over the past few days and weeks, I have been watching the news reports from BBC correspondents in Datchet, the Somerset Levels, Dawlish and elsewhere. While BBC News does a reasonable job of telling us what is happening in those specific locations, why are you not addressing human-induced climate change in your news programmes? In failing to do so, you are in danger of giving a false impression to the viewers that climate change is irrelevant to the flooding.

‘This careful analysis produced by the respected Carbon Brief website could equally well apply to BBC News:

[‘http://www.carbonbrief.org/blog/2014/02/analysis-how-climate-change-features-in-newspaper-coverage-of-the-uk’s-floods/](http://www.carbonbrief.org/blog/2014/02/analysis-how-climate-change-features-in-newspaper-coverage-of-the-uk's-floods/)

‘I’d be grateful to receive a reply from you, please.’

There was a near-total silence to this challenge. However, BBC News deputy director Fran Unsworth did send this identikit ‘response’, suitable for all occasions, the following day:

'Thank you for your email. I am sure you will understand that it is not feasible for me to enter into a dialogue with individuals.

'However, as previously explained, if you would like to make a complaint, you can do so via the webform on the BBC's complaints website. The BBC has gone to some trouble to establish procedures that will enable us to be as responsive as possible to complaints from the public at the same time as exercising due regard to the need to use licence fee payers' money efficiently. For this reason, we prefer complaints to be processed and logged centrally and staff, such as myself, are contacted for the responses as necessary. Unfortunately, because of the way our systems work, we cannot forward your email and must ask you to resubmit your complaint if you would like a reply.

'To send a complaint to the BBC please submit it centrally through our complaints website at www.bbc.co.uk/complaints to be guaranteed a reply (or alternatively by post to BBC Complaints, PO Box 1922, Darlington DL3 0UR or by phone on 03700 100 222). Full details of our complaints service are available on our Complaints website.'

Of course, from years of experience, we had no illusions about getting a proper response from the BBC to our challenge. We replied to the deputy director of BBC News (February 11, 2014):

'Thank you for such a prompt reply. But when even the former BBC chairman Lord Grade [described](#) his experience of complaining to the BBC as "grisly" due to a system he said was "absolutely hopeless", what hope for the rest of us mere mortals?

'It is entirely your personal choice whether or not it is "feasible ... to enter into a dialogue with individuals". But if you continue to sidestep serious queries by diverting the public into a "convoluted", "overly complicated" and "absolutely hopeless" "complaints service", the credibility of BBC News will nosedive.'

On February 13, BBC Radio 4 Today asked, 'Is climate change a factor in the recent extreme weather?', and [once again](#) showed itself embarrassingly [out of its depth](#), with the BBC still stuck in a [discredited framework](#) of climate change as a battle between 'believers' versus 'sceptics'. The programme set up a [falsely balanced](#) 'debate' between an authoritative, if rather conservative, climate scientist – Sir Brian Hoskins, one of the country's most eminent climatologists – and a neoliberal climate denial propagandist with [undisclosed](#) sources of funding – Lord Nigel Lawson, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer under Margaret Thatcher. Perhaps Today would also host a 'debate' between the government's principal medical officer and a paid lobbyist for the tobacco industry to discuss, 'Is smoking a factor in cancer and heart disease?'

Some signs of climate sanity started to break through after weeks of journalistic feet being shuffled almost in embarrassment. Unlike BBC News, Channel 4 News appeared to be comfortable addressing, to some extent, the possibility of human-induced climate change being a factor in the extreme weather. Greenpeace campaigner Joss Garman even took part in one [live broadcast](#). This live segment was also notable for the evasiveness of Adam Afriyie, the local Tory MP for Windsor, in declaring he was 'really not comfortable' talking about climate change. Kudos to Jon Snow for at least putting the climate change point to him, and then pointing out the 'massive carbon emission' overhead as a jet flew past!

Last Friday, the Guardian gave front-page coverage to [important remarks](#) by economist

Nicholas Stern who noted the 'immense' risks of human-induced climate change, adding:

'If we do not cut emissions, we face even more devastating consequences, as unchecked they could raise global average temperature to 4C or more above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century [...] The shift to such a world could cause mass migrations of hundreds of millions of people away from the worst-affected areas. That would lead to conflict and war, not peace and prosperity.'

There were also promising signs of a popular backlash against climate denialism with [calls](#) for the sacking of Environment Secretary Owen Paterson. Green MP Caroline Lucas rightly [noted](#) that:

'It is absurd to leave someone in charge of a department whose role is to protect the country from a growing climate crisis who himself believes that "people get very emotional about this subject, and I think we should just accept that the climate has been changing for centuries".'

'If we're to have an integrated and credible national strategy to deal with the flooding crisis, we must start by having someone in charge who is prepared to acknowledge the reality of the growing climate threat that we face.'

Shamefully, Tory jeers drowned out Lucas during Prime Minister's Questions when she said that any Cabinet member who did not take 'an evidence-based approach to the increasing reality of climate change' should be removed from their post.

At the weekend, Labour leader Ed Miliband [criticised](#) David Cameron for 'backtracking' on a supposed 'commitment to the environmental cause' and said that:

'climate change threatens national security because of the consequences for destabilisation of entire regions of the world, mass migration of millions of people and conflict over water or food supplies.'

Miliband added:

'The science is clear. The public know there is a problem. But, because of political division in Westminster, we are sleepwalking into a national security crisis on climate change.'

Those are certainly sensible words. But Labour's own abysmal record on the environment, and the party's close ties to corporate and establishment interests, do not bode well for the radical changes that are required.

Finally, if our persistent challenging of BBC News, in particular, appears needlessly relentless, then bear in mind the stakes here. We are already in the midst of the [sixth great extinction](#) in the geological record, this time at the hands of humans. And unless drastic measures are taken to curb global warming, we will be engulfed by [catastrophic climate change](#).

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-

abusive tone.

Please write to:

Fran Unsworth, deputy director of BBC News

Email: fran.unsworth@bbc.co.uk

Jamie Angus, editor of the Today Programme

Email: jamie.angus@bbc.co.uk

Nick Robinson, BBC political editor

Email: nick.robinson@bbc.co.uk

Twitter: [@bbcnickrobinson](https://twitter.com/bbcnickrobinson)

Please blind-copy us in on any exchanges or forward them to us later at:

editor@medialens.org

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