

Fake News, Propaganda and Threats to Journalism

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Threats to journalism and journalistic autonomy come in many forms. At the most extreme, journalists are [directly threatened, intimidated](#) and, all too frequently, *harmed by political actors seeking to influence the 'information environment'*.

As a form of coercion, aimed at controlling what journalists write and say, threats and attacks can be understood as a form of propaganda: as a kind of 'propaganda of the deed' they function not only to silence individual journalists but also to send an unequivocal message to other journalists.

More common forms of propaganda involve approaches to shaping perceptions and actions through the manipulation of information. Although of a different scale to threats and killings, their effect can also be profoundly damaging to the autonomy of journalists. Understood by some to refer to any form of persuasive communication, most definitions of propaganda throughout the 20th and 21st century have recognised that, at some level, propaganda is a form of persuasion that works via manipulation and subversion of the rational will.

One important way in which propaganda manifests itself, and perhaps the one which is most frequently associated with propagandistic communication, involves some form of deception. Whether through outright lying, omission of important information, distortion or misdirection, propaganda frequently involves manipulation through deceiving people with respect to reality.

For Western publics, the most recent high-profile and well-documented example of this occurred in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. During this period, through a combination of distortion and omission, US and UK government information campaigns [misled many people into believing there was a clear and imminent threat from Iraqi WMD](#). As Chilcot, (chair of the Iraq Inquiry) recently noted, Tony Blair went 'beyond the facts of the case' in promoting the war against Iraq.

Of course, recently, the issue of deception and manipulation has become a major focal point for debate in the so-called 'fake news' crisis. Much of this debate has been driven by concerns from within the liberal centre ground that political crises surrounding the debate in the UK over Brexit, and the election of Trump as US President, have been fuelled by the resort to outright lies by anti-establishment actors utilising alternative media outlets.

At the same time, the term 'fake news' has itself become a propaganda meme providing a useful shorthand to discredit information being provided by alternative media, whether truthful or deceptive, and serving to underpin the frequent allegations being levelled at Russia with respect to interference in the US elections and its military actions in Syria. At

this point, [no evidence](#) has been presented to confirm the allegations being levelled at Russia. Moreover, there has been little sustained mainstream media attention to the content of the DNC (Democratic National Congress) leaks/hack which have fuelled so much of the controversy regarding the US elections and alleged Russian information warfare.

Indeed, these leaked/hacked emails, released by Wikileaks, [showed that the DNC actively favoured Clinton](#) over Sanders during the primaries whilst [evidence of question fixing with CNN was also revealed](#). There are no serious challenges to the authenticity of these emails and, as such, they do not appear to be actual examples of fake news. This has not stopped, however, media coverage linking [Russia with the leaks and, arguably, conflating all of this with a fake news/propaganda narrative](#). Moreover, whilst the fake news debate has been overwhelmingly focused on alternative media and external actors (i.e. Russia), little attention has been paid to the use of [deception and propaganda by Western governments](#).

Moving beyond claims and counter-claims regarding fake news, bias and deception, it is also critical to recognise that propaganda involves coordinated actions and activities beyond simply the crafting of manipulative media messages: It also involves the mobilisation of resources and physical actions.

For example, in relation to the current Syrian conflict, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton authorised the 'training for more than a thousand (Syrian) activists, students, and independent journalists' in order to promote her regime change preference in 2011. More prominently, the much-lauded *White Helmets Syria Civil Defence* entity has been critiqued for its function as a pro-[intervention propaganda tool](#). [This group](#), apparently set up to rescue injured civilians in Syria, and which has been an important source for Western mainstream media outlets, is heavily funded by Western governments and associated only with [opposition groups and opposition-held areas](#).

We are also witnessing a worrying increase in organised attempts to silence dissenting voices here in the West. For example, the apparently self-styled [Propornot](#) entity now provides a list of news sites which it claims to be distributing Russian propaganda, whilst [Professorwatch blacklists US professors accused \(anonymously\) for alleged liberal bias and 'anti-American values'](#).

It is likely that these, and similar activities, are contributing to a significant restriction of freedom of expression here in the West, as well as across non-liberal democratic states, and are inhibiting news media from performing their expected roles as watchdogs and truth seekers. Indeed, as has recently been argued by [Louis Allday](#), individuals challenging official claims regarding Syria have frequently been met with tirades of abuse whilst former British Ambassador to [Syria Peter Ford](#) and mainstream commentator [Peter Hitchens](#) have recently both stated that Western publics are being profoundly misled with regard to the reality of the situation in Syria.

We must now seriously entertain the possibility that the war in Syria has involved similar, if not greater, levels of manipulation and propaganda than that which occurred in the case of the 2003 Iraq War: In a nutshell, it appears increasingly likely that a Western-backed regime-change operation in Syria, which includes the supporting and arming of extremist groups, has been obscured via a propaganda campaign aimed at demonising Assad's autocratic regime and promoting a simplistic narrative of good vs. evil.

Does it go too far to say there is now a crisis across Western public spheres whereby

propaganda and 'fake news' emanating from mainstream media and governments has created a situation in which there is 'major media malfunction'?

There probably is a crisis. Government communications strategies involving deceptive combinations of exaggeration and omission, as well as probably occasional outright lies, and the organisation of entities whose objective it is to shape the information environment, including via the intimidation of dissent and free thought, mean that journalistic autonomy and freedom are under severe threat.

When a country can be invaded based upon spurious and bogus claims regarding weapons of mass destruction whilst a second subjected to a five-year-long regime-change war based upon, it seems likely, propaganda and lies, all within the space of 10 years, there are signs that something is seriously wrong. The means are less brutal than those instances of threat and violence usually seen outside the West. But they are, nonetheless, effective. Before casting stones, the West needs to get its own house in order.

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