

How Truth slips down the Memory Hole

By [John Pilger](#)

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In his latest article for the New Statesman, John Pilger applies to current events Orwell's description in '1984' of how the Ministry of Truth consigned embarrassing truth to a memory hole. He highlights the killing of a Palestinian cameraman by the Israelis as an example of how "we" are trained to look on the rest of the world as quite unlike ourselves: useful or expendable.

One of the leaders of demonstrations in Gaza calling for the release of the BBC reporter Alan Johnston was a Palestinian news cameraman, Imad Ghanem. On 5 July, he was shot by Israeli soldiers as he filmed them invading Gaza. A Reuters video shows bullets hitting his body as he lay on the ground. An ambulance trying to reach him was also attacked. The Israelis described him as a "legitimate target". The International Federation of Journalists called the shooting "a vicious and brutal example of deliberate targeting of a journalist". At the age of 21, he has had both legs amputated.

Dr David Halpin, a British trauma surgeon who works with Palestinian children, emailed the BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen. "The BBC should report the alleged details about the shooting," he wrote. "It should honour Alan [Johnston] as a journalist by reporting the facts, uncomfortable as they might be to Israel."

He received no reply.

The atrocity was reported in two sentences on the BBC online. Along with 11 Palestinian civilians killed by the Israelis on the same day, Alan Johnston's now legless champion slipped into what George Orwell in Nineteen Eighty-Four called the memory hole. (It was Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth to make disappear all facts embarrassing to Big Brother.)

While Alan Johnston was being held, I was asked by the BBC World Service if I would say a few words of support for him. I readily agreed, and suggested I also mention the thousands of Palestinians abducted and held hostage. The answer was a polite no; and all the other hostages remained in the memory hole. Or, as Harold Pinter wrote of such unmentionables: "It never happened. Nothing ever happened... It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

The media wailing over the BBC's royal photo-shoot fiasco and assorted misdemeanours provide the perfect straw man. They complement a self-serving BBC internal inquiry into news bias, which dutifully supplied the right-wing Daily Mail with hoary grist that the corporation is a left-wing plot. Such shenanigans would be funny were it not for the true story behind the facade of elite propaganda that presents humanity as useful or expendable, worthy or unworthy, and the Middle East as the Anglo-American crime that never happened, didn't matter, was of no interest.

The other day, I turned on the BBC's Radio 4 and heard a cut-glass voice announce a programme about Iraqi interpreters working for "the British coalition forces" and warning that "listeners might find certain descriptions of violence disturbing". Not a word referred to those of "us" directly and ultimately responsible for the violence. The programme was called Face the Facts. Is satire that dead? Not yet. The Murdoch columnist David Aaronovitch, a warmonger, is to interview Blair in the BBC's "major retrospective" of the sociopath's rule.

Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four lexicon of opposites pervades almost everything we see, hear and read now. The invaders and destroyers are "the British coalition forces", surely as benign as that British institution, St John Ambulance, who are "bringing democracy" to Iraq. BBC television describes Israel as having "two hostile Palestinian entities on its borders", neatly inverting the truth that Israel is actually inside Palestinian borders. A study by Glasgow University says that young British viewers of TV news believe Israelis illegally colonising Palestinian land are Palestinians: the victims are the invaders.

"The great crimes against most of humanity", wrote the American cultural critic James Petras, "are justified by a corrosive debasement of language and thought... [that] have fabricated a linguistic world of terror, of demons and saviours, of axes of good and evil, of euphemisms" designed to disguise a state terror that is "a gross perversion" of democracy, liberation, reform, justice. In his reinauguration speech, George Bush mentioned all these words, whose meaning, for him, is the dictionary opposite.

It is 80 years since Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, predicted a pervasive "invisible government" of corporate spin, suppression and silence as the true ruling power in the United States. That is true today on both sides of the Atlantic. How else could America and Britain go on such a spree of death and mayhem on the basis of stupendous lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, even a "mushroom cloud over New York"? When the BBC radio reporter Andrew Gilligan reported the truth, he was pilloried and sacked along with the BBC's director general, while Blair, the proven liar, was protected by the liberal wing of the media and given a standing ovation in parliament.

The same is happening again over Iran, distracted, it is hoped, by spin that the new Foreign Secretary David Miliband is a "sceptic" about the crime in Iraq when, in fact, he has been an accomplice, and by unctuous Kennedy-quoting Foreign Office propaganda about Miliband's "new world order".

"What do you think of Iran's complicity in attacks on British soldiers in Basra?" Miliband was asked by the Financial Times.

Miliband: "Well, I think that any evidence of Iranian engagement there is to be deplored. I think that we need regional players to be supporting stability, not fomenting discord, never mind death..."

FT: "Just to be clear, there is evidence?"

Miliband: "Well no, I chose my words carefully..."

The coming war on Iran, including the possibility of a nuclear attack, has already begun as a war by journalism. Count the number of times "nuclear weapons programme" and "nuclear threat" are spoken and written, yet neither exists, says the International Atomic Energy Agency. On 21 June, the New York Times went further and advertised an "urgent" poll,

headed: "Should we bomb Iran?" The questions beneath referred to Iran being "a greater threat than Saddam Hussein" and asked: "Who should undertake military action against Iran first... ?" The choice was "US. Israel. Neither country".

So tick your favourite bombers.

The last British war to be fought without censorship and "embedded" journalists was the Crimea a century and a half ago. The bloodbath of the First World War and the Cold War might never have happened without their unpaid (and paid) propagandists. Today's invisible government is no less served, especially by those who censor by omission. The craven liberal campaign against the first real hope for the poor of Venezuela is a striking example.

However, there are major differences. Official disinformation now is often aimed at a critical public intelligence, a growing awareness in spite of the media. This "threat" from a public often held in contempt has been met by the insidious transfer of much of journalism to public relations. Some years ago, PR Week estimated that the amount of "PR-generated material" in the media is "50 per cent in a broadsheet newspaper in every section apart from sport. In the local press and the mid-market and tabloid nationals, the figure would undoubtedly be higher. Music and fashion journalists and PRs work hand in hand in the editorial process... PRs provide fodder, but the clever high-powered ones do a lot of the journalists' thinking for them."

This is known today as "perception management". The most powerful are not the Max Cliffords but huge corporations such as Hill & Knowlton, which "sold" the slaughter known as the first Gulf war, and the Sawyer Miller Group, which sold hated, pro-Washington regimes in Colombia and Bolivia and whose operatives included Mark Malloch Brown, the new Foreign Office minister, currently being spun as anti-Washington. Hundreds of millions of dollars go to corporations spinning the carnage in Iraq as a sectarian war and covering up the truth: that an atrocious invasion is pinned down by a successful resistance while the oil is looted.

The other major difference today is the abdication of cultural forces that once provided dissent outside journalism. Their silence has been devastating. "For almost the first time in two centuries," wrote the literary and cultural critic Terry Eagleton, "there is no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist prepared to question the foundations of the western way of life." The lone, honourable exception is Harold Pinter. Eagleton listed writers and playwrights who once promised dissent and satire and instead became rich celebrities, ending the legacy of Shelley and Blake, Carlyle and Ruskin, Morris and Wilde, Wells and Shaw.

He singled out Martin Amis, a writer given tombstones of column inches in which to air his pretensions, along with his attacks on Muslims. The following is from a recent article by Amis:

Tony strolled over [to me] and said, "What have you been up to today?" "I've been feeling protective of my prime minister, since you ask." For some reason our acquaintanceship, at least on my part, is becoming mildly but deplorably flirtatious.

What these elite, embedded voices share is their participation in an essentially class war, the long war of the rich against the poor. That they play their part in a broadcasting studio or in the clubbable pages of the review sections and that they think of themselves as liberals or conservatives is neither here nor there. They belong to the same crusade, waging

the same battle for their enduring privilege.

In *The Serpent*, Marc Karlin's dreamlike film about Rupert Murdoch, the narrator describes how easily Murdochism came to dominate the media and coerce the industry's liberal elite. There are clips from a keynote address that Murdoch gave at the Edinburgh Television Festival. The camera pans across the audience of TV executives, who listen in respectful silence as Murdoch flagellates them for suppressing the true voice of the people. They then applaud him. "This is the silence of the democrats," says the voice-over, "and the Dark Prince could bath in their silence."

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