

The Main Form of Media Deception: Censorship by Omission

This is the second of two posts about the media. The first part is entitled 'How the Media Distort Reality – Filtering Out the Important Stuff'

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

*"We don't understand how your government gets the media to repeat propaganda without question. In our country we have to tear finger nails out to get this level of co-operation."(1)
(Russian journalists visiting America during the cold war)*

Censorship By Omission – The Things That Are Not Discussed Are The Most Important

"Great is truth, but even greater from a practical point of view is silence about truth"
(Aldous Huxley(2))

We can see the outcome of the filtering system discussed in the previous post by looking at coverage of politics overseas. Tyrants in other countries commit serious atrocities, but provided they continue to implement economic policies that the US and Britain like, they receive little criticism. Our politicians regularly criticise governments they want to replace, and the media repeat these criticisms with little challenge. A recent example of this is when the media says that 'life is terrible in Venezuela, we must do something', meaning that the US and British governments want to overthrow the government of Venezuela.(3) The mainstream coverage is dumbed-down and superficial. It is based upon unstated assumptions which, if examined, turn out to be untrue. What is missing is context, history, and critical thinking, such as(4)

- a) The historical role of wealthy elites, backed by the US, plundering Venezuela's resources and maintaining inequality and poverty
- b) The positive achievements of recent left-wing governments in Venezuela improving living standards for the poor
- c) The serious problems caused by US sanctions on Venezuela
- d) The track record of murder and torture by right-wing dictators put in place by the US throughout South and Central America
- e) A wider discussion of US and British imperialism, their records of violence in the pursuit of control and profits, and the evidence that they have never carried out humanitarian intervention.

More generally, there is no exploration of complex issues, no critical analysis of the true role of our military, no serious critique of the corporate system, and no questioning of the incorrect assumption that our governments and corporations are benign or benevolent.

What should be the most important issues in society today are virtually unmentionable in the mainstream press.

This failure to discuss most of the important issues, and the discussion of other topics in a narrow way, is known as censorship-by-omission. It is the main method for keeping us poorly informed. It applies most obviously to coverage of war, which is so sanitised that US and British viewers rarely get to see the true results of our wars.(5) What they see is government propaganda videos of laser-guided bombs hitting their targets. When a single American or British soldier dies, this is worthy of a news report, usually saying how brave they were. There is no mention of the fact that they are trained killers who are dead because they have illegally invaded and occupied someone else's country, and helped to slaughter huge numbers of innocent people.

The true scale of death and injury, of Iraqis and Afghans, killed by our troops in our wars is not discussed by the mainstream media. If everyone saw the mutilated corpses and horrific injuries of civilians every day, populations would be less likely to believe the lies that create a false justification for war. By not examining the consequences of war in much greater detail, most of the media end up creating the illusion that war is like a video game where our 'good' guys fight against someone else's 'bad' guys, and that we should celebrate every time 'bad' guys get killed. As critics of the mainstream media have noted, journalists who reinforce the belief that the "world is made up of humanitarian interventionists (us) and monster states (them) are vital cogs in the machinery of state killing".(6)

The Illusion of Critical Media

The aim of the mainstream media is to

"limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum."(7)

Endless stories about political manoeuvres; who is saying what about whom; and the character of politicians, are not real news. They are peripheral issues and distractions that create the illusion of having in-depth debates in order to avoid talking about the most important issues.

As well as ignoring or limiting the discussions of some topics, the media will exaggerate the importance of other issues. A clear example is the allegation that Russia manipulated the 2016 US election, which was repeated endlessly in the US media.(8) The evidence for this manipulation was extremely weak, and if there was any Russian manipulation, the effect was negligible. On the other hand, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and other US organisations, have interfered in 81 foreign elections since 1950.(9) They manipulate elections abroad more than everyone else put together. This is well documented, but the mainstream US and British media never discuss this.

Sometimes the media do mention specific instances of wrongdoing, but in general this will be presented as individuals operating outside the system. There will be little criticism of the system itself. For example, when corporations appear in the news having committed serious fraud, the focus is usually on a single corporation, with little attempt to explain that they have been carrying out activities similar to many other big corporations, and that much of the corporate system now involves criminal, fraudulent, or unethical activity. Similarly, when

torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was discussed, the focus was on the low-ranking individuals who were involved.(10) There was little effort to blame the top-level planners who created the policies, and to insist that they should have been prosecuted.

The Mysterious Case of Right and Left-Wing Bias

These posts describe the media as having pro-establishment, pro-war, pro-corporate or right-wing bias. However, the media is often accused (particularly by the government) of having anti-government or left-wing bias. This is partly explained by governments trying to deflect attention from their crimes, but there are other explanations for this apparent contradiction. Many journalists claim that if they are receiving equal numbers of accusations of left-wing and right-wing bias, they must actually be somewhere in the middle, and the accusations actually reflect the bias of the accuser. This is not true. The terms right-wing and left-wing are being used to mean different things. Most journalists are middle-class white people who tend to favour freedom for individuals on personal matters. The media therefore have a left-wing bias on cultural issues, such as gay marriage. However, those who accuse the media of right-wing bias are talking about foreign and economic policy. The media is uncritical of Britain and the US invading other countries, and uncritical of corporate power, so they have a right-wing bias on these issues.

The Mainstream Media Are Not Unbiased or Impartial

There are many sources of bias. Most information that supports the US or British governments gets presented without question – it is assumed to be unbiased. This was the case with government propaganda stating that the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, had Weapons of Mass Destruction before the Iraq war, which was not true. On the other hand, if someone criticises the government, they are assumed to be biased, so a government spokesperson is invited to appear on TV to oppose that point of view.

Broadcasters claim that they are providing unbiased coverage if they present the viewpoints of both Republicans and Democrats in the US, or if they present both Conservative and Labour viewpoints in Britain. But prior to Jeremy Corbyn becoming leader of the Labour Party in 2015, there was often little difference between the two parties in either country on the most important issues, particularly war or corporate power. To genuinely present a balanced discussion, broadcasters would have to invite people saying ‘destroying a nation is a crime, we should not go to war’ onto their shows regularly. If our media were honest, the mainstream government view, which is that the US and Britain have the right to invade or destroy other nations when they pose no threat to us, would be considered insane.

Media coverage in both Britain and the US has been analysed in detail after various wars. The vast majority is pro-war. Only a few voices are critical, and even then only in narrow ways, such as “we did not plan the war carefully enough” or “we did not send enough troops”.(11) There is almost no questioning of the government’s actual motivation – it is always assumed to be good. In one academic study of war reporting, it was found that the BBC was actually more biased in favor of war than any of the other TV stations analysed, including one from the US. Only 2% of the BBC’s coverage was strongly anti-war.(12)

A similar study in the US found that only 3% of US guests on news programs were anti-war.(13) In Britain and the US, the mainstream media promote US-led wars almost unquestioningly. In relation to the invasion of Iraq, most newspapers and TV channels

portrayed US President Bush and British Prime Minister Blair as wonderful leaders trying to help other nations achieve democracy, when the evidence overwhelmingly contradicted this.(14) If Russia had destroyed Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the media would (correctly) be saying how outrageous these crimes are, and demanding that the leaders responsible be prosecuted.

The Death of Critical Journalism

Quite a few British and US journalists realised in 2003 after the invasion of Iraq that they had been used by their governments to transmit propaganda. Mainstream US news channels did eventually concede that they should have been more questioning about the invasion. Some are now on the record as saying that they have been unable to report the truth during military actions due to the system of government-controlled propaganda and embedded journalists (these are journalists who can be controlled because they travel with the soldiers). A leading war reporter, Christiane Amanpour, stated that her network, CNN, was muzzled (censored) by the US government, and that it also “self-muzzled”.(15)

Some journalists claimed that they would be more critical and questioning after Iraq, but in fact they have become even less critical.(16) Journalists in Australia stated that since 2001 there has been more and more censorship,(17) and that the general public has no idea what is really going on. By the time of the US and British bombing and destruction of Libya in 2011, there was almost no criticism from the mainstream media.

We discussed in the previous post how senior BBC staff were fired after receiving flak from the government over the 2003 Iraq war. This led to a decrease (from already low levels) in media criticism. In 2013, computers at the Guardian newspaper were destroyed by the security services(18) because the Guardian had participated in the revelations of whistleblower Edward Snowden, which showed that the US National Security Agency (NSA) was spying on everyone through their phones and computers. The destruction of the computers was just for show, as all the data was backed up on computers elsewhere. However, since then, the mainstream media in Britain and the US have been extremely compliant. The Australian government has also cracked down on accurate reporting of its war-crimes and spying activities, by raiding the homes of journalists and the headquarters of the broadcaster ABC.(19)

One of the few TV stations to portray the darker side of US power has been Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar. Its war reporting has consistently tried much harder to show the horrors of war and to show US war crimes for what they are. For this reason, the Al-Jazeera studios in Kabul were bombed by US forces.(20)

Since 2006, the most important source of accurate news has been the website, Wikileaks, set up by Julian Assange. It publishes evidence from whistleblowers, and makes all the evidence available for everyone to examine, without journalists or politicians applying their heavily-distorted interpretation. The documents that have been sent to Wikileaks include 91,000 US military reports for the War in Afghanistan, and 490,000 reports for the war in Iraq. These have been described as the “most finely detailed history of war that has ever been disclosed. Precise times, locations, kill counts.”(21) Wikileaks analysed these documents and showed that the total number of violent deaths in Afghanistan due to US action was hundreds of thousands of people.(22) This information has been extremely embarrassing for the US and British governments, who prefer to be able to commit their war crimes in secret. For this reason they (together with the Swedish government) have been

persecuting Julian since 2010. The United Nations expert on torture, Nils Melzer, has described Julian's treatment as torture.(23) The purpose of persecuting him is to send a message to all other journalists and whistleblowers that if they expose the crimes of the US government, it doesn't matter where they live or work, it doesn't matter where they are from, the US government will persecute them too.(24)

The Mainstream Media is the Real Fake News

A recent development is 'Fake News'. This is an attempt by the mainstream to pretend that what they write is honest journalism, and that the critical voices on the internet are themselves just propaganda outlets. The internet carries every perspective imaginable, some of it bizarre, some of it no better than the mainstream, and much of it replicates the mainstream. However, if you can work out where to look and who to read, most of the best reporting on serious issues is now on critical, non-mainstream, websites.

Look at the Evidence

When the ideas in these posts are discussed with mainstream journalists, their first response tends to be 'that's just your opinion'. But the world is not just made up of opinions. There is such a thing as evidence, which can be used to assess the accuracy and truthfulness of an opinion. Many mainstream media statements are evidence-free. They are copies of what politicians and corporate leaders have said. Evidence which contradicts those statements is mostly ignored. Despite the huge amount of detail about US and British crimes and atrocities in declassified government documents, and in Wikileaks' documents, the mainstream media in Britain and the US still fail to seriously challenge US-led wars.

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Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the twelfth in a series entitled Elephants In The Room, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

Notes

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