

Testimony on the Liberation of Aleppo: How the Media Distorts and Manipulates Reality

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A moment of world history missed by quite a few

I was in Aleppo December 10-14, 2016 and the Eastern part was finally liberated on the 12th.

Beyond any doubt, this was a world historic moment: because of Aleppo's importance as a city in Syria and the Middle East, its status as UNESCO World Heritage site, as turning point in the soon 6 year long war in and on Syria. And because of the almost 100.000 people who came out of 4,5 years of hell-like occupation and because of the sheer proportions of [the destruction](#).

Remarkably, there were no leading Western media present, also not those who were in Damascus and thus had a media visa. Most reported from very far away or from Beirut in neighbouring Lebanon, Istanbul or Berlin.

I happened to be the only one from Scandinavia and among the first dozen of people – mostly media people – to get into the East of the city and see the devastation and talk with the exhausted but immensely happy people.

I had the opportunity to visit the Hanano district, the old town, Ramouseh, Sheikh Saeed, the huge industrial zone Shaykh Najjar and the Jinin reception zone to which the people in need of humanitarian assistance arrived.

Old media reactions

From a normal professional media perspective, my presence there as well as my photos should, given the importance of Aleppo and its human dimensions – have attracted some interest, perhaps even been seen as a scoop. Particularly by those who had no reporter on the ground.

Well, not exactly so.

TFF's media list counts some 4000 addresses worldwide – individuals as well as editorial offices – of which about 700 in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. All received a couple of messages that I would be in Syria and how to reach me.

One Danish newspaper, left-wing [Arbejderen](#) made an interview upon my return.

No other media did.

Here some examples of how the old media in Scandinavia tried to perform their little tricks. They are all respected, professional media with a record of decency – not sensational yellow press.

Danish Radio station 24/Seven

When just out of Eastern Aleppo and emotionally very touched I receive a call from Danish Radio 24/Syv telling me they want an interview about what I have seen and heard there and then. I gladly accept but when the interview takes place, the hidden agenda becomes clear.

The station has found a image on Twitter of me sitting at a restaurant in Western Aleppo with some people and then done some face recognition. Among them was the President of the Chamber of Industry Syrian Industrial Association, *Fares al-Shehabi* He had kindly offered us a glass of wine to celebrating – with the rest of the people – the liberation of Eastern Aleppo.

The first question had to do with how I could sit there and celebrate when the regime had regained control of the city and how I could be “with a representative of the regime.”

Answer to the first: because people in East and West celebrated their freedom from the occupation the Western-backed RIOTs, as I call them, Rebels-Insurgents-Opposition-Terrorists. Secondly, Shehabi is an MP, but independent, not a member of the Baath Party. As a businessman who has stayed, as one of few, he was a very good informer.

24/Seven’s next question was why I was with “the regime’s army.” Answer: You simply don’t get into a war zone without military protection, they take care of you and don’t want reporters and others to get hurt or killed by snipers or whoever. It was a transport to and from a place – I could freely talk with any citizens in the streets of Eastern Aleppo, no one guiding me to any persons at any point.

I tried to explain why my focus is on the underlying conflict and not the violence and that, to understand a conflict one must talk with all sides, and that I even had handed in a request to meet ministers – particularly the minister for reconciliation who is also leader of the opposition – and president al-Assad himself.

But it was lost upon the interviewer and I began to feel pretty angry: No questions was asked about the situation in Eastern Aleppo, the immense destruction or the human suffering.

His next question: Which side are you on? I asked what this had to do with my work here, guessing that he had probably never asked that to all those who support the RIOT’s various fractions or been in Syria on their sides, or gone to Washington for that matter. I told him that, with the suffering I had just witnessed, I was with the non-armed civilian 98% of the Syrian people.

Clearly, 24/Seven’s purpose was to try to place me in the stupid good-guy-bad-guy media frame and prove that I was “with the regime.” As the interview over almost 10 min had gotten quite tense due to my irritation, what was broadcast later was about two minutes, the most embarrassing passages omitted. The editors later used various selected small soundbites as point of departure for discussing, implicitly, how one-sided I was with other

journalists and politicians who – surprise surprise – thought I was one-sided. I admit gladly that they did offer a half-hearted apology for the hidden agenda “that we should have told you about before the interview”... and offered me also the opportunity to participate in these later discussions but I refused to have more to do with 24/Seven.

Never again.

End of story.

Danish daily Information

Mail on December 13 from Nikolaj Houmann Mortensen: “I can see you are in Aleppo at the moment. If you can find the time and would like to, I’d like to do an interview with you about both your eyewitness story and the experience of being embedded with the Syrian state’s forces. Do you have time?

My answer: “If your point of departure is to place me as embedded with the Syrian Army, my answer is No thanks.”

That seems to have been the case. Heard no more.

End of story.

Danish newspaper Berlingske Tidende

Ole Damkjær wants to interview me about my impressions of Eastern Aleppo and continues with reference to 24/Seven – “why a peace researcher is participating in a toast on the victory” and later when I asked for an elaboration: “Your sitting there can be interpreted as if you are siding with the Syrian regime (Danish: “styre”). That is not criminal but anyhow sensational for a peace researcher. How do you explain that yourself?”

Damkjær is a decent man without a hidden agenda. He gave me his six questions in advance. One of which was how I had gotten in and my relations to the Ministry of Information. The other four were about the situation in Eastern and Western Aleppo.

I then asked him whether he had ever asked an expert or another journalist who had been to, say, Washington and Bruxelles and had reported from there – who they had been seen with or embedded with. Damkjær answered:

“No, I have not and I cannot remember a similar situation where I have interviewed a researcher about Syria after he has visited and obtained information from ‘the other party.’ ”

Mmmmm quite a revelation – as I wrote back.

We decided to do the interview from Damascus. Unfortunately I had to leave the country as my visa was not extended and told Damkjær we could make it any time after I was out of Syria. Four days later I ask what is happening with our agreement. No reply.

End of story.

Swedish daily Sydsvenska Dagbladet

Right after my Aleppo visit, write this to the general mailbox of the newspaper as well as to its political reporter, Olle Lönnaeus: "As you've been informed before, I'm in Syria and have just visited Eastern and Western Aleppo. What you (the newspaper) reports has rather little to do with the reality here. I am at your disposal with a less one-sided perspective."

I also pointed out that the daily's recommendation to its readers to donate to humanitarian aid efforts through the White Helmets (among others) was not such a brilliant idea and sent a link to my comprehensive [analysis](#) to explain.

No answer.

End of story.

The Danish Broadcasting's "Deadline" – a daily social affairs, political program

Jonathan Kargaard writes Dec 19 that they want me in the studio in Copenhagen – "The central questions will be: To which extent can one be a neutral observer in a conflict such as that in Syria? Which sources do you find credible? What do you apply when you quote sources that describe the situation in Syria and To which extent do you have confidence in the international institutions?"

I reply that I'm willing to participate and talk about Aleppo and *touch upon* these – relevant – questions. Explains at length that I am not a journalist but a conflict analyst and look at other things than his questions indicate that he thinks I do and [enclose this for his info](#). Repeat: I'm willing to do it in spite of the questions having little, if anything, to do with the situation in Syria.

Kargaard replies that the enclosed was interesting and that one could certainly talk about demonisation of both (!? – JO) parties. And then adds: "That said, it has to be pointed out that your latest updates have created a debate that, to some degree, overshadows your peace research project at the moment. Therefore, we'd like to stick to the questions I raised in my earlier mail."

In spite of his blaming me and not 24/Seven for the said debate, I say OK and ask about honorarium and travel costs – traveling from Lund, Sweden to Denmark and spending most of an evening on this late program.

Reply: Due to what had just happened in Berlin and Istanbul program plans had been altered. But since Syria will be important also in the future, the idea of a discussion would *perhaps* be taken up in the new year.

It hasn't been.

End of story.

Swedish daily Dagens Nyheter

On Facebook, Middle East correspondent Erik Ohlsson finds my posts too strong and argues that journalists often do not get a visa to Syria. I reply that I think that is true but that there were/had been people in Damascus and Aleppo earlier and that they had decided to leave right before the – predictable – liberation. Also, that *some* Syrians I met have often felt that no matter what they tell and show, Western journalists write whatever they please.

A participant in that thread suggests that Ohlsson could use the opportunity to interview me for Dagens Nyheter (I can add that Dagens Nyheter and Erik Ohlsson himself have basically followed the mainstream reporting. An article about Aleppo's fall/liberation focuses on little Bana. And the daily has systematically used "regime" and "dictator" in its news articles).

End of story.

Facebook suggestions

A number of Facebook friends and followers have told me that they have written to media people, also such they know personally, and suggested they make an interview with me or use my texts and/or photos.

Kind gestures that have lead to nothing.

End of story.

Summary – framing

1) Far the majority of the media on TFF's address list – right, middle and left – never contacted us. Neither before nor we had published my eyewitness report, analytical texts and photos which professionalism alone should have deemed fairly important and topical at that particular moment. They must believe more in Western new bureaus repetitive, their colleagues and similar narrative written up by people who sat hundreds or thousands of kilometres from Aleppo.

2) Those contacting me were not interested in the heartbreaking human suffering – and happiness after hell – neither in the destruction of a huge historic and cultural city. Instead they saw it as their task to frame me as an Assad apologist and as the peace guy who is embedded with the dictator's military. (I was in Syria during ten days and did not conduct an interview with a single representative of the government).

3) My stories just don't fit. Since I am physically on the government side and my focus is on underlying conflicts and the possibilities to make peace, it doesn't fit their obsessions with war and violence reporting and the blame game. Concretely, I did not repeat all the usual stuff and the pathetic [grouphink](#) that seems to fill the air inside the news media box.

It's called framing.

Framing is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" writes Robert M. Entmann in *Journal of Communication* 43 (4) back in 1993. Spot on. It's nothing new.

What *is* new in my view is the thickness of the wall, the *degree* to which complex matters are reduced beyond any possible recognition – not because media consumers are that illiterate but because media people refer to the need for simplicity among their readers and viewers and thus, conveniently, feel that they don't have to seek "complicating" information, let alone read some longer background article and certainly not a book or two. Intellectual laziness, in other words.

Another new thing is that there are no small holes in the wall. The news media world has

closed all doors and windows – called self-censorship combined with preservation of good relations with media owners, the foreign policy establishment (how else to get an interview with the foreign minister?) and the ever larger orientation and truth-defining power of a handful of leading, predominantly American media. And – of course – bad old [PSYOPS](#) aimed at systematically influencing public opinion to be in favour of “our” side and hate the “others” – at best when the target group, including journalists, are not even aware of it.

And these media, particularly in NATO countries, have to operate inside a declining Empire that gets increasingly desperate and losing one war and one policy and one confidence after the other.

If you are strong and self-confident, you can allow other voices in. If you are weak as the Communist countries and their were in the 1980s you can't tolerate such luxury.

The resistance to alternative perspectives is massive – has to be.

During the wars that ended Yugoslavia, there was also a framing: Everything was the fault of the evil Serbs and president Milosevic who – after having been used by and useful to the West until the Dayton Accords in December 1995 – suddenly in 1999 became the new Hitler of Europe, as Bill Clinton called him shortly before he bombed carve out Kosovo from Serbia as a nice little punishment for an ethnic cleansing of all Kosovo-Albanians which a) never took place and b) no plan existed for and therefore wasn't found after the whole affair was over.

But there were plenty of loopholes; the resistance to every other type of story wasn't massive.

Banalisation of evil in the news

The narrative is a moralising, selective human rights-oriented reporting coupled with demonisation of one part among dozens or hundreds – and, implicitly, conveying to the political establishment (of which they are now an integral part) that they must “Do something”. And that something is military action, not diplomacy, pressure, dialogue, mediation. No, go and bomb them and He, the dictator. It's anyhow the only language they understand. And for the high moral mission we are on – to hell with international law.

And as part of that: Omit or justify whatever crimes your own side is doing, the actions of the bad guys – who uses *evil* violence – *always* legitimise what we do – because we use *good* violence.

The basic problem is that there is little left of media integrity, source critique, diversity in coverage, attempt at objectivity. Why even try? Your final product – article, new report and studio debate is already pre-determined. Totally predictable. And the editors have been selected carefully – no wild cats let in.

These old media know what the good guys do and why. They are therefore upset in the case Syria that the good side has been too weak – this soft Obama didn't smash up Syria when the regime used chemical weapons “on its own people.”

Whether it did or not isn't a problem because John Kerry said he knew that they did – and we trust him even though his country is a participant *in* the war, bombs and kills and has interests in the region. What the others do is anyhow much worse...or so we believe.

And since we all know – [grouphink](#) – that al-Assad is a liar and mass murderer, we repeat for 5 years that he did throw these bombs on his own. Whether empirically true or not. Reports that argue that perhaps it was more likely to have been a crime committed by our – moderate – opposition friends are surely written by someone embedded, an Assad apologist or by the Russians...

The far majority of the Western media have systematically called president al-Assad “the dictator” and the government “the regime”. These negatively loaded words do not belong in news reports – whereas you may find such jargon in editorials and debate articles. News media which has used these terms are an integral part of a war-promoting narrative or deliberate propaganda. It has nothing to do with professional journalism. But why discuss it, we all agree that that is what it’s all about.

It does not matter when you are morally superior: Contempt for the moral inferior is right. Like in Nazi Germany with the Jews. Now it's the Muslims' turn. al-Assad is one of them and those he doesn't manage to kill he send up to Europe. He is certainly Evil personified

Ever heard about [projection](#)? as a part of the news media grouphink?

The old and the new media

There are those who believe the old media – the mainstream printed newspaper, TV and radio news – are fading because people prefer social media and whatever they find on the Internet. That is partly true. But it’s very convenient to focus on new technologies and economic structures as causing the soon-to-be death of the traditional media.

What is conveniently omitted is the conspicuous trend over the last 30-40 years: the old media’s *decreasing quality and ignoring of classical values, norms and rules of news reporting that used to be – just such as thing that nothing should be published before two of each other independent sources had confirmed w news item.*

The alternative media are booming.

They may not be better per se but I can sit on my screen and read a variety of media in the US, EU, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, RIOT etc. and get a much broader understanding of what is happening whereas my national newspaper will tell me what one national news bureau may have cut-and-pasted from a single, most often Western, news agency. And I can go to online sites, blogs and commentators, research institutes and ministries and get mainstream perspectives and alternative angles – quite fast and easily.

OK, my life gets more complicated but I can piece together my own understanding and worldview. The old media’s monopoly is gone.

Why is that so? Well it is thanks to new technologies on screens, tablets and on phones, true. But it is also that *there is a much larger pool of talents to access out there.* A diversity much more reflective of the world’s realities. And there is an openness, receptivity and connectivity. There is interaction.

I’ve experienced it and can truthfully report it. In a couple of weeks after my Syria mission, I’ve gained thousands of new friends and followers, likes and comments. People are happy to comment and dialogue – mostly in a good tone – and share emotions which you can’t when you sit with a non-interactive newspaper or watching prime time news.

Further – the [three photo stories](#) I have produced from Aleppo have been seen by 75.000 people worldwide and caused positive reactions and expressions of gratitude beyond my wildest expectations.

And about twenty online media from Vietnam to California and a couple of large non-Western TV channels have made interviews over Skype.

In this media war about Syria, I have experienced where the dynamics and openness lies. And it is not att BBC or the Danish and Swedish media I've just told you about.

Interactivity in a new key

Before the Internet and the social media one could not know how, say, a TV or radio program was made. How the program planning had changed during the process or what has, last minute, been left out. You could not call an editor and ask: How did you arrive at that particular format and content in the program last night?

Today, we can tell media users what's behind a program and what is omitted. I've told you here how some media went about doing their job vis-a-vis me. I can tell you why an interview or debate did not take place – and you wouldn't know if I didn't tell you. That is, you would not really know how the manipulation is conducted and how you end up seeing – or not seeing – what you do.

This type of media critique I've exercised here is hardly appreciated in the media world. I expect no debate. Silence is a major tool in the old media.

For far too long a time experts and others have kept silent if they knew – because, naturally, they would like to be on TV and get their message out. So better not hurt anybody's feeling, better keep quite and hope to be invited again.

That no longer applies. I myself refuse to be manipulated, framed, an extra in somebody's staged show, etc.

With this article, I may never again be invited by the media I have revealed to some extent above. So be it. It's OK. Here is [my media policy](#). If it is overlapping with some of the old media's fine. If not, I don't bother.

I believe in diversity, democracy, dialogue and decency.

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