

The Corporate Media's Dubious Syria Coverage

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Western news media reportage on the rampant criminal activities of foreign-backed paramilitary groups operating within Syria still relies heavily on unreliable sources frequently referred to as “activists.” Such spokespersons routinely claim the Syrian military are committing atrocities against the Syrian population. The reports are often disputed by the Bashar al-Assad government and proven suspect or false when additional information is unearthed by independent researchers and alternative news media.

In July 2012 UK journalist Charlie Skelton reported that Western news outlets remain willing accomplices in a propaganda campaign being carried out by public relations practitioners. According to Skelton, “the spokespeople, the ‘experts on Syria’, the ‘democracy activists’ ... The people who ‘urge’ and ‘warn’ and ‘call for action’” against the Assad regime are themselves part of a sophisticated and well-heeled propaganda campaign to allow NATO forces to give Syria the same medicine administered to Libya in 2011. “They’re selling the idea of military intervention and regime change,” Skelton reports,

and the mainstream news is hungry to buy. Many of the “activists” and spokespeople representing the Syrian opposition are closely (and in many cases financially) interlinked with the US and London – the very people who would be doing the intervening. Which means information and statistics from these sources isn’t necessarily pure news – it’s a sales pitch, a PR campaign.[1]

One needn’t look far for current examples of such uncertain reportage and sourcing from eminent news organizations. For example, a prominent February 8, 2014 story from Turkey’s state-run Anadolu Agency, titled, “Aleppo Bombings Kill 23, Activists Say,” carries the lead, “At least 23 people have been killed as a regime helicopter dropped barrel bombs on an opposition-controlled district in Syria’s largest city Aleppo on Saturday, activists said.”[2]

The *New York Times* reports, “Rebel and government groups have each been accused of massacring civilians, and the government has stepped up air attacks on Aleppo with barrages of improvised “barrel bombs” packed with high explosives that activists say have killed more than 200 people.”[3]

Similarly influential papers such as the *Washington Post* also remain unabashedly forthright in their reliance on such sourcing. A recent Associated Press piece carried in the paper, titled, “Activists: Syrian Forces Launch New Aleppo Strikes,” quotes the Aleppo Media Center, a self-described “anti-Bashar Assad activist group.” *Post* readers are assured the entity “has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting.”[4]

Likewise, in November 2013 the BBC, whose Syria coverage tilts strongly toward “activist” observations, cites the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights to break the story of Syrian government air strikes “kill[ing] dozens in Aleppo.” As Skelton noted in his 2012 exposé, “The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is commonly used as a standalone source for news and statistics” which are taken at face value and parroted by corporate media. While SOHR sounds like a credible and non-partisan human rights outfit, “‘They’ are Rami Abdulrahman (or Rami Abdel Rahman), who lives in Coventry,” Skelton observes. In 2011 Reuters reported that when Abdulrahman “isn’t fielding calls from international media, [he] is a few minutes down the road at his clothes shop, which he runs with his wife.”[5]

The analysis suggests how despite the fact that those regularly quoted as authorities on Syria are often far-removed from what is transpiring on the ground and thus involved in a more far-reaching disinformation program to confuse the public on the calculated murder and chaos being carried out throughout Syria by Western-financed mercenary forces.

With the foreign-backed destabilization of Syria now well over two years old, major corporate-owned and government-backed news media, perhaps amazingly, continue to rely on such questionable entities as sources. Indeed, a Google search of “activists say” and “Syria” yields 919,000 results.

A more careful LexisNexis database search for “Syria,” “Assad,” “government” and the phrases “activists say” or “activists report” in the subject headings or text of news items for conventional print outlets indexed for June 1, 2012 to February 7, 2014 yields a data set consisting of close to 2,000 pieces—1,638 newspaper articles, 205 BBC broadcast transcripts, and 148 web-based articles.[6] A total 134 articles appeared in the *New Zealand Herald*, 52 in the *Washington Post*, 38 in the *New York Times*, 30 in the *Financial Times*, and 28 in the *International New York Times*.

The following table breaks down the news outlets that, based on the above search parameters, appear to have used so-called “activists” as sources 20 or more times since June 1, 2012.

News Outlet	News Articles / Transcripts	Referencing “Associated Press”
British Broadcasting Corporation	205	
<i>New Zealand Herald</i>	134	43
<i>Belfast Telegraph Online</i>	97	—
<i>Washington Post</i>	52	26
<i>Daily Star (Lebanon)</i>	38	—
<i>New York Times</i>	38	5
<i>Today’s Zaman (Turkey)</i>	36	—
<i>The National (UAE)</i>	34	21
<i>Anadolu Agency</i>	32	—
<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	30	—
<i>Financial Times</i>	30	15
<i>Scotsman</i>	29	—
<i>Guardian</i>	28	—
<i>International New York Times</i>	28	8

<i>The Capitol (Annapolis MD)</i>	26	13
<i>McClatchey Tribune</i>	26	—
<i>Times of Oman</i>	26	—
<i>Salt Lake City Tribune</i>	25	23
<i>Times & Transcript</i>	24	5
<i>Times (London)</i>	23	—
<i>The Mirror</i>	22	—

About 13.5% of the sample (270) either reference the Associated Press as a source or are AP wire stories. A search for “Associated Press” within the search results yields 270 articles, including a significant number appearing in the *New Zealand Herald* (43), the *Washington Post* (26), *The National* (21), the *Bismarck Tribune* (15), and the *International New York Times* (8). A far smaller number of the overall sample (33) reference “Reuters.”

Combined with an acquiescent news media that are arguably complicit in such deception, the end result amounts to sheer propaganda selling the “Syrian revolution” and further conditioning world public opinion for the inevitability of gradual regime change or even more direct military intervention.

After over two decades of phony atrocity stories and tall tales involving Middle Eastern bogeymen and their legion hordes—from babies being thrown out of incubators in Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait to bin Laden’s alleged 9/11 attacks, Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, and Muammar Gaddafi’s fabricated “crackdown” on his people—the public should well understand that much of corporate news media merely function as a well-oiled propaganda machine where “special interests” pull the strings. This is particularly the case when the true powers that be seek to undermine sovereign governments and carry out programs of wholesale terrorism and destruction against their populations.

Notes

[1] Charlie Skelton, “[The Syrian Opposition: Who’s Doing the Talking?](#)” *Guardian*, July 12, 2012.

[2] “[Aleppo Bombings Kill 23, Activists Say](#),” Anadolu Agency, February 8, 2014.

[3] Anne Barnard and Mohammad Ghannam, “[Dozens Are Killed in Syrian Violence, Even Amid Preparations for Peace Talks](#),” *New York Times*, December 23, 2013, 12.

[4] “[Activists: Syrian Forces Launch New Aleppo Strikes](#),” Associated Press / *Washington Post*, February 1, 2014.

[5] Skelton, “The Syrian Opposition”; “[Coventry: An Unlikely Home to Prominent Syria Activist](#),” Reuters, December 8, 2011.

[6] A search including the past tense phrases “activists said” or “activists reported” would have likely retrieved an even larger sample.

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James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at [MemoryHoleBlog.com](#), [TracyLegalDefense.org](#), and [jamesftracy.wordpress.com](#).

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