

The Deeper Truths Journalists Are Blind to

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, February 21, 2016

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February 2016

As I have found out myself, there is nothing media outlets like less than criticising other media publications or the “profession” of journalism. It’s not really surprising. The credibility of a corporate media depends precisely on their not breaking ranks and not highlighting the structural constraints a “free press” operates under.

So one has to commend the Boston Globe for publishing [this piece](#) by Stephen Kinzer, a former foreign correspondent, warning that the media is not telling us the truth about what is going on in Syria.

But those constraints are also why Kinzer glosses over deeper problems with the coverage of Syria.

This [most western reporting of Syria] is convoluted nonsense, but Americans cannot be blamed for believing it. We have almost no real information about the combatants, their goals, or their tactics. Much blame for this lies with our media.

Under intense financial pressure, most American newspapers, magazines, and broadcast networks have drastically reduced their corps of foreign correspondents. Much important news about the world now comes from reporters based in Washington. In that environment, access and credibility depend on acceptance of official paradigms. Reporters who cover Syria check with the Pentagon, the State Department, the White House, and think tank ‘experts.’ After a spin on that soiled carousel, they feel they have covered all sides of the story. This form of stenography produces the pabulum that passes for news about Syria.

This is more of the “cock-up, not conspiracy” justification for skewed reporting. If only there was more money, more space, more time, more reporters, the media would not simply spew the government’s official line. Guardian journalist Nick Davies wrote a whole book, *Flat Earth News*, making much the same claim – what he called “churnalism”. I reviewed it at length [here](#). Journalists like this kind of argument because it shifts responsibility for their failure to report honestly on to faceless penny-pinchers in the accounting department.

And yet, there are journalists reporting from the ground in Syria – for example, Martin Chulov of the Guardian – who have been just as unreliable as those based in Washington. In fact, many of the points Kinzer raises about the reality in Syria echo recent articles by Seymour Hersh, who is writing from the US, not Damascus. But he, of course, has been shunted to the outer margins of media discourse, publishing in the *London Review of Books*.

Media coverage of Iraq was just as woefully misleading during the sanctions period in the 1990s, when I worked in the foreign department at the Guardian, and later in the build-up of the US-led attack on Iraq. In those days, when there was no shortage of resources being directed at foreign reporting, the coverage also closely hewed to the official view of the US and UK governments.

The problem is not just that foreign reporting is being stripped of financial resources as the media find it harder to make a profit from their core activities. It is, as Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky pointed out long ago in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, that the corporate media is designed to reflect the interests of power – and the corporations that control our media *are* power. They select journalists through a long filtering process (school, university, journalism training, apprenticeships) precisely designed to weed out dissidents and those who think too critically. Only journalists whose worldview aligns closely with those in power reach the top.

None of this is in Kinzer’s piece. It is doubtful that he, a member of the media elite himself, would recognise such an analysis of the journalist’s role. As Chomsky once told British journalist Andrew Marr, when Marr reacted with indignation at what he inferred to be an accusation from Chomsky that he was self-censoring:

I don’t say you’re self-censoring. I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying. But what I’m saying is, if you believed something different you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.

That understanding of journalism does not depend on conspiracy, but nor does it accept that it is all about cock-up. It posits a much more interesting, and plausible, scenario that journalists get into positions of influence to the extent that they are unlikely to rock the boat for elite interests. The closer they get to power, the more likely they are to reflect its values. Much like politicians, in fact.

That’s why extremely few senior journalists have read *Manufacturing Consent*. And why among the Guardian journalists I worked with, though none seemed familiar with his huge body of work, there were few intellectuals who were referred to in more derisive terms than Chomsky.

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