

The Original 'Fake News'? The BBC and the Information Research Department

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IAN SINCLAIR reveals the hidden history of the BBC's relationship with the secret state, suppression of 'subversives' and support for military intervention overseas

*Last month Ritula Shah presented a BBC World Service discussion programme entitled *"Fake News" A Threat To Democracy?**

Predictably the debate focused on Russian attempts to influence Western populations and political systems.

Asked whether the US has been involved in similar activities, Dr Kathleen Bailey, a senior figure in the US State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the 1980s, was dismissive:

"We [the US] certainly do not have a budget, bureaucracy or intellectual commitment to doing that kind of thing."

Carl Miller, the research director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos, also played down the West's activities:

"I think Western countries do do less of this as a kind of tool of foreign policy than autocracies."

"Read real journalism" — presumably BBC journalism — was one of the guest's suggestions for countering Fake News.

Putting this self-serving and self-congratulatory narrative to one side, it is worth considering the BBC's, and particularly the BBC World Service's, own relationship to the British government's own propaganda.

"Directly funded by government [the Foreign Office], rather than the licence fee" the World Service is "deeply embedded in the foreign policy, security and intelligence apparatus of the British state," Dr Tom Mills notes in his must-read 2016 book *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service*.

In particular, the BBC had a very close relationship to the Information Research Department (IRD) — “a Foreign Office propaganda outfit which sought especially to foster anti-communist sentiments on the left,” explains Mills, a Lecturer in Sociology and Policy at Aston University.

Set up in 1948, the IRD “was one of the largest and best-funded sections of the Foreign Office until it was discreetly shut down in 1977 on the orders of [then foreign secretary] David Owen,” investigative journalist Ian Cobain reported in the Guardian in July 2018.

A 1963 Foreign Office review of IRD sets out the work of the covert unit:

“The primary aim is unattributable propaganda through IRD outlets — eg in the press, the political parties ... and a number of societies.”

Focusing on the Soviet Union and its supposed influence around the world, “IRD material poured into the BBC and was directed to news desks, talks writers and different specialist correspondents,” according to Paul Lashmar and James Oliver in Britain’s Secret Propaganda War, their 1998 history of the clandestine organisation.

The programming of the BBC’s Overseas Service (which would change its name to the World Service in 1965) “was developed in close consultation with the Foreign Office and its information departments,” they highlight.

The BBC “were seemingly quite content to be directed by the FO [Foreign Office] as to how to deal with Middle Eastern personalities, and enquired whether it was desirable for them ‘to deal in a more or less bare-fisted manner with any of the leading statesmen (or their principle spokesmen)’,” notes Simon Collier in his 2013 PhD thesis on IRD and British foreign policy.

Infamously, the BBC played a key role in the US-British assisted overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected prime minister in 1953, with the signal for the coup to begin arranged with the BBC.

That day the corporation began its Persian language news broadcast not with the usual “it is now midnight in London,” but instead with “it is now exactly midnight,” reveals historian Mark Curtis in his 2003 book Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World.

When it came to nuclear war, the BBC was similarly careful about what was broadcast, effectively banning the dramatised documentary film War Game in 1965 (even though it had originally commissioned it).

Discussing the film’s depiction of a nuclear attack on Britain, the chairman of the BBC wrote to the cabinet secretary arguing that the “showing of the film on television might well have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent.”

Though formally concerned with foreign influence, IRD also took a close interest in British domestic politics, including in the Northern Ireland conflict, as well as carrying out campaigns against people they suspected were communists and trade unionists.

For example, writing in the Guardian last year Cobain reported:

“Senior figures in Harold Wilson’s Labour government plotted to use a secret Foreign Office propaganda unit [IRD] to smear a number of left-wing trade union leaders,” including Jack Jones, the general secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union.

In the same report Cobain highlights a letter the BBC director-general wrote to IRD in 1974 asking for a briefing on “subversives” working in broadcasting.

This, it seems likely, was a complement to the wider political vetting the BBC undertook, with the help of MI5, between the 1930s and 1985.

Communists and members of the Socialist Workers Party and Militant Tendency were barred from key positions at the BBC, or denied promotion if they were already working for the corporation, according to a memo from 1984, with an image resembling a Christmas tree added to the personnel files of individuals under suspicion.

It is important to understand the relationship between the BBC and IRD and the wider British state was kept deliberately vague, a quintessential British fudge of formal and informal connections and influence.

“Many of the executives of the BBC had gone to the same public schools, and inevitably Oxbridge, with their Foreign Office colleagues,” note Lashmar and Oliver.

“Both were part of the establishment, attending the same gentlemen’s clubs and having an implicit understanding of what constituted the national interest.”

Cutting through this fog, Mills provides a concise summary:

“During the Cold War period the BBC was ... distributing propaganda material in close co-operation with the British state.”

However, he is keen to highlight that though “there is a temptation to view all this as merely a feature of the Cold War ... there is no good reason to think that there is not still significant collusion.”

He quotes Dr Emma Briant, who notes in her 2015 book *Propaganda and Counter-Terrorism* that the BBC director-general receives direct briefings from the British intelligence services “on the right line to take on whether something is in the national and operational interest to broadcast.”

Indeed, out of all the British broadcasters’ coverage of the Iraq war, the BBC was revealed to be the most sympathetic to the government, according to a 2003 study led by Professor Justin Lewis from Cardiff University’s School of Journalism.

Defending the BBC’s reporting in a letter to prime minister Tony Blair in 2003, then BBC director-general Greg Dyke noted he had “set up a committee ... which insisted that we had to find a balanced audience for programmes like *Question Time* at a time when it was very hard to find supporters of the war willing to come on.”

The same committee “when faced with a massive bias against the war among phone-in callers, decided to increase the number of phone lines so that pro-war listeners had a better chance of getting through and getting onto the programmes,” Dyke explained.

This “was done in an attempt to ensure our coverage was balanced,” Dyke wrote, apparently with a straight face.

Moreover, academic studies on issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and the financial crisis shows the BBC has tended to reflect “the ideas and interests of elite groups, and marginalised alternative and oppositional perspectives,” to quote Mills on the BBC’s overall journalistic output.

Turning to contemporary politics, in 2016 Sir Michael Lyons, the former chair of the BBC Trust, raised concerns about the corporation’s coverage of new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

“I can understand why people are worried about whether some of the most senior editorial voices in the BBC have lost their impartiality on this,” he noted.

As is often the case, a careful reading of Establishment sources can provide illumination about what is really going on.

Concerned about the government’s proposed cuts to the World Service, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee highlighted the propaganda role of the BBC in 2014: “We believe that it would not be in the interests of the UK for the BBC to lose sight of the priorities of the FCO, which relies upon the World Service as an instrument of ‘soft power’.”

Fake news indeed.

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