

Trump, 'Fake News' and the War on Dissidents

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The state-corporate media must be in trouble if a BBC veteran like Nick Robinson is getting dirty in the trenches, taking up arms against the “guerrilla war” he claims people like me are waging. In a new commentary piece for the Guardian, he [argues](#) that media critics – from the right and the left – are taking to social media in an organised campaign to discredit what Robinson calls the “mainstream media”. Predictably, his article strikes the self-satisfied tone of those who claim to be right because they have come under attack from both sides.

Let me delay briefly to point out that critics of the BBC, including myself, are not suggesting – as Robinson claims – either of the following:

“that we reporters and presenters are at best craven, obeying some diktat from our bosses or the government, or at worst nakedly biased.”

Robinson, like his colleagues in the corporate media, seems either averse to or incapable of understanding that serious criticism of the corporate media is based on the Propaganda Model, set out in great detail in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* by Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky.

According to that model, structural constraints – what Herman and Chomsky call “filters” – ensure journalists conform ideologically to their role in a media system that is incapable of questioning the foundations of the capitalist system of which the media is an integral part.

Put at its simplest, journalists like Robinson succeed in the state-corporate media because they are supremely good at promoting the official line. They rise through the ranks while journalists who are too critical fall by the wayside, weeded out in the long selection procedures journalists undergo before they reach the top.

In other words, journalists aren't “cravenly taking orders from bosses”. Journalists like Robinson are selected for their highly partisan assumptions, because they proudly believe in and promote orthodoxy – in this case, the legitimacy of the neoliberal system. They manufacture consent for the present economic, political and social conditions, not because they are told to do so but because they fervently believe those conditions are for the benefit of all. If they did otherwise, as Chomsky once famously [pointed out](#) to Robinson's colleague Andrew Marr, they would not be sitting where they are – in the interviewer's chair.

Anyone who threatens the legitimacy of this system is treated as a menace, whether it be a progressive like Jeremy Corbyn or a too-nakedly brutal neoliberal capitalist like Donald Trump.

And this brings us to the second point. Robinson suggests that the new social media “guerrillas” plotting against the “mainstream media” are somehow indistinguishable from each other in their methods. Those on the right, the Trumpists, are no different from those on the left. In fact, he goes further and argues that progressive-left critics of the BBC are actually learning from Trump’s attacks on the media.

Campaigners on left and right have been looking at and learning from the method behind what some regard as the madness of Donald Trump’s attacks on the “failing” press as purveyors of “fake news”. Italy’s leftwing populist Beppe Grillo has described the Italian media as “the opium of the people – they hide the truth to reassure you, while you slowly die”. In Germany the rightwing Alternative für Deutschland party (AfD) has revived the Nazi insult “lugenpresse”, meaning “lying press”.

But this is to invert reality. It is an example of the very “fake news” Robinson claims to be worried about. Trump isn’t teaching us about “fake news”. He’s exploiting popular disillusionment with the corporate media – the understanding that it has a corporate agenda that benefits a tiny elite – for his own political ends.

It is not that Trump rejects that corporate agenda, as progressives do; it’s that he is reckless in regard to the image carefully crafted for it by its guardians, the traditional political and media elite. He is not interested in advancing the broader interests of the corporate system, of maintaining its legitimacy; instead, he wants to advance his own personal interests within that system. He is a prime example of the self-destructiveness at the heart of neoliberal capitalism.

What Trump and his followers have done is appropriate the linguistic veneer of media criticism, without its intellectual substance, to justify their hyper-selfish agenda. By “fake news”, Trump means those who disagree with him and his political programme. That is not what the progressive left means. Their goal is to identify when and how the news is misrepresented by the corporate media, and whose interests are being served.

Worse for the progressive left, Trump has given ammunition to the enforcers of orthodoxy, like Robinson. The Trumpists’ often-empty claims of “fake news” serve to obscure or discredit the reality that the corporate media daily promotes fake news to further its agenda, whether it’s in Iraq or Venezuela, or whether it’s articles about a comic-book supervillain Putin taking over the US, or another moral panic about supposed rampant anti-semitism in the Labour party.

In reality, Trump’s scatter-shot claims of fake news are being exploited to shore up the corporate system. There is already a backlash, one being used to justify [ever tighter controls](#) over the internet and access to websites offering real critical news. Robinson’s claims that the left and right are the peddlers of the same “fakery” in attacking the media is part of that campaign to ensure normal service is resumed as soon as possible.

As the saying goes, the corporate media would have had to invent Donald Trump if he didn’t already exist. He has become the perfect foil to allow the system to relegitimise itself.

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