

‘We Just Publish The Position Of The British Government’ - Edward Snowden, The Sunday Times And The Death Of Journalism

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In the wake of the greatest crime of the twenty-first century, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, you might have thought that the days of passing off unattributed government and intelligence pronouncements as ‘journalism’ would be over. Apparently not. On June 14, the Sunday Times, owned by Rupert Murdoch, published what has already become a classic of the genre (behind a [paywall](#); full text [here](#)).

The prominent front-page story was titled: ‘British spies betrayed to Russians and Chinese; Missions aborted to prevent spies being killed’. It sounded like an exciting plot for a James Bond film. And the first line was suitably dramatic:

‘Russia and China have cracked the top-secret cache of files stolen by the fugitive US whistleblower Edward Snowden, forcing MI6 to pull agents out of live operations in hostile countries, according to senior officials in Downing Street, the Home Office and the security services.’ (our emphasis)

What followed was a series of assertions from faceless sources, backed by zero evidence and outright falsehoods.

Western intelligence agencies – famously trustworthy and free of any hidden agenda – said they had ‘been forced into the rescue operations after Moscow gained access to more than 1m classified files held by the former American security contractor, who fled to seek protection from Vladimir Putin’. Anyone seeking ‘protection’ from one of the world’s ‘Bad Guys’ is, of course, immediately deemed suspect.

‘Senior government sources’ claimed that ‘China had also cracked the encrypted documents’, endangering British and American spies. One senior Home Office official accused Snowden of having ‘blood on his hands’, although Downing Street said there was ‘no evidence of anyone being harmed’. The journalists appeared unperturbed by the discrepancy and ploughed on.

More anonymous sources popped up: ‘David Cameron’s aides confirmed’, ‘A senior Downing Street source said’, ‘said a senior Home Office source’, ‘a British intelligence source said’, ‘A US intelligence source said’. The only named source in the whole piece was Sir David Omand, the former director of [GCHQ](#), the secretive agency that conducts mass surveillance for the British intelligence services.

Taking as undisputed fact that Russia and China had access to Snowden's material, Omand said that this:

'was a "huge strategic setback" that was "harming" to Britain, America and their Nato allies.'

No other views were reported by the Sunday Times. This was stenography, not journalism.

The article appeared under the bylines of Tom Harper (the paper's home affairs correspondent), Richard Kerbaj (security correspondent) and Tim Shipman (political editor). But it was clearly prepared with major input from intelligence and government sources with their own particular agendas. All of this was, no doubt, given the all-clear by the paper's editor, [Martin Ivens](#).

BBC News echoed the Sunday Times article, with an [online piece](#) containing 'analysis' by BBC security correspondent Gordon Corera. This supposed expert commentary was based on 'my understanding from conversations over an extended period' and performed [his usual function](#) of providing a conduit for the government view. Some mild scepticism – 'a pinch of salt' – did filter through to later versions of the BBC article as it was updated. But it was shunted to the bottom of the piece, with no mention in the introduction.

In summary, the Sunday Times article contained no evidence for its anonymous claims, no challenges to the assertions made, and no journalistic balance. It was almost inevitable, then, that it would quickly fall apart under scrutiny.

The Opposite Of Journalism

Craig Murray, the former British diplomat, responded promptly with a blog piece titled, '[Five Reasons the MI6 Story is a Lie](#)'. One of these reasons, Murray notes, is:

'The argument that MI6 officers are at danger of being killed by the Russians or Chinese is a nonsense. No MI6 officer has been killed by the Russians or Chinese for 50 years. The worst that could happen is they would be sent home.'

Another reason is the convenient timing, aimed at providing a propaganda service for the alleged need for mass surveillance by the intelligence services:

'This anti Snowden non-story ... is timed precisely to coincide with the government's new Snooper's Charter act, enabling the security services to access all our internet activity.'

Ewen MacAskill, the Guardian's defence and intelligence correspondent, raised a sceptical eyebrow, listing '[five questions for UK government](#)'. Of course, the Guardian, including MacAskill himself, has a history of channeling government propaganda – not least during the great propaganda campaigns pushing for the invasions of Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. ([Archive of Media Lens media alerts](#), *passim*).

One of the most notorious examples of Sunday Times-style state stenography occurred in

2007 when Pentagon propaganda occupied the Guardian's front page under the title, [‘Iran’s secret plan for summer offensive to force US out of Iraq’](#). As we [noted](#) then, the piece by Simon Tisdall, a Guardian foreign affairs specialist, was based almost entirely on unsupported assertions by anonymous US officials. Indeed 22 of the 23 paragraphs in the story relayed official US claims: over 95 per cent of the article. It went like this:

‘US officials say’; ‘a senior US official in Baghdad warned’; ‘The official said’; ‘the official said’; ‘the official said’; ‘US officials now say’; ‘the senior official in Baghdad said’; ‘he [the senior official in Baghdad] added’; ‘the official said’; ‘the official said’; ‘he [the official] indicated’...

No less than 26 references to official pronouncements formed the basis for a Guardian story presented with no scrutiny, no balance, no counter-evidence; nothing. Remove the verbiage described above and the Guardian front page news report was essentially a Pentagon press release. (For other examples, see also: [‘Real Men Go To Tehran’](#) and [‘An Existential Threat – the US, Israel and Iran’](#).)

The ‘pushback’ from Guardian journalists to the Sunday Times article, then, has to be seen in the wider context of: (a) Guardian complicity and journalistic cowardice in the face of Western government propaganda over many years; (b) an opportunity for liberal journalists to attack the corporate competition in the form of a Murdoch newspaper and make themselves look good.

Returning to the Sunday Times piece, journalist Ryan Gallagher, who writes for [The Intercept](#), [notes](#):

‘the Sunday Times story raises more questions than it answers, and more importantly it contains some pretty dubious claims, contradictions, and inaccuracies. The most astonishing thing about it is the total lack of scepticism it shows for these grand government assertions, made behind a veil of anonymity. This sort of credulous regurgitation of government statements is antithetical to good journalism.’

But perhaps the most comprehensive demolition came from Glenn Greenwald, the journalist who met Edward Snowden in Hong Kong, and who was primarily responsible for bringing Snowden’s whistleblowing to public attention. Greenwald [writes](#):

‘the entire report is a self-negating joke. It reads like a parody I might quickly whip up in order to illustrate the core sickness of western journalism.’

This ‘sickness’ is summed up by:

‘the formula that shapes their brains: anonymous self-serving government assertions = Truth.’

This is raw submission to power with the result that:

‘government officials know they can propagandize the public at any time because subservient journalists will give them anonymity to do so and will uncritically disseminate and accept their claims.’

As Greenwald observes, there is a long history of anonymous government accusations and smears being laundered through the media whenever damaging information is revealed by whistleblowers. Much the same happened in the Nixon era to Daniel Ellsberg when he published the Pentagon Papers on the Vietnam War. The US government tried to smear Ellsberg by asserting that he had shared information with the Soviet Union. This was a lie.

Greenwald adds that there is ‘a coordinated smear campaign in Washington to malign Snowden’. The British government and intelligence agencies are no doubt well aware of this, and happy to be part of it. The Sunday Times smear job fits the pattern.

Greenwald then exposes what he calls an ‘utter lie’. The paper had stated:

‘David Miranda, the boyfriend (sic – spousal partner) of the Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald, was seized at Heathrow in 2013 in possession of 58,000 “highly classified” intelligence documents after visiting Snowden in Moscow.’

In fact, as Greenwald points out:

‘David did not visit Snowden in Moscow before being detained. As of the time he was detained in Heathrow, David had never been to Moscow and had never met Snowden. The only city David visited on that trip before being detained was Berlin, where he stayed in the apartment of [filmmaker] Laura Poitras.’

The day after the Sunday Times piece was published, observes Greenwald, the paper ‘quietly deleted’ the offending paragraph:

‘they just removed it from their story without any indication or note to their readers that they’ve done so (though it remains in the print edition and thus requires a retraction). That’s indicative of the standard of “journalism” for the article itself. Multiple other falsehoods, and all sorts of shoddy journalistic practices, remain thus far unchanged.’

The Sunday Times was clearly stung by Greenwald’s piece. The very next day, Murdoch’s company News UK sent a letter to First Look, the publisher of The Intercept where Greenwald’s piece had appeared, demanding that an image of the Sunday Times front page be removed from the critical article. Greenwald [replied](#):

‘No, @TheSundayTimes, we are not going to remove the image of your humiliating headline from our story about it <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2101948-news-uk-dmca-notification-first-look-productions.html>’

‘We Just Don’t Know’ – Four Minutes Of Farcical Fumbling

Tom Harper, the lead reporter of the Sunday Times article, appeared in a laugh-out-loud, four-minute [interview](#) on CNN that should be shown to journalism students from now until

the end of eternity.

George Howell, the CNN interviewer, tried to find out from Harper what his article was about, and what evidence he had for the claims being made. Howell is no radical; but he didn't need to be. By asking basic questions about the Sunday Times 'story', he revealed the utter paucity of anything that could count as journalism. Among a blizzard of 'ums' and 'ers', Harper could offer little more than:

'Well, uh, I don't know, to be honest with you, George'.

'All we know is that this is effectively the official position of the British government'.

'Well, again, sorry to just repeat myself, George, but we don't know'.

'Again, I'm afraid to disappoint you, we just don't know'.

Adam Weinster of Gawker has helpfully provided a complete transcript of the calamity interview [here](#). He adds ironically:

'it ended up being perhaps the clearest vindication of Snowden's work to date.'

Journalist Ryan Gallagher neatly [sums up](#) the CNN interview:

'How were the files breached? "I don't know." Were the files hacked or did Snowden hand them over? "We don't know." Were MI6 agents directly under threat? "We don't know." How did the government know what was in the files? "That's not something we're clear on." Can you substantiate the claims? "No."'

Gallagher adds:

'The interview is quite extraordinary because it makes absolutely clear that not only was this entire dubious story based solely on claims made anonymously by government officials, the reporters who regurgitated the claims did not even seek to question the veracity of the information. They just credulously accepted the allegations and then printed them unquestioningly. That really is the definition of stenography journalism — it's shameful.'

The Sunday Times approach was best [encapsulated](#) when Harper made the mistake of admitting blankly in the CNN interview:

'We just publish what we believe to be the position of the British government'.

That epitaph may as well be engraved on the tomb of British 'mainstream' journalism.

The 'Moral Equivalence' Argument Gets Another Airing

As noted earlier, the natural stance of BBC News was to take the Sunday Times propaganda

piece at face value, with a smattering of cautious scepticism added later to the mix to simulate 'balanced' journalism. Andrew Marr [declared](#) on his Sunday morning BBC show: 'It has a certain plausibility about it, however'. Of course, Marr has a long history in finding 'a certain plausibility' in crass state propaganda, as was [seen](#) when he was the BBC's political editor during the invasion of Iraq.

On the flagship Radio 4 Today programme, the BBC's structural bias was exposed yet again when Justin Webb made the mistake of interviewing Glenn Greenwald, who knows what he's talking about. (Today [link](#); expires 20 June 2015. Also archived on [YouTube](#).)

Webb presented the standard, propaganda-friendly version of Snowden's courageous whistleblowing:

JW: 'A lot of people [are] saying, whatever you think of Edward Snowden, he has drawn people's attention to something that needed to have its attention drawn to it. But the other side of that ledger – it would be reasonable to assume, wouldn't it? – is that he has given away secrets that have been useful to people who want to do harm to other perfectly innocent people. I just wonder if you accept that those are the two sides of it, and that's what we've all got to live with?'

GG: 'No, I think you just made that up, what you just said [JW laughs in shock]. Edward Snowden has not given any documents or any information to anybody, except for journalists with major media organisations. So if the New York Times or the Guardian or the Washington Post has published a story that you think shouldn't have been published, your quarrel is with them. Edward Snowden didn't disclose any documents. He went to journalists and gave the documents to journalists and said, "I want you to work in order to find the ones in the public interest that the public ought to know."'

In the interview, Webb also asked Greenwald:

'I mean you are not suggesting that President Putin's government is on a par in its support of democracy and human rights with the United States or Britain, or are you?'

Greenwald responded:

'I'm pretty sure that it wasn't Russia that invaded and destroyed a country of 26 million people called Iraq, or set up a worldwide torture regime around the world to torture people in secret, or put people in indefinite detention camps in the middle of the ocean called Guantanamo. So I think it would be incredibly naïve for some Westerner to say: "My side is really good. It's Vladimir Putin's side that's the bad side.'"

This was classic BBC propaganda fare. Webb's framing of Putin as the 'Bad Guy', and the United States and Britain as the 'Good Guys', underpins the delusional 'moral equivalence' argument that corporate journalists habitually deploy.

We recall the BBC's Michael Buerk commenting in disbelief to Denis Halliday, the former senior UN diplomat who had resigned in protest at the genocidal sanctions imposed on Iraq by the West:

'You can't... you can't possibly draw a moral equivalence between Saddam Hussein and George Bush Senior, can you?' (BBC radio interview, 2001)

And the BBC's incredulous Jeremy Paxman to Noam Chomsky in a 2004 [interview](#) on Newsnight:

'You seem to be suggesting or implying, perhaps I'm being unfair to you, but you seem to be implying there is some moral equivalence between democratically elected heads of state like George Bush or Prime Ministers like Tony Blair and regimes in places like Iraq.'

Chomsky demolished this specious 'argument':

'The term moral equivalence is an interesting one. It was invented, I think, by Jeane Kirkpatrick [former US ambassador to the UN] as a method of trying to prevent criticism of foreign policy and state decisions. It is a meaningless notion. There is no moral equivalence whatsoever.'

Investigative journalist Peter Osborne, who resigned from the Telegraph in February in protest at the paper's perpetration of a '[fraud on its readers](#)' in its failure to report scandals involving HSBC, recently [commented](#):

'The men and women who advocated the Iraq invasion remain dominant in British public life. Those who opposed it remain marginal and despised.'

This ought to be deeply shocking and very disturbing. Unsurprisingly, the journalistic practices that made the Iraq crime possible also remain dominant with honest practices relegated to the margins and despised.

And so we find that major news organisations continue to act as mindless conduits for anonymous state propaganda, somehow unable to learn the blindingly obvious lessons of past deceptions. Given the scale of the Iraq and Libyan catastrophes, this is powerful testimony indeed to the sheer depth of the structural corruption of the corporate media system. Not even Iraq, not even the deaths of [one million Iraqis](#), not even the devastation of a country of 26 million people, are enough to deter journalists who are driven by ruthless political and economic forces, apparently immune to public pressure – so far.

In truth, those destructive forces have grown stronger in the years since the 2003 invasion. Media performance is indicative of a sharp and dangerous deterioration in Western democracy.

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