

9 Making News

Trust and journalism

In 2013, an Ipsos MORI poll found that trust in journalists had fallen to 21 per cent in the UK, equal to bankers, but not yet at the bottom of the list. That position, at 18 per cent, was occupied by politicians in general, who could not compete against business leaders (34 per cent), the ordinary person in the street (64 per cent) or against doctors, teachers, scientists and judges, all registering over 80 per cent in the trust survey (Ipsos MORI 2013). The poll notes the ‘disconnect’ between voters and ‘political elites’ to explain politicians’ poor showing, but does not otherwise speculate on public trust levels. A wary public may be suspicious that politicians and journalists are too influential and unaccountable; perhaps they work in tandem to manufacture consent and deceive the public to hold their positions. Both professions must perform in complex information environments. They work for influential masters and are forced into compromising positions. Ultimately, bad publicity for journalists and politicians has undermined their credibility, keeping them at the bottom of the trust index poll since it began in 1983.

In many accounts, politicians and the mainstream media join forces against an identified enemy. According to Rutherford, politicians, generals and corporate media worked together to bring coalition forces into war with Iraq using ‘weapons of mass persuasion’. The war was ‘narrative and spectacle . . . a branded war, a co-production of the Pentagon and of newsrooms’ (2004: 4). In an earlier example, Seumas Milne’s reporting on the ‘smear campaign’ against Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers reveals a unified effort by Thatcher’s Conservative government, the corporate media lead by newspaper baron Robert Maxwell, the judiciary and the British security apparatus to discredit the coal miners’ union as the ‘enemy within’ throughout the 1980s and early 1990s:

The campaign was a bizarre, almost surreal, episode which revealed much about the way British public life works: its double standards and workaday corruption; the myriad ties and connections which allow different parts of the establishment to move in tandem as soon as the need arises; the comfortable relationship between sections of the Labour hierarchy and the government and security apparatus; the way politicians, government and its various agencies, newspapers, broadcasters and professionals feed off the same political menu as if to order. It also served to highlight, in exemplary fashion, the political venality and pliability of the bulk of the British media. (Milne [1994] 2005: 310–11)

No accusations against Scargill and his closest colleagues in the union were substantiated. Milne's trenchant commentary provides insight into the perennial lack of public trust in politicians and journalists identified by the Ipsos MORI polls over the past thirty years.

Web of influence

Curtis (2003) argues that the British news media contribute to a 'web of deceit' woven by the government of the day to hide activities from a public who would never agree to these policies carried out in its name. Political realists claim that deception and propaganda are necessary in democracies to support a state apparatus capable of decisive action, while protecting national interests in a competitive, international arena. Without secrecy, deception and propaganda, competitive advantage and information dominance are lost. To counter this defence, Curtis documents patterns of deception exercised by the British Government since WWII. While government rhetoric proclaims its 'basic benevolence' (380), Curtis demonstrates that Britain 'is a systematic violator of international law and ethical standards in its foreign policy' (1). A 'tirade of propaganda' disguises 'actual policies that are directly opposite to [elite] rhetoric' (2–3). Curtis cites convincing examples from Indonesia, Malaya, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, Kosovo, Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran to illustrate his thesis that the British Government pursues policies that the majority of citizens would find morally repugnant. 'It is not a conspiracy', he writes, 'rather, the system works by journalists and academics *internalising* sets of values, generally accepted wisdom and styles of reporting' (4).

News reporting distorts reality when it fails to report on important stories and policies; frames stories to exclude relevant history,

context or information; and repeats stories without challenging official explanations (376–7). The pretext of bringing balance to stories often means that official statements and opinions overpower independent commentary. Curtis cites James Curran's idea that 'the modern mass media in Britain now perform many of the integrative functions of the church in the middle ages' (377) by identifying deviant and anti-social behaviour, marginalising radical opinions and demonising infidels and outsiders, from trade union activists to immigrants. News media explain and legitimise the social order and thereby reinforce existing power structures.

Television news is particularly susceptible to distortion, since it is structured around striking visuals and sound bite commentary. Any extended analysis involves experts, officials and pundits expressing opinions, telling audiences what to think and repeating official talking points. Deviations from this pattern risk a deluge of criticism (flak) from interest groups, publicists and authorities. The Glasgow University Media Group concludes that 'the news is not a neutral and natural phenomenon; it is rather the manufactured production of ideology' (Curtis 2003: 379). While news reporting at its worst can involve a web of deceit, it is more frequently caught up in a web of influence.

Political idealists maintain that government and corporate transparency are required for meaningful democratic decision-making, and media concentration limits diversity of opinion (Schiller 1991; Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2008). When public relations masquerades as objective journalism, public cynicism increases and contributes to an 'increase of depoliticisation' (McChesney 2013: 59). Diminished trust, credibility and transparency contribute to apathy in the political process and are even encouraged by those who understand that increased political engagement means greater opposition to policies benefiting elites (Carey 1997; Lessig 2011; Stiglitz 2013). 'I don't want everybody to vote', claimed Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich in 1980, 'our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down' (McChesney 2013: 59). In *Republic, Lost* (2011), Lessig argues that political campaign financing and special interest lobbying in the US Congress have created 'dependence corruption' in an 'economy of influence' (17), where politicians and advisors depend on financial incentives (bribes) and positive publicity to stay in power. For economist Stiglitz ([2012] 2013), the 'price of inequality' includes widespread perceptions of unfairness and deception. Zak (2012) confirms the importance of trust in sustaining 'moral markets', social fairness and national prosperity. As perceptions of inequality increase, trust in the messengers declines.

Greater access to information and increasing diversity of viewpoints promised by digital media are clearly having an impact on news reporting (Rowland 1997; Benkler 2006; Castells 2012). At the same time, the desire for information dominance encourages surveillance, massive data collection and ‘trading’ and leads to asymmetries of information as much as disparities of wealth (Stiglitz [2012] 2013: 347). The digital revolution is closely monitored by power elites, with legions of publicists, advertisers, organisations and individuals contributing opinion as news in a torrent of influence. In a media environment saturated with blogs, Tweets, spectacle and churnalism, finding the scarce attention of audiences is the contemporary equivalent of a gold rush. Still, as with the muckrakers in the early twentieth century, investigative journalists play an influential role speaking truth to power.

Investigative journalism: exceptions prove the rule

Responsible investigative journalism shines a spotlight on under-reported news stories and even agitates for political and social reform. In his collection of articles written since 1945, Australian journalist and filmmaker John Pilger ([2004] 2005) celebrates journalists who ‘bear witness and investigate ideas’ neglected or distorted in the mainstream media and mount, in the words of activist Vandana Shiva, an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledge’ in the face of ‘dominant knowledge’ (xvi). Pilger’s heroes range from Martha Gellhorn (reporting on Dachau in 1945), Wilfred Burchett (atomic radiation at Hiroshima in 1945), Edward R. Murrow (McCarthyism from 1947 to 1954), Seymour Hersh (Vietnam in 1970), Seumas Milne (UK coal miners in the 1980s and 1990s), Amira Hass (Gaza in 1996), Anna Politkovskaya (Chechnya from 1999 to 2002), Greg Palast (the US election fraud in 2000) and Robert Fisk (reporting on Iraq in 2003). Today, we might extend Pilger’s list to include Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, Naomi Klein, Charles Ferguson, Nick Davies, Mark Dowie, Robert Greenwald, Greg Philo and Mike Berry, and Jeremy Scahill among many others who dig beneath conventional wisdom, official statements and outright spin to restore trust and credibility in journalism.

Pilger’s story begins in 1820s Australia, when Edward Smith Hall stood up to the virtual dictatorship of General Ralph Darling: ‘[Hall’s] campaigns for the rights of convicts and freed prisoners and his exposure of the corruption of officials, magistrates and the Governor’s hangers-on made him a target of the draconian laws of criminal libel’ (xviii). Almost 200 years later, whistle-blowers are facing draconian laws for revealing secret government activity, but they are no longer

charged with criminal libel. Instead, they are cast as traitors betraying national interests and are charged with espionage. In 2014, a Pulitzer Prize for journalism was awarded jointly to reporters from *The Guardian* and the *Washington Post* who worked on Edward Snowden's revelations of mass surveillance.

Pilger does not believe a conspiracy theory is necessary to explain a news apparatus in the service of power: 'Journalists and broadcasters are no different from historians and teachers in internalising the priorities and fashions and propriety of established power' (xvii). They, too, are subject to received wisdom, patriotic pride and cultural values. To advance in their professions, journalists are 'trained', 'groomed' and encouraged to 'set aside serious doubts'. Stories are framed to be about 'us' and thus tend toward narcissism and self-interest. Conflict in news reporting is expressed in dichotomies: their actions are threatening; our intentions are noble; they are terrorists; we are protecting our interests. This psychological approach leverages fear of a hostile Other (Keen 1986), with the effect that it forges community, promotes national self-interest, reinforces allegiances, defines a way of life and appeals to the status quo. Power needs good publicity at home and bad news elsewhere to justify its status. While cooperation between governments, corporations, security establishments and powerful media actors is defensible during a national crisis, manipulative cooperation done secretly betrays principles of trust and transparency necessary to democracy. A noble lie is required, to use Edward Herman's phrase, to 'normalise the unthinkable for the general public' (Herman, in Pilger [2004] 2005: xxvi). As Pilger concludes: 'Instead, noble words and concepts like "democracy" and "freedom" and "liberation" are emptied of their true meaning and pressed into the service of conquest' (xxvi). Good investigative journalism challenges this trend to prove an exception to the rule.

News propaganda model

Perhaps foremost among critics of media complicity in the service of power is the linguist and cultural critic Noam Chomsky. A prolific researcher, author and commentator, Chomsky openly condemns US policy in the Middle East and considers the US a 'failed state' for its unilateral approach to foreign affairs. Chomsky's overall project responds to Lippmann's ([1922] 1997: 158) notion of the 'manufacture of consent', where state-corporate hegemony is amplified to the condition of propaganda. With Edward Herman, Chomsky developed a propaganda model in the 1980s to account for biased corporate

news reporting, both in the US and elsewhere (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

The propaganda model describes a communications environment for ‘thought control in democratic societies’. It identifies five filters that frame news reporting and set the agenda for public discourse. To defend the model, power elites assert that media do not have to be controlled, because they are legitimate actors in the influence business. The principle of press freedom makes reform difficult and provides an illusion of the separation of powers. The newspaper scandals involving Rupert Murdoch and his News Corporation discussed later in this chapter are a case study in the application and defence of the propaganda model. The five filters include:

1. *Ownership and editorial policy*: Major media operations are corporations and share interests with the corporate community. Their owners are frequently wealthy entrepreneurs, who cultivate political alliances and who can exert influence over politicians. News organisations are subject to direction by owners and editors, who ultimately shape and enforce editorial policy.
2. *Funding sources and advertising*: News organisations depend on government subsidies (in the form of tax incentives) and advertising dollars to make a profit, and these funding sources exert pressure on news reporting.
3. *News sources*: Government and corporate public relations, sources of opinion (advisors, pundits, think tanks) and news services dominate news supply, especially when news organisations fire reporters and close foreign bureaus to economise.
4. *Flak*: Negative responses to news articles or programmes are submitted from interest groups, lobbyists, publicists, politicians and lawyers, who dispute the facts or tone of news reports. They may threaten to sue, ask for retractions or request equal time for rebuttal. Fear of flak has a dampening effect on reporting and contributes to the common practice of quoting official representatives without challenge.
5. *Ideology/fear*: The propaganda model was developed during the Cold War, and Chomsky and Herman specified anti-communist bias as the final filter. In subsequent writing, they revised their model to specify that any ideology threatening elite interests – unionism, socialism or terrorism – will shape news coverage and its interpretation. (Herman and Chomsky 1988)

The model predicts that corporate news has built-in conflicts of interest, making it less able to balance power between elites and citizens.

By implication, ideal news reporting in democratic societies should be free of these biases or at least more transparent about them. Chomsky advises that ‘citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defence to protect themselves from manipulation and control’, because corporate media no longer perform this function (1989: viii). Intellectual self-defence involves seeking out alternate news sources and opinions, questioning source credibility and researching the context for important stories.

Illustrations of the propaganda model at work:

- *Containing the enemy (appeal to fear)*: During the Cold War, government intervention was justified as a defence against creeping socialism, even when that defence was pre-emptive or aggressive. Chomsky discusses the CIA-backed interventions in Guatemala (1954) and Nicaragua (1980s) and the war in Southeast Asia as examples. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and demise of the former USSR, a new enemy for containment was needed. On 11 September 2001, the perennial threat of terrorism became the necessary illusion. In a literal sense, the Israeli security wall was built to contain Palestinian ‘terrorists’ and is justified on that basis.
- *Setting the agenda (framing)*: Top-tier newspapers such as the *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe* and *Los Angeles Times* in the US set the news agenda by deciding what is newsworthy and, in turn, set the agenda for second-tier news coverage. (The same principles apply in other news markets.) Chomsky’s chief example in 1989 was media coverage of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, where debate was limited to the methods most suitable to remove the Sandinistas from power, not whether it was legitimate to do so. Similar restraints are placed on the question of nuclear capability in Iran and North Korea, without mentioning Israel, India and Pakistan.
- *Failing to report on stories (selection/censorship)*: The media’s failure to report adequately on mass killings in Cambodia, Rwanda and East Timor or to probe the role of private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan excludes newsworthy stories from public view. Commercial interests in war zones are seldom acknowledged to explain causes of conflict. While the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia collaborated on a global surveillance network called Project Echelon for years (Schmid 2001; Asser 2000), secret agreements to cooperate between intelligence agencies were virtually ignored in the media long before Edward Snowden revealed more advanced surveillance operations in 2013.

- *Interpreting world events along ideological or self-congratulatory lines:* In Iraq, the US and UK Governments explained pre-emptive aggression and regime change as a defence of democracy and human rights. 'Democracy' is achieved when the former failed state is safely in the hands of those who wield economic and political power (Chomsky [1989] 1991: 106). British foreign policy exhibits a 'basic benevolence' (Curtis 2003: 380). Canadian tar sands oil is 'ethical' because it is produced in a democracy, not a totalitarian state.

The boundaries of legitimate debate are drawn by official sources who define issues of concern and marginalise opinions by non-officials. For the necessary illusion to persist, debate must be tolerated within certain bounds to confirm that democracy thrives on controversy and differences of opinion, as long as elite views remain paramount.

Case study in flak: the Israel lobby

In March 2009, British MP George Galloway was denied entry into Canada because he supported Hamas, an elected political party in Gaza identified as a terrorist organisation by the Canadian Government. Galloway was trying to enter Canada from New York, where he had advocated a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Columbia University students. Galloway, who helped organise and fund an aid convoy to Hamas, suggested that the presiding judge's decision was influenced by 'external lobbying' and 'political influence' (Wallace and MacCharles 2009). He experienced first-hand the pro-Israel lobby's power and its influence on the governments, judiciary and media of the day.

The pro-Israel lobby is a significant source of flak challenging media reports on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Journalists reporting both sides of the conflict face 'an uphill task', since 'to criticise Israel can create major problems' (Philo and Berry [2004] 2011: 2). For their research on *More Bad News from Israel*, Philo and Berry heard from journalists about 'the extraordinary number of complaints which they receive' (2) if their reporting implies criticism of Israel. Davies notes that contemporary public relations has rules, one of which is to 'avoid the electric fence' by paying 'deference to any organisation or individual with the power to hurt news organisations' ([2008] 2009: 122). In Davies' opinion, the 'most potent electric fence in the world is the one erected on behalf of the Israeli government' (123).

Journalists who write stories which offend the politics of the Israeli lobby are subjected to a campaign of formal complaints and pressure on their editors; most of all, they are inundated with letters and emails which can be extravagant in their hostility. (123)

Davies refers here to an international network of organisations that specialise in condemning critics of Israel. Their orchestration of complaints approaches the status of propaganda, argues Davies, and supplements Israeli *hasbara* (public diplomacy) to explain its policies to international audiences (Shabi 2009). Organisations such as HonestReporting, Give Israel Your United Support (GIYUS), the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Palestine Media Watch and the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) collectively exert pressure on news media and public figures to condemn Palestinian ‘terrorism’ and endorse Israeli ‘peacekeeping’ initiatives.

The Israel lobby in the US is a ‘loose coalition of individuals and organisations’ pursuing two broad strategies: (1) to pressure Congress and the executive to support Israeli policies (often in consultation with Israeli politicians); and (2) to ‘ensure that public discourse portrays Israel in a positive light’ (Mearsheimer and Walt 2011: n.p.). As with other US interest groups, the Israel lobby makes campaign contributions, influences elected representatives and bureaucrats and shapes public opinion. Key lobby organisations include the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organisations. Many Christian evangelicals support the lobby, seeing the triumph of Israel as a matter of biblical prophecy.

Lobbying power is based on the ability to reward or punish politicians during elections, especially with campaign contributions and threats of negative publicity. AIPAC organises letter-writing campaigns to pressure newspaper editors to include pro-Israel opinion pieces. The Committee for Accurate Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) organised demonstrations against National Public Radio (NPR) and persuaded network contributors to withdraw their funding, because NPR’s coverage was not sympathetic enough to Israel (Levin 2002). On university campuses, support groups such as the Caravan for Democracy, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Hillel and the Israel on Campus Coalition actively promote Israel. In 2002, Daniel Pipes established the controversial Campus Watch to monitor Middle East studies courses and report any anti-Israel activity by professors (McNeil 2002).

The Israel lobby intimidates critics with ad hominem attacks, calling them ‘anti-Semitic’ or ‘self-hating Jews’ or even making physical

threats (Davies [2008] 2009: 123). ‘Indeed, anyone who merely claims that there is an Israel lobby runs the risk of being charged with anti-Semitism, even though the Israeli media refer to America’s “Jewish Lobby”’ (Mearsheimer and Walt 2011: n.p.). In July 2011, an aid flotilla to Gaza was blocked by the Greek Government under pressure from Israel and the United States (McGovern 2011). Alan Dershowitz, a prominent pro-Israel supporter and Harvard law professor, described the flotilla as ‘ships of fools, knaves hypocrites [sic], bigots, and supporters of terrorism that tried to break Israel’s naval blockade of Gaza’ (Dershowitz 2011: n.p.). His attack continues:

A common virus among many on these ships is a hatred for Jews, the Jewish state, America, and the West. Some are self-haters, because they themselves are Jews, Israelis or Westerners. Others are Arabs who cannot abide the notion of the Jewish state, regardless of its size or borders, anywhere in the Middle East. (Dershowitz 2011: n.p.)

McGovern observes that one of the ‘self-hating Jews’ on the US ship was Hedy Epstein, an 86-year-old Holocaust survivor (2011).

In their investigation of the Israel lobby, Mearsheimer and Walt (2011) question why the US Government would jeopardise its own security to provide financial, political and moral support to a country identified by the United Nations as engaging in human rights abuses and illegal annexation of territory. ‘The combination of unwavering support for Israel and the related effort to spread “democracy” throughout the region has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized not only US security but that of much of the rest of the world’ (2011: n.p.). Their argument was confirmed in Osama bin Laden’s letter ‘To the Americans’ (October 2002), where he asserted that the US had become a target for terrorist attacks because it continued to support Israeli aggression in the Middle East and was itself engaged in imperialist adventures in the region (bin Laden 2005: 162). While US solidarity with Israel is presented as a common fight against terrorism,

saying that Israel and the US are united by a shared terrorist threat has the causal relationship backwards: the US has a terrorism problem in good part because it is so closely allied with Israel, not the other way around. (Mearsheimer and Walt 2011: n.p.)

For its part, the Israeli Government’s National Information Directorate continues its *hasbara* efforts with its own talking points: ‘that Hamas broke the ceasefire agreements with Israel; that Israel’s

objective is the defence of its population; and that Hamas is a terror organisation targeting Israeli civilians' (Shabi 2009: n.p.). Israel's need for security is a legitimate matter of global concern, but building separation barriers with both concrete and words may be counterproductive. When US Secretary of State John Kerry warned in 2014 that Israel was in danger of becoming 'an apartheid state' like South Africa, he was immediately criticised by the pro-Israel lobby and even President Obama, who countered: 'Injecting a term like apartheid into the discussion doesn't advance that goal [of peace] . . . It's emotionally loaded, historically inaccurate, and it's not what I believe' (Rogin 2014: n.p.).

Anti-Semitism is real and has a long and terrible history. Following Russian and Soviet pogroms and the Nazi Holocaust, understanding the intense desire for a Jewish homeland and sanctuary in Israel is a matter of empathy and compassion. Peace has been difficult and painful to negotiate and crimes have been committed on all sides. Discourse that further inflames polarisation and enmity is not helpful and endangers lives, both in the region and elsewhere. As Brendan Nyhan comments, there is a 'downside' to 'registering outrage', because 'drawing attention to group differences can amplify divisions' (2014: n.p.).

Another way forward is suggested by the collaboration between Edward Said and Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. A film about their collaboration called *Knowledge is the Beginning* (2005) tells the story of young musicians coming together from Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Spain to perform selections from classical repertoires. Barenboim describes the project as intended to promote understanding and peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict:

The Divan was conceived as a project against ignorance. A project against the fact that it is absolutely essential for people to get to know the other, to understand what the other thinks and feels, without necessarily agreeing with it . . . I want to . . . create a platform where the two sides can disagree and not resort to knives. (Vulliamy 2008: n.p.)

Fox News and post-truth politics

We live in a cynical time, when words like 'fair' and 'balanced' are used as slogans to sell content that is anything but. When the words of lobbyists and the politicians they support are given equal weight with the consensus of scientific experts, by journalists who think a

news story is a competition between opposing narratives rather than a judicious search for truth. (Brock and Rabin-Havt 2012: 11)

In 2004, filmmaker Robert Greenwald used leaked emails from a senior editor at Fox News as the centrepiece of his film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*. Among other accusations, the film criticises management interference in news reporting, particularly coverage of the Iraq War. Hosts such as O'Reilly and Hannity routinely intimidate guests they disagree with. Citing unidentified sources ('some people say . . .'), hosts are able to make accusations with impunity, using constant repetition and talking points to set the agenda for discussion. Greenwald's film is not balanced in its critique, but it raises serious issues about journalistic ethics and management interference, especially when that interference is sustained, partisan and inflammatory.

In *The Fox Effect* (2012), Brock, Rabin-Havt and the research team at Media Matters for America use content analysis to document the evolution of Fox News from a partisan news organisation to an active political player and 'propaganda machine'. They reveal an extreme version of management interference – the first propaganda news filter – as well as a trend toward advocacy journalism unconstrained by balance and objectivity. The authors spotlight the influence of Fox News President Roger Ailes and his senior managers on editorial opinion, story coverage and ideological slanting. They conclude that far from being 'fair and balanced', the network broadcasts 'demonstrable lies and distortions with a consistent conservative spin' (12). They cite studies revealing that viewers who regularly watch Fox News are among the most misinformed on a variety of issues (13) and are subjected to rhetoric filled with 'violent imagery and demonisation' (12).

Fox News acted as a Republican cheerleader during the Bush presidency, but it quickly took the offensive against Obama and Congressional Democrats after the 2008 election. 'Now the network would wag the elephant, transforming itself from a news and opinion outlet into the leading communications, fund-raising, and mobilising arm of the Republican Party' (Brock and Rabin-Havt 2012: 17–18). Just days into his presidency, Obama's 'socialist' policies were deemed a failure. He was compared to genocidal leaders, accused of racism, of not being American (the birtherism controversy), of being soft on terrorism. Personal attacks and name-calling soon extended to his health-care reforms ('death panels' would decide who lived or died), economic reforms and environmental policies. When host Glenn Beck went too far and accused Obama of racism, over seventy advertisers noted the public outrage and cancelled their contracts (148).

As the 2010 elections approached, Fox News crossed another ethical line for news organisations when it allowed Republican candidates to promote their campaigns on the air. 'Over the course of the 2010 election cycle, more than thirty Fox News employees endorsed, raised funds, or campaigned for over three hundred Republican candidates and organisations' (213). Fox was no longer a news broadcaster; it had become a political player making a difference in the polls, especially for conservative Tea Party candidates.

Brock and Rabin-Havt conclude that Roger Ailes, increasingly out of favour with Murdoch for his single-minded leadership, became a 'king maker' for Republican candidates, who depended on Fox for favourable coverage. Ailes, they suggest, 'has ushered in the era of post-truth politics', where 'the facts no longer matter, only what is politically expedient, sensationalistic, and designed to confirm the pre-existing opinions of a large audience' (283). Significantly, the Fox audience is large enough to influence the politics of the world's most heavily militarised state.

Journalism's dark arts

One of the prerogatives of a free press is the power to influence, and Rupert Murdoch became a master of the game, first in Australia, then Britain and most recently in the US, with his various acquisitions including *The Wall Street Journal* and the Fox Network. As a self-confessed libertarian, Murdoch built a media empire to influence his diverse publics on an industrial scale toward his politically conservative views.

Murdoch was an innovator in electronic newspaper publication in the 1980s when he built state-of-the-art facilities at Wapping in the London dockyards. The new production methods anticipated the challenges of distributing news on the internet, through social media and mobile computing, but led to lay-offs and labour unrest. He courted those in positions of power, was courted in return and successfully positioned his news properties to comment on and influence politics: in the 1980s and early 90s, he supported Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives, he switched allegiance to Tony Blair and Labour in the late 1990s and then he swung back to the Cameron Conservatives after 2005 (Pilger [2004] 2005: xx–xxi; Watson and Hickman 2012: 6–7). Murdoch cultivated a reputation as a 'hands-on' proprietor, shaped editorial policy and fostered a competitive, profit-driven newsroom atmosphere.

In July 2011, stories began to emerge that *News of the World* and other Murdoch newspapers had been paying private investigators to

hack the telephones of politicians, celebrities, members of the royal family and crime victims, often with the help of corrupt police officers. Known as ‘blagging’ – obtaining something by persuasion or guile – this breach of journalistic ethics was condemned in the corporate media, even though the practice was widely suspected for years (Davies [2008] 2009; Watson and Hickman 2012).

While the complex story of the ‘phone hacking scandal’ is still being written, reporters and a parliamentary investigation have pieced together facts, allegations and denials into a tale of journalism sacrificing ethics and truth for sensationalism and profit. The ‘dark arts’ of the new journalism (Davies [2008] 2009: 259) used various blagging techniques to gather information for stories, including: phone hacking; accessing databases, criminal records, telephone numbers, billing records, credit card and bank statements; searching through trash; corrupting public officials; and influencing members of government. Investigations and courtroom testimony revealed an extensive network of bribery and collusion extending into the London Metropolitan Police and Scotland Yard, following years of denial and inaction on their part.

Watson and Hickman (2012) explain

how a particular global media company . . . came to exert a poisonous, secretive influence on public life in Britain, how it used its huge power to bully, intimidate and to cover up, and how its exposure has changed the way we look at our politicians, our police service and our press. (xvi)

Their indignant tone telegraphs the authors’ bias, but captures the sense of outrage at revelations that *News of the World* and other publications routinely violated the privacy of British subjects, published their findings to increase circulation and then denied the practice. Senior editors at *News of the World*, along with Rupert Murdoch and his son James, were called to testify before the parliamentary committee, but essentially denied all foreknowledge of private investigators, eavesdropping and blagging until convictions had been secured and evidence accumulated to the point where further denials were impossible.

When the phone hacking scandal reached a crescendo, *News of the World* closed its doors after 160 years of reporting. Murdoch’s bid for control of the BSkyB satellite network was withdrawn in July 2011. Rupert Murdoch was deemed ‘not a fit person to exercise stewardship of a major international company’ and was proven to have demonstrated ‘wilful blindness’ toward illegal activities in News

Corporation properties ('Rupert Murdoch' BBC 2012: n.p.). By 2012, it was public knowledge that the dark arts were not isolated to News Corporation, but endemic across the British press. At the height of the controversy, Carl Bernstein – of Watergate reporting fame – commented:

As anyone in the business will tell you, the standards and culture of a journalistic institution are set from the top down, by its owner, publisher, and top editors. Reporters and editors do not routinely break the law, bribe policemen, wiretap, and generally conduct themselves like thugs unless it is a matter of recognized and understood policy. Private detectives and phone hackers do not become the primary sources of a newspaper's information without the tacit knowledge and approval of the people at the top, all the more so in the case of newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch, according to those who know him best. (Bernstein 2011: n.p.)

Bernstein goes on to quote a former executive and close Murdoch aide as saying the scandal could have happened

[o]nly in Murdoch's orbit . . . More than anyone, Murdoch invented and established this culture in the newsroom, where you do whatever it takes to get the story, take no prisoners, destroy the competition, and the end will justify the means. (2011: n.p.)

Press reform: holding power to account

Freedom of the press has been enshrined in British common law for 300 years. In his inquiry into the phone hacking scandal, Justice Leveson commented: 'The press, operating properly and in the public interest is one of the true safeguards of our democracy' (Leveson 2012: 3). In that role,

the press is given significant and special rights . . . With these rights, however, come responsibilities to the public interest: to respect the truth, to obey the law and to uphold the rights and liberties of individuals. In short, to honour the very principles proclaimed and articulated by the industry itself. (3)

The *News of the World* scandal raises widespread concern, because it sits at the nexus of technological change, journalistic ethics and influence and the highest aspirations of democratic societies. In Australia, the Finkelstein media inquiry report (2012) expressed similar concerns about a market with a higher concentration of newspaper owner-

ship than the other twenty-six countries studied. News Corporation controls 65 per cent of metropolitan and daily news circulation in Australia (Bacon 2012). If the function of the press is 'to hold those with power to account' (5), its failure during the UK phone hacking scandal to investigate its own crimes is a breach of public trust.

Leveson is cautious not to make any recommendations undermining press freedom and independence, especially by the government, but insists there must be a mechanism for protecting the public interest. He condemns inaction by the Press Complaints Commission and calls for its reformation to become independent of the industry and capable of robust and timely complaint arbitration. He concludes that the relationship between the Metropolitan Police Service and *News of the World* was 'too close' (20) and contributed to a failure to investigate crimes coming to light beginning in 2007 (Underhill 2011). Leveson also accuses the press of 'recklessness in prioritising sensational stories, almost irrespective of the harm that the stories may cause . . . all the while heedless of the public interest' (2012: 10). *News of the World* 'lost its way', he concludes, with a 'significant and reckless disregard for accuracy' (11).

Politician Tom Watson reached his own conclusions: 'Ultimately this scandal is about the failure of politicians to act in the interests of the powerless rather than themselves' (Watson and Hickman 2012: xvi). Without the press or politicians to protect the 'powerless', who will hold those with power to account? Al Jazeera is one news organisation attempting to do just that.

Al Jazeera under fire

Egyptian-American filmmaker Jehane Noujaim made *Control Room*, her 2004 documentary on Al Jazeera, on a shoestring budget. She was eventually granted extraordinary access to reporters and producers working for the Qatar-based broadcaster. Prominent figures in the film include Hassan Ibrahim, a Sudanese journalist formerly at the BBC; Samir Khader and Deema Khatib, senior producers at Al Jazeera; and Lt Josh Rushing, a press officer at US Central Command in Doha. With an audience of 40 million viewers in the Arab world during the Iraq War, Al Jazeera's satellite broadcasts made it an influential player on the brink of notoriety.

In the film, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld accuses Al Jazeera of propaganda for showing the dead bodies of US soldiers and Iraqi civilians. The network tells lies and encourages resistance, he asserts. It is 'not being helpful'. George W. Bush calls Al Jazeera the

‘mouthpiece of Osama bin Laden’. From the other side of the conflict, Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf, the Iraqi Minister of Information, says Al Jazeera transmits American propaganda. Since its founding in 1996, Al Jazeera’s support of democracy and modernisation in the Arab world has made it vulnerable to criticism and censorship from repressive Arab regimes. Its motto is ‘the opinion and the other opinion’.

Early in the film, Josh Rushing performs his duty of presenting the coalition talking points that they are liberating Iraq from a tyrant willing to use weapons of mass destruction on his own people, and Iraqis will welcome their liberators with open arms. Rushing accuses Al Jazeera of bias in its focus on civilian casualties, but he also acknowledges the biased coverage of Fox News. Khader explains that Al Jazeera’s coverage reveals the real costs of war on both sides. Images transcend language barriers, he argues, and communicate information to both sides of the conflict when they are not contrived. Later in the film, while watching television images of wounded civilians, Khader comments: ‘Rumsfeld calls this incitement. I call this true journalism’.

Rumsfeld’s accusations that Al Jazeera’s coverage is not helpful takes on ominous overtones when the film shows a US fighter attack on Al Jazeera’s Baghdad headquarters on 8 April 2003. (Previously, Al Jazeera had reported its location coordinates to the US military to prevent any mistaken attacks.) Journalist Tareq Ayyoub is killed in the attack, and his widow is later shown on television pleading with journalists to ‘tell the truth’ about his death. On the same day as the Al Jazeera bombing, US forces open fire on the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, killing two cameramen, and attack the Abu Dhabi television network. These three attacks on non-embedded journalists were considered deliberate by eyewitnesses.

In his writing on the Iraq conflict, Paul William Roberts explains that journalism is considered ‘an aspect or wing of psychological warfare operations’, whose purpose is to gain ‘information dominance’. The attacks on non-embedded news organisations by US forces were another facet of ‘full-spectrum dominance’ (2004: 89–90). Commenting on the question of balance when reporting war casualties, Roberts concludes: ‘With the ubiquity of personal computers and internet access, not to mention Al Jazeera, our bias is increasingly available for all to see, and we are rightly despised for it, regarded as hypocrites and liars’ (210).

Control Room documents how difficult it is for journalists and news organisations to report accurately in the ‘fog of war’, especially when modern warfare relies so heavily on psychological operations to dominate the ‘human terrain’. A 2009 Associated Press investigation

identified the US\$4.7 billion annual budget for Pentagon public relations, with the fastest-growing area going to psychological operations directed at foreign audiences ('Pentagon Spending Billions on PR' 2009). Thus, a significant emotional fulcrum of the film balances on the character of Josh Rushing. Through his interactions with the spirited and cynical Hassan Ibrahim, Rushing begins to express doubts about his role as a military apologist. The film captures his growing indecision about the US mission, and his character evolution is frequently noted in film reviews. Rushing's horror at seeing images of dead Iraqis finally prompts him to express his hatred for war. During discussions with Ibrahim, who explains the importance of optics for television audiences, Rushing begins to exhibit genuine curiosity about world events, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His character arc provides a powerful emblem of the film's message: reporting truth about war can be transformative.

Postscript: when his military superiors refused to allow Rushing to discuss his involvement in the film or give interviews, he resigned his commission and within a year helped launch Al Jazeera English.

As soon as I hired on with Al Jazeera, I was blistered by hate mail and death threats from people who had never seen a minute of the Arabic news channel. Once, to promote my appearance on Hannity & Colmes, Fox News ran a picture of me in uniform. Beneath it the word traitor was punctuated with a question mark. Five years later, that image is still one of the first pictures that pop up in a Google image search of my name – despite the fact that my reporting has taken me to Iraq and Afghanistan ten times, often embedded with soldiers and Marines at the invitation of their commanders. (Rushing 2011: n.p.)

In August 2013, Al Jazeera America (america.aljazeera.com/) launched a new twenty-four hour news channel to compete with MSNBC, Fox News and CNN, with over 400 investigative journalists on staff. Ehab Al Shihabi, acting chief executive, promised: 'There will be less opinion, less yelling and fewer celebrity sightings' (Stelter 2013: n.p.).

Samizdat journalism: information wants to be free

Dissident Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez, on a 2013 Mexican lecture tour, told newspaper publishers that press freedom in her country 'is calamitous', but Cubans had discovered a new form of *samizdat* using memory sticks. 'Information circulates hand to hand through this wonderful gadget known as the memory stick . . . and it is difficult for the

government to intercept them' (Johnson 2013: n.p.). Sanchez reports that 'underground blogs, digital portals and illicit e-magazines proliferate' in a new incarnation of samizdat (self-publishing) that originated in 1950s USSR to circumvent state censorship. Risking harsh punishment, individuals reproduced censored documents and passed them hand-to-hand. Samizdat was distinguished by retrograde reproduction techniques and nondescript covers designed to avoid detection. In time, the ad hoc production techniques came to symbolise the resourcefulness and the rebellious spirit of dissident Soviet citizens.

Generally, samizdat was directed at intellectual elites, many of whom held positions of power and practiced 'dual consciousness': reading censored material to know how to censor it (Komaromi 2004; Alfaro and Komaromi 2012). Samizdat literary works included Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, but samizdat documents were predominantly political or social in nature and included Medvedev's series *The Political Journal*, circulated from 1964 to 1970, and *Chronicle of Current Events*, which focused on human rights issues using readers' contributions. In Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel's essay 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978) was distributed in this manner and is credited with inspiring hope throughout a dispirited populace. In Northern Ireland, the IRA's secretive *Green Book* functioned as both induction manual and propaganda source. Samizdat – both its material form and system of distribution – has come to refer to dissident publications circulating through grassroots, rhisomatic networks to avoid state censorship (Komaromi 2004). Samizdat can be a valuable source of news in repressive regimes and, when mimicked, can function as propaganda.

While parallels are not precise, the activities of WikiLeaks have samizdat qualities: self-publication of censored documents by Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks network requires circuitous (decentralised) routes to reach a wider audience and exposes main players to considerable risk. WikiLeaks uses the tools and techniques of computer hacking and encryption to circulate files and avoid denial of service attacks trying to shut down its website (Kaplan 2012). Despite the risks, Sifry (2011) says that WikiLeaks heralds an 'age of transparency' and will inspire other attempts at citizen-powered advocacy, crowdsourcing and 'copyleft' creativity. 'If anything, Assange's greatest contribution to global enlightenment is the idea of a viable "stateless news organisation" . . . beholden to no country's laws and dedicated to bringing government information into public view' (173).

WikiLeaks is on the front lines of a global cyberwar to influence

what becomes news and reveal what remains hidden from public view. In *Top Secret America* (2011), Priest and Arkin document the extraordinary growth of the US security infrastructure after 9/11, its labyrinthine and unaccountable activities hidden behind firewalls of secrecy.

Regardless of Assange's publicly stated bias against U.S. policies and the allegations against his personal behaviour, this unprecedented trove of material has allowed reporters around the world to write some of the most insightful and revealing stories of our time. ([2011] 2012: xxiv)

Priest and Arkin offer a counterproposal to the burgeoning security state they document: '[O]nly more transparency and debate will make us safe from terrorism . . . Terrorism is not just about indiscriminate violence. As the name suggests, it is about instilling paranoia and profound anxiety' (xxv).

To ensure credibility and accountability, WikiLeaks worked with five well-regarded news organisations to publish documents 'responsibly'. This collaboration proved difficult, but raised important legal and ethical questions about reporting on secretive government activities. Alan Rusbridger, editor at *The Guardian*, commented: 'It was surprising to see the widespread reluctance among American journalists to support the general ideal and work of WikiLeaks. For some it simply boiled down to a reluctance to admit Assange was a journalist' (Leigh and Harding 2011: 10–11). If Assange is guilty of a crime for publishing classified documents, so, too, are investigative journalists and reputable news organisations. Rusbridger notes that 'it would be virtually impossible to prosecute Assange for the act of publication of the war logs or state department cables without also putting five editors in the dock. That would be the media case of the century' (11).

More than a publisher and journalist, Assange is a whistle-blower, someone who discovers corporate or government wrongdoing and brings it to public attention. The US Office of Special Counsel defines whistle-blowers as those who disclose the violation of laws, rules or regulations; significant mismanagement or waste of funds; abuse of authority; or specific danger to public health and safety (www.osc.gov). The whistle-blower policy rests on the principle that laws have been broken and is intended to protect those made vulnerable by their revelations. Whistle-blower protection remains in doubt, however, when secret legislation changes laws to give governments additional powers. For example, the US Congress passed secret legislation to authorise citizen surveillance, and Edward Snowden was not protected by whistle-blower safeguards (Greenwald 2014).

The revelations of WikiLeaks, Manning, Snowden and others reached a tipping point in 2012–13, as numerous accounts of state secrecy and surveillance were covered in mainstream news and full-length studies (Priest and Arkin 2011; Morozov 2012; Bennett et al. 2014). It became increasingly difficult for governments to deny they were secretly watching their own citizens or spying on foreign governments and businesses (Hopkins and Borger 2013; Freeze 2013). These governments did not need to deny any wrongdoing. They now possessed technologies to watch everyone, and information dominance was theirs. Security had trumped transparency.

Citizen journalists and networks of power

In her study of US diplomacy and propaganda, Snow recommends a combination of citizen diplomacy and media reform to repair damage to the US image at home and abroad ([1998] 2010). Citizen-based diplomacy ‘places civic-mindedness and civic activism at the centre of the body politic by emphasising human rights, human security, and environmental and cultural preservation’ (38). Snow despairs of reforming the mainstream media (49) and instead recommends expanding citizen journalism and independent media outlets through the internet: ‘The public is migrating to the internet and mainstream media are going to have to meet the public there’ (50). Public, commercial-free media require subsidies, but are necessary in her view: ‘Democracy cannot function and will not survive without a sufficient medium by which citizens can inform each other and engage in public policy debates’ (50).

Similarly, McChesney and Nichols call for publicly funded media (along the lines of the BBC in the UK, CBC in Canada and ABC and SBS in Australia), as long as they are adequately funded and independent of government interference (McChesney 2013). Public broadcasting, however, has not always reached its potential, because politicians and corporate leaders fear its independence of opinion or object to it on ideological grounds. Given the challenges facing a robust public broadcasting system, media critics have turned their attention to the internet as an information and news source – and promising stimulus to media reform – because it provides greater diversity of opinion if one looks for it. Independent news agencies, NGO websites, blogs and social media operate in tandem with established news channels to circulate stories. Audiences can independently triangulate information by comparing different sources. Underlying this participatory approach to news making is the hacker’s ethic, and the idea that information wants to be free (Levy 1984).

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells established his reputation as a theorist of the networked society with his ambitious trilogy *The Information Age* (1996–2004). Widely cited for his description of the ‘space of flows’ – where data and ideas traverse global information networks to coordinate economies and circulate culture – Castells maintains that networks and social movements in combination can revolutionise power distribution. ‘Mass self-communication’ is the ability of the internet to communicate one-to-many and many-to-many through extensive networks. It is difficult, but not impossible to control and provides a stage for the autonomous social actor, whether an individual or a group. This ability to communicate autonomously outside the usual networks of power, with their monopolies and gatekeepers, explains ‘why governments are afraid of the Internet’ and ‘corporations have a love-hate relationship with it and are trying to extract profits while limiting its potential for freedom’ ([2012] 2013: 7). Snowden’s revelations of digital surveillance complicate Castells’ analysis, since mass self-communication leaves tracks across the networks.

Networks of power intersect at ‘switching points’ to give global financial networks and media networks immense influence when they join forces. But this power still has to compete with political networks, production networks, military and security networks, criminal networks and networks dedicated to sharing knowledge. For Castells, power in the network society depends on ‘programmers’ in charge of individual networks and ‘switchers’ who control the intersections between networks. Switchers include ‘media moguls introduced in the political class, financial elites bankrolling political elites, political elites bailing out financial institutions, media corporations intertwined with financial corporations, academic institutions financed by big business’ ([2012] 2013: 8–9). Those wishing to challenge the status quo of power need to programme their own networks to express their interests and values and build switches to connect with other networks. They join the conversation, despite the existing noise, by ‘occupying the medium and creating the message’ (9). They hack the news by hacking the networks. For progressive media critics, Castells’ description acts as a roadmap for thinking about social change in networked societies.

Castells’ model of networked power has obvious application to the news organisation – a production network intersecting with political and social networks to form a matrix of information, entertainment, advertising and persuasion. With Amelia Arsenault, Castells researched the ‘switching power’ of Rupert Murdoch’s ‘global business

of media politics' as a case study for testing his model of networked power. They examine News Corporation operations to learn how media actors such as Murdoch navigate networks and manage switches to serve their business interests. Strategies to increase market share and influence audiences include 'political brokering, leveraging public opinion, instituting sensationalist news formulas, customising media content, and diversifying and adapting media holdings in the face of technological and regulatory changes' (2008: n.p.). Arsenault and Castells describe the contemporary news organisation as an influencing machine adapted for the networked political economy.

'Any theory of cultural transmission must now account for a new mode of production', writes Strangelove, 'one that enables massive volumes and varieties of non-corporate cultural products to circulate through the social system' (2005: 11). He rejects the 'normalisation thesis' advanced by McChesney and others that government and market forces will eventually assert control over the internet, as they did with radio and television. He argues instead that capitalism's empire can be challenged by internet audiences producing their own counter-narratives and systems of meanings. In this chapter, we have seen that public trust in politicians and journalists is perennially low, with their lack of credibility being a constant complaint. In the final chapter, we consider the ethics of deception, activism as counter-propaganda and the possibility of a democratic media. Digital media and their networks will require discerning and savvy switchers, programmers and watchers to keep them accessible, credible and trustworthy.

Exercise questions

1. Illustrate Chomsky and Herman's (1988) five filters of news propaganda with short case studies.
2. Either online or in the classroom, discuss the opposing positions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whenever possible, use reliable statements from the media to support your position.
3. After discussing journalism practices and ethics online or in class (see Alia 2004), upload a three minute video report on an event you attend as a 'journalist'.
4. Review a piece of investigative journalism that you find informative, credible and fair. What techniques has the writer used to give the piece these qualities?
5. In a letter to the editor or op-ed piece, respond to a news report where you think the weight of opinion is not supported by evidence.

6. Define what ‘in the public interest’ means and explain why this notion is important to news reporting.
7. Identify significant problems with the media in your country and suggest realistic proposals for reform.
8. Review an example of journalism where framing excludes issues important for understanding the story’s meaning.



Figure 14 ‘Vinyl wars’. Photo: M. Soules, Vancouver, 2011.
Popular culture is a messy collective performance with gifts to offer.
Disguises are common.