

Guardians of Power

Gabriele Zamparini interviews *Media Lens*' editors

'Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media'¹ is a new book by David Edwards and David Cromwell, the two editors of Media Lens, an internet-based watchdog "correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media".

According to Noam Chomsky,

"Regular critical analysis of the media, filling crucial gaps and correcting the distortions of ideological prisms, has never been more important. Media Lens has performed a major public service by carrying out this task with energy, insight, and care."

Edward Herman wrote,

"Media Lens is doing an outstanding job of pressing the mainstream media to at least follow their own stated principles and meet their public service obligations. It is fun as well as enlightening to watch their representatives, while sometimes giving straightforward answers to queries, often getting flustered, angry, evasive, and sometimes mis-stating the facts."

John Pilger thinks that,

"The creators and editors of Media Lens, David Edwards and David Cromwell, have had such influence in a short time that, by holding to account those who, it is said, write history's draft, they may well have changed the course of modern historiography [...] Not since Noam Chomsky's and Edward Herman's 'Manufacturing Consent' have we had such an incisive and erudite guide through the media's thicket of agendas and vested interests. Indeed, they have done the job of true journalists: they have set the record straight. For this reason, 'Guardians of Power' ought to be required reading in every media college. It is the most important book about journalism I can remember."

But not everybody agrees. After he was recently contacted following Media Lens coverage of the *Guardian*, its Readers' Editor Ian Mayes described them as "an electronic lobby group". Expressing his views about the *Guardian*'s readers, his job and the very idea of democracy, he also said:

"I did not engage with or respond to this lobby, whose members poured several hundred emails into the *Guardian*. I did not read more than a tiny sample of the emails directed at me. I consider organised lobbies in general to be in effect—whatever the rights or wrongs of their position—oppressive to put it mildly."

Mayes also happens to be the President of the Organization of News Ombudsmen.

I asked David Edwards and David Cromwell to tell me more about their book and their work at Media Lens.

QUESTION: Why the title (and the subtitle) 'Guardians of Power: The myth of the liberal media'?

ANSWER: The title is obviously a not very subtle reference to the *Guardian*, but it also refers to the media in general. The sub-title is intended to indicate that the liberal media—the best media, like the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Observer* (as it used to be) and the BBC—play a really crucial role in protecting power. In a totalitarian system it doesn't matter what people think—if they get out of line, you can hit them on the head, drag them away in the middle of the night. Thanks to centuries of popular struggle, violence of that kind is no longer an option for Western elites. Instead, in our society, control is primarily maintained by controlling what people think.

It's ironic that we tend to associate this kind of thought control with Soviet-style systems, but in fact it's far more important in an ostensibly democratic society like ours. If you are to convince people in our society that they are free, you can't just censor everything as they did in the Soviet Union, because then everyone knows they're living in a kind of prison. In our society people are bombarded with business and political propaganda

that shapes their assumptions about the world. But they also have access to some honest ideas in comparatively small circulation newspapers like the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, and primarily through one or two honest writers like John Pilger and Robert Fisk. This acts as a kind of vaccine—tiny doses of dissent that inoculate people against the idea that they are subject to thought control. But the reality is that this dissent is flooded and overwhelmed by propaganda that keeps us thinking the right way, keeps us passive and in line. By the way, we don't intend to suggest that this is the result of any kind of conspiracy. It happens as a kind of side-effect of the media's pursuit of maximised profits in a state-capitalist society.

QUESTION: What is Media Lens? When did it start? How does it work?

ANSWER: Media Lens is an attempt to subject the mainstream corporate media to analysis uncompromised by personal hopes of employment, payment or status within the media system. We do this by comparing the media's versions of events with what we believe are honest versions based on rational arguments, verifiable facts and multiple, credible sources. We provide references and links for all of these, so that readers can evaluate for themselves whether we are distorting the facts in some way. We then invite readers to judge for themselves which is more reasonable and accurate, and to send their opinions to both journalists and ourselves. It is vital for us to provide an accurate account of the media version because we are not 'selling a line'—we are encouraging readers to make a rational judgement on the basis of the facts. This is why we think it is wrong to describe us as a "lobby", as often happens. The tobacco lobby, for example, is not motivated to provide the public with the facts it needs to make an informed judgement. The goal of the tobacco lobby is to subordinate truth to maximised profits. Their goal is to manipulate the public, to persuade them of their version of the truth. Our goal is to empower the public to establish their *own* version of the truth based on their *own* evaluation of the arguments. The world needs self-confident, critical thinking, empowered human beings, not Media Lens drones.

Our readers can check the media version of events for themselves, so we have every reason to be accurate and honest in describing these. Our readers can also easily check out the credibility and accuracy of the facts and sources we give because, as discussed, we provide references for all of them. As Noam Chomsky has noted many times, dissidents challenging the corporate status quo are automatically subjected to intense and relentless attack regardless of the honesty and accuracy of their views—our arguments have to be extremely accurate and reasonable if they are to stand a chance of being taken seriously.

Also, unlike, say, corporate lobbies, we are not motivated by profit, nor status or power. Our goal is to provide the facts so that people can draw their own conclusions.

QUESTION: Please, give us a couple of concrete examples of your work?

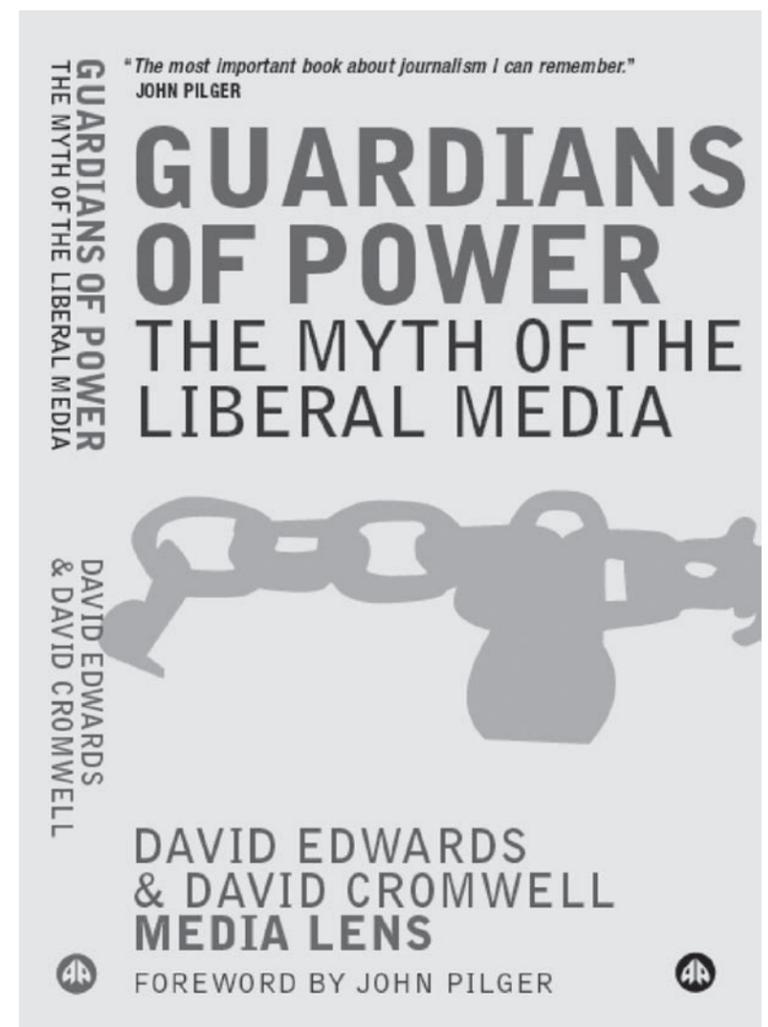
ANSWER:

Example One - Climate Change and Advertising

An editorial in the *Independent* on December 3, 2005 entitled 'Global warming and the need for all of us to act now to avoid catastrophe', declared:

"Governments must demand greater energy conservation from industry. And action must be taken to curtail emissions from transport. That means extensive investment in the development of alternative fuels and the taxation of air flights."

The editors concluded:



"But it is not just governments that have a responsibility. Individuals must act too. By opting to cycle or walk, instead of driving everywhere, we can all do something to reduce emissions. If more of us turned off electrical devices when not in use and recycled our waste properly, our societies would be hugely less energy inefficient... A failure to act now will not be forgiven by future generations."

As though these words had not appeared, the rest of the paper returned to adverts, consumer advice and financial news ("bet on easyJet to fly higher"). *The Independent's* holiday supplement, *The Traveller*, urged readers to climb on fossil fuel burning planes and visit Paris, Brussels, Syria, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Aspen, Chamonix, Mallorca, Australia, Dubai, New Zealand, Lapland, Spain, North America, Austria, Germany, the Maldives, and on and on.

Advertising industry sources told us that between January 1st and October 7th, 2005, Independent News and Media PLC—owners of the *Independent* newspapers—received the following revenues from advertisers:

BP Plc: £11,769

(this figure has risen substantially since October 7 as a result of the 'Beyond Petroleum' campaign)

Citroen UK Ltd: £418,779

Ford Motor Company Ltd: £247,506

Peugeot Motor Co Plc: £260,920

Renault UK Ltd: £427,097

Toyota (GB) Ltd: £715,050

Vauxhall Motors Ltd: £662,359

Volkswagen UK Ltd: £555,518

BMI British Midland: £60,847

Bmibaby Ltd: £12,810

British Airways Plc: £248,165

Easyjet Airline Co Ltd: £59,905

Monarch Airlines: £15,713

Ryanair Ltd: £28,543

(Email to Media Lens, December 12, 2005)

It is enlightening to compare these figures with the *Independent* editors' suggestion:

"Individuals must act too. By opting to cycle or walk, instead of driving everywhere, we can all do something to reduce emissions."

At the same time, the *Independent* is hosting adverts specifically designed to disarm dissent and pacify the public.

The point is that the media are structurally obliged to remain on square one. What has a corporate business like the *Independent* to say about the impact of its own corporate advertising on environmental collapse? What has it to say about the remorseless activities of its business allies working to bend the public mind to their will over decades? What has it to say about their determination to destroy all attempts to subordinate short-term profits to action on climate change? What has it to say about the historical potency of people power in challenging systems of entrenched and irresponsible power of this kind, of which it is itself a part?

Example Two: An Exchange With Newsnight Editor, George Entwistle

In researching a *New Statesman* article, Media Lens co-editor David Edwards interviewed George Entwistle (March 31, 2003), then editor of the BBC's flagship current affairs programme, *Newsnight*. Part of the interview involved asking Entwistle if Scott Ritter had appeared on *Newsnight* in recent months. Ritter, a UN weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991-98, described how Iraq had been 'fundamentally disarmed' by 1998 without the threat of war, and how any retained weapons of mass destruction would likely have long since become harmless 'sludge'. He was almost completely ignored by the mainstream press ahead of the war. In 2003, the *Guardian* and *Observer* mentioned Iraq in a total of 12,356 articles. In these articles, Ritter was mentioned a total of 17 times.

David Edwards: 'Have you pitted Ritter against government spokespeople like Mike O'Brien and John Reid?'

George Entwistle: 'I can't recall when we last had Ritter on.'

DE: 'Have you had him on this year?'

GE: 'Not this year, not in 2003, no.'

DE: 'Why would that be?'

GE: 'I don't particularly have an answer for that; we just haven't.'

DE: 'Isn't he an incredibly important, authoritative witness on this?'

GE: 'I think he's an interesting witness. I mean we've had...'

DE: 'Well, he was chief UNSCOM arms inspector.'

GE: 'Absolutely, yeah. We've had Ekeus on, and lots of people like that.'

DE: 'But why not Ritter?'

GE: 'I don't have a particular answer to that... I mean, sometimes we phone people and they're not available; sometimes they are.'

DE: 'Well I know he's very keen, he's forever speaking all over the place. He's travelled to Iraq and so on...'

GE: 'There's no particular... there's no sort of injunction against him; we just haven't had him on as far as I'm aware.'

DE: 'The other claim is...'

GE: 'David, can I ask a question of you at this stage?'

DE: 'Yes.'

GE: 'What's the thesis?'

DE: 'What, sorry, on why you haven't...?'

GE: 'No, I mean all these questions tend in a particular direction. Do you think that *Newsnight* is acting as a pro-government organisation?'

DE: 'My feeling is that you tend to steer away from embarrassing the government [Entwistle laughs] in your selection of interviewees and so on, they tend to be establishment interviewees. I don't see people like Chomsky, Edward Herman, Howard Zinn, Michael Albert, you know—there's an enormous amount of dissidents...'

GE: 'Well we've been trying to get Chomsky on lately, and he's not wanted to come on for reasons I can't explain. What's the guy who was the UN aid programme guy...?'

DE: 'Denis Halliday?'

GE: 'Yeah, we've had him on. I think our Blair special on BBC2 confronted him [Blair] with all sorts of uncomfortable propositions.'

DE: 'The other thing is that UNSCOM inspectors, CIA reports and so on have said that any retained Iraqi WMD is likely to be "sludge"—that's the word they use—because, for example, liquid bulk anthrax lasts maybe three years under ideal storage conditions. Again, I haven't seen that put to people like John Reid and Mike O'Brien.'

GE: 'Um, I can't recall whether we have or not. Have you watched every... episode, since when?'

DE: 'Pretty much. This year, for example. Have you covered that?'

GE: 'Um, I'll have to check. I mean, we've done endless pieces about the state of the WMD, about the dossier and all that stuff.'

DE: 'Oh sure, about that, but about the fact that any retained WMD is likely to be non-lethal by now, I mean...'

GE: 'I'll, I can... I'll have to have a look.'

DE: 'You haven't covered it have you?'

GE: 'I honestly, I don't know; I'd have to check. I genuinely can't remember everything we've covered.'

DE: 'Sure, but I mean it's a pretty major point isn't it?'

GE: 'It's an interesting point, but it's the kind of point that we have been engaging with.'

DE: 'Well, I've never seen it.'

GE: 'Well, I mean, I'll endeavour to get back to you and see if I can help.'

Following this conversation, Entwistle wrote to Edwards by email. He provided what he considered powerful evidence that *Newsnight* had in fact challenged the government case for war on Iraq. He cited this exchange between *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman and Tony Blair (Blair On Iraq – A *Newsnight* Special, BBC2, February 6, 2003):

TONY BLAIR: Well I can assure you I've said every time I'm asked about this, they have contained him [Saddam Hussein] up to a point and the fact is the sanctions regime was beginning to crumble, it's why it's subsequent in fact to that quote we had a whole series of negotiations about tightening the sanctions regime but the truth is the inspectors were put out of Iraq so -

JEREMY PAXMAN: They were not put out of Iraq, Prime Minister, that is just not true. The weapons inspectors left Iraq after being told by the American government that bombs would be dropped on the country.

(The rest of the transcript followed, March 31, 2003)

We responded to Entwistle:

'You mention Paxman raising the myth of inspectors being thrown out. You're right, Paxman did pick him [Blair] up on the idea that inspectors were "put out" of Iraq, but then the exchange on the topic ended like this:

TONY BLAIR: They were withdrawn because they



couldn't do their job. I mean let's not be ridiculous about this, there's no point in the inspectors being in there unless they can do the job they're put in there to do. And the fact is we know that Iraq throughout that time was concealing its weapons.

JEREMY PAXMAN: Right.

Right! Paxman let Blair get away with this retreat back to a second deception.'

(David Edwards to Entwistle, March 31, 2003)

In fact the remarkable truth is that the 1991-98 inspections ended in almost complete success. As we have discussed, Ritter insists that Iraq was 'fundamentally disarmed' by December 1998, with 90-95% of its weapons of mass destruction eliminated. Thus, Entwistle's chosen example of Paxman powerfully challenging Blair is in fact an excellent example of him failing to make even the most obvious challenge.

QUESTION: How have the liberal media reacted to your work? Any examples?

ANSWER: Reactions have changed over time. Initially, the reaction was disbelief and open contempt. When we challenged the BBC's John Sweeney on child deaths in Iraq, he wrote:

"I don't agree with torturing children. Get stuffed."

(Email to Media Lens Editors, June 24, 2002)

A typical response has been to suggest that we and our readers can't possibly have read what has been written, or that we can't have watched what has been broadcast:

"I wonder—from your email—if you actually read the *Guardian*, or whether you are responding to a suggested form of words on a website?"

(Email from Alan Rusbridger to Media Lens reader, February 7, 2003)

ITN's head of news gathering, Jonathan Munro, wrote:

"It would help if the correspondents had actually watched the programmes. Most are round-robins and refer to pieces published in newspapers or in other media."

(Email to Media Lens, February 17, 2003)

Observer editor Roger Alton here once again follows the customer-friendly protocol familiar to all who have engaged with the press:

"What a lot of balls ... do you read the paper old friend? ... "Pre-digested pablum [sic] from Downing Street..." my arse. Do you read the paper or are you just recycling garbage from Media Lens?

Best

Roger Alton"

(February 14, 2003)

It may be that the media are becoming less complacent about internet-based criticism. *The Guardian* Readers' Editor, Ian Mayes, noted recently:

"Immediately after what everyone involved took as the resolution of the complaint, the editor of the *Guardian* sent an email to about 400 of the people who had emailed the *Guardian* on the subject of the Chomsky interview. He took the opportunity to reject conspiracy theories claiming that senior journalists at the *Guardian* had colluded in targeting Prof. Chomsky with the object of discrediting him. I believe he was right to do that. Nothing emerged in my interviews to support the idea."

(Mayes, 'Open door,' December 12, 2005)

Previously, the media has simply ignored even large numbers of emails. On this occasion, even the editor of the *Guardian* felt compelled to respond to the huge numbers of people who had written in.

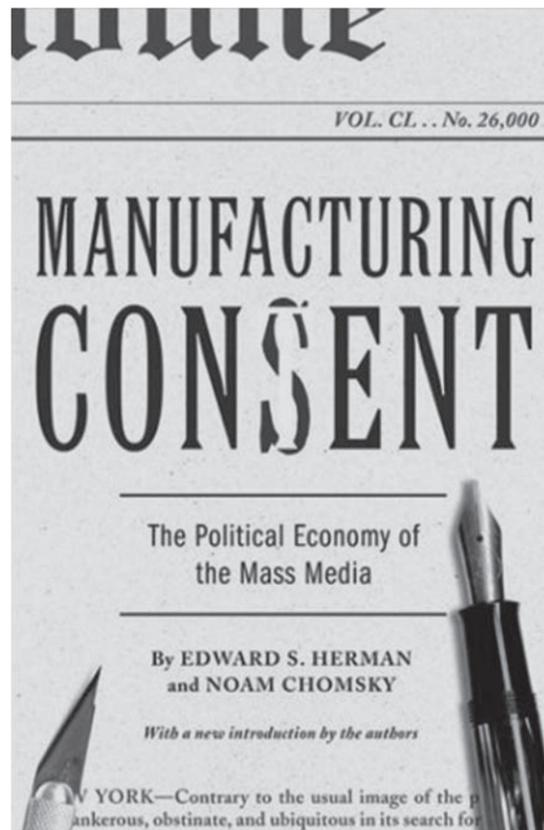
We are also beginning to receive (comparatively) positive comments from the media. The BBC's *Newsnight* editor Peter Barron³ has begun inviting us and our sources (on our suggestion) to appear on the programme, and has even written:

"One of Media Lens' less ingratiating habits is to suggest to their readers that they contact me to complain about things we've done. They're a website whose rather grand aim is to 'correct the distorted vision of the corporate media'.

They prolifically let us know what they think of our coverage, mainly on Iraq, George Bush and the Middle East, from a Chomskyist perspective.

In fact I rather like them. David Cromwell and David Edwards, who run the site, are unfailingly polite, their points are well-argued and sometimes they're plain right.

For example, *Newsnight* hasn't done enough on the US war on insurgency in Western Iraq. The reason is we don't have a presence there because it's too dangerous and pictures and firm evidence are hard to come by. But that shouldn't be an excuse, and this week we managed to get an interview with a US Marine colonel on the front line to raise some of the points Medialens



and others are concerned about."

QUESTION: Why should someone who already knows s/he can't trust the corporate media read your book?

ANSWER: We have read every one of our Media Alerts over and over again. When we took the nuggets out of the alerts, updated them, added material and mashed it all together in the book, we assumed the result would be very familiar to us. But when we read through the result something quite remarkable happened. The combined impact of all this concentrated, damning material and evidence was to open our eyes to just how obviously corrupt and compromised the corporate

media system is. It actually opened our eyes to what we're dealing with!

This points to an interesting feature of media propaganda. It operates by a kind of mass hypnosis—when you're exposed to it day in day out, it infiltrates the way you see things; it makes even complete absurdity seem serious. The illusion is attenuated somewhat when you read an honest article or two. But when you read a really concentrated blast of powerful evidence, it seems to have a different order of effect on the mind. That's the conclusion we've come to because it was very surprising to be educated by our own book!

To know more, please visit MEDIA LENS

<http://www.medialens.org/>

Notes

- 1 http://www.medialens.org/bookshop/guardians_of_power.php
- 2 To know more, please read an oppressive email by an electronic lobby group's member:
<http://www.thecatsdream.com/blog/2005/12/guardians-readers-editors-strange-idea.htm>
- 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/4426334.stm>

Gabriele Zamparini is an independent filmmaker, writer and journalist living in London. He's the producer and director of the documentaries 'XXI CENTURY' and 'The Peace!', and author of 'American Voices of Dissent' (Paradigm Publishers). He can be reached at: info@thecatsdream.com <http://TheCatsDream.com>