

Propaganda Compliant Society

Alex Law

somewhere between stocks & share
and the 'commonsensical' editorial

pity the poor arts page
thinking itself alone

Tom Leonard, *Reports from the Present*

Media failure poses a stark conundrum for civic nations. Where, as a matter of course, it naturalises the rule of dominant groups' mass communications and provides rather inhospitable ground for nurturing democratic values. Public discourse is instead forced through narrow institutional channels amenable to the ruling consensus. This vision of a spoiled public interest is bad news indeed for those nations that pride themselves on the democratic vitality of their civil societies.

Mass communications made nationalism possible.¹ With the onset of modernity stimulating the spread of print capitalism, geographically separate groups of people became socially arranged as a special kind of a community, a specifically national one, united by newly-minted ancient bonds. Today, appeals are made about preserving, or better still reinventing the nation; all the better to fend off market processes that impose cultural standardisation and political homogenisation.

In England, the call has been put out by left-wing and liberal nationalists like Billy Bragg, Jeremy Paxman and Paul Kingsnorth to rescue what is distinctive about English national culture from rapacious corporations and overcentralised government. This alternative Orwellian England includes the English pub – "probably the best know international symbol of our folk culture" – bookshops, orchards, post offices, dairy farms, and street markets.² Such appeals to a 'national folk culture' not only carry with it the danger of accepting right-wing national mythology uncritically, it also issues in a false opposition to neoliberalism in the essentialist idea of an authentic organic folk community.

'Britain' here is too often appealed to as a universally neutral source of identity in contrast to the selfish particularities of small nation nationalism.³ For instance, one Scottish academic countered arguments for devolved public broadcasting by arguing that the BBC symbolises the best of British values: "Scottish broadcasters are embedded in the most admired broadcasting organisation in the world".⁴ Leaving aside the BBC's own class bias, both in staffing and programme content, and notwithstanding its reputation as a supposedly impartial arbiter of the public interest, at an overt level it failed to resist political intimidation and New Labour threats to public funding.

One need not be a crude materialist to notice that, amidst the unselfish altruism of nationalist rhetoric, the social base of nationalism often rests on groups that are suitably positioned to gain from it – not just politicians but also cultural workers like writers, academics, lawyers, journalists.⁵ Smaller nations within Britain are certainly no strangers to the attractions of cultural nationalism. Cultural workers in Scotland demand more resources in support of a distinctively Scottish media and arts policy, while others, albeit a minority, are satisfied with the existing distributive terms of centralised British control.⁶

In Scotland an inter-locking network of elites has endured since at least the nineteenth century.⁷ For much of that time Britain existed as an unquestioned platform for elite self-interest. Of course, the personnel and functions have changed since then, from industrial capitalist families, to financiers, to corporatists, through to the political, business and culture elites of the neoliberal present.

Scotland is a small nation with meshing social circles where elites gather to profit from their mutual connections. Close interpersonal relations, sometimes literally family relations, eases the profitable mobilisation of social capital and cultural capital. A journalist in the investigative tradition, Paul Hutcheon, has tirelessly mapped the contemporary nature of 'McCroneism' in Scotland. Hutcheon found that around fifty MSPs had put their spouses, children and in-laws on the payroll.⁸ Of course, this is not unique to Scotland. However, devolution was meant to represent a departure from the Old Corruption of sleazy Westminster.

Here political devolution has also had the effect of diverting attention from the emergence of neoliberal elites springing from the very same soil as civic nationalism.⁹ Whatever the democratic arguments for devolution, it has proven to be a boon for elite groups in Scotland in other ways. Access to, management of, and influence over the devolved institutions has been lubricated by public relations and its auxiliary wings in the Scottish media.¹⁰

With the election of a minority Nationalist administration, the political, business and cultural elite founded on largesse under the control of Labour Party apparatchiks in Scotland has been forced to reorient itself. This has not proven to be a shattering experience for the well connected since the SNP administration is wide open for public relations interventions, in which they themselves are proven adepts. So while the 2007 Scottish election disturbed some entrenched Labourist networks, the permanent elite in Scotland carry on, usually out of sight. In Edinburgh's Princes Street, for instance, the New Club allows business, legal, political, state, and professional elites to mingle unobtrusively with each other.¹¹

Mistaken Conspiracy

Nations such as Scotland like to claim that they are founded on a robust civil society. They further lay claim to the civic values of rationality, democracy, personal liberty, pluralism and tolerance. At the heart of this is a free and open system of mass communications, where dissent can be aired, claims to truth verified, gaps in understanding acknowledged, and where a tolerable consensus emerges through the gravitational pull of 'public opinion'.

The books under discussion here explode this as an image of how mass communications actually function in a neoliberal world. In *A Century of Spin*, David Miller and William Dinan plot with scholarly care the real extent and corrosive nature for democracy of the public relations industry on both sides of the Atlantic. They drag into the glaring light of day the truly dirty business of corporate PR as the handmaiden of the most powerful interests that rule over society.

In a context where PR operatives much prefer to remain unnoticed and unchecked in the shadows and background, Miller and Dinan's dogged research has allowed them to piece together usually unnoticed inter-connections. They push public relations into a spot where it would rather not be – at the forefront of our attention. Building on a wide range of sources and their own previous studies, they expose the extent and function of public relations and the global web of corporate elite entanglements.

Piecing together the dense PR web of deceit, Miller and Dinan are at pains to distinguish their cataloguing of propaganda activities from the wilder shores of conspiracy theorists. Conspiratorial efforts are indeed part of the staple of many of the groups Miller and Dinan analyse. But by linking the disparate, not to say antagonistic interests of, for instance, Freemasonry, Marxism and Zionism, febrile right-wing conspiracies typically misrecognise how the

elite coalition of power structures are defined all the way through by specific kinds of class interests.

Neither are these structures always hidden away from view. Much corporate propaganda goes on in full view of those who are prepared to look. Corporate visibility is made plain in many forms, from trade associations, lobby groups, and policy planning vehicles.¹² There is no need to settle dogmatically on the simplistic conspiracy idea of isolated groups of malign individuals who possess disproportionate causal powers to explain wider, complex and uncertain social and political phenomena.

Of course, small conspiratorial groups do exist. In their detailed coverage of the public relations industry Miller and Dinan demonstrate as much. But this is not a sufficient condition to explain the efficacy of corporate propaganda. Indeed, it proves counter-productive where it diverts attention from much wider, more deeply embedded structures of domination.

Part of this explanation is provided by Nick Davies in *Flat Earth News*. Davies, a seasoned, award-winning journalist with the *Guardian*, dissects conspiratorial theories that purport to explain away the degradation of the craft of journalism by recourse to the dubious character of individual journalists. It is unlikely that there are any more flawed personalities working as journalists than are working as academics or lorry drivers or any other occupation for that matter.

Not all journalists are unprincipled, corrupt hacks and careerists, although some may be. A major problem here is that the flawed personality theory of media distortion fails to account adequately for the systemic character of the distorted newsprint consensus about the nature of the world around us. "Individual corruption only masks the *structural corruption* (should we even talk about corruption in this case?) that operates on the game as a whole through mechanisms such as competition for market share".¹³ Neither is the overt influence of corporate advertisers sufficient on its own to profoundly distort newspaper reporting on a daily basis, although the daily delivery of audiences to advertisers remains a profound shaping mechanism for media content.¹⁴

Nor are explanations adequate that point to the interference of the nasty newspaper proprietor. Of course, there are examples of this from Northcliffe through to Murdoch. But there are substantial differences from the old-style Citizen Kane owner models of political interference to a Murdoch, for whom the pursuit of profit appears to be pathological, hence his bias for political rulers from Thatcher to Blair, and an ability to operate flexibly within political systems as distinctive as Australia and China.

Perhaps then the unseen influence of ideology, where journalists share the same narrow political and moral worldview, might account more adequately for media distortion. In this case a broad consensus exists among journalists around selective 'news values' that results in stories that chime with dominant interests. This is the staple of media studies explanations of media bias. Undoubtedly, like the baleful influence of advertising, this forms part of an explanation for media failure. But where it remains stuck at the level of the (false) ideas in isolated journalists' heads that gives rise to misrepresentations in newspaper stories it becomes divorced from the workaday institutional reality that journalists find themselves caught, day in and day out.

Inside the News Factory

The power of *Flat Earth News* – and the reason that media insiders are apoplectic about it – is that media failure is firmly fixed by Davies to the terra firma of deskilling inside the journalist labour process. Davies likens this to a 'news factory' recycling unreliable secondhand information by

'churnalists', itself set within a wider neoliberal political economy of incessant cost-cutting by the new breed of managers of national and local newspapers – a ruling caste Davies likens to 'grocers'.

Neither does Davies take the easy option and look at the obvious sources of media failure – the sloppy chequebook journalism of the tabloids. Instead, he looks at the hardest test case for scrutinising his hypothesis of media failure. With the help of academics at Cardiff University he examines the 'quality press' – *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* – papers, with the exception of the latter, that like to see themselves as sophisticated, thorough, objective and reliable. However, while separate chapters are highly critical of the *Sunday Times*, the *Observer* and the *Daily Mail* little in comparison is said about media failure in Davies' own paper the *Guardian*.

The Cardiff researchers analysed the routine practices of news judgment, fact-checking, balance, criticism and general evidence of interrogating sources across 2207 domestic news stories in these papers selected over a random two week period. By comparing these pieces to the source material they found that only one in eight stories were generated by journalists themselves. In other words, the vast majority of pieces in quality national titles – 80 per cent – derived, at least in part, from secondary sources – from wire copy and PR – rather than being generated by reporters themselves.

It is rare indeed that such stories are openly attributed to the PR business. Instead, 'churnalists' either plagiarise wholesale or cannibalise the secondary sources to suit the house-style of their title. As the Cardiff researchers note, "any meaningful independent journalistic activity by the press is the exception rather than the rule".¹⁵ Degraded, deskilled journalism now churn out stories rather than craft them. Press releases are recycled not as some aberrant practice of a few unscrupulous chancers. They are the debased common currency of the news industry, reproduced and regurgitated inside each news factory. As Davies puts it:

"Do what the others do, be exclusive, steal other people's exclusive, sell papers, sell a bunch of second-hand ideas, save money, make money, make friends, hurt enemies, hype it, ramp it, tweak it, match it to a picture, match it to a space, splash it on the front, bury it inside. This isn't a conspiracy. It's just a mess".¹⁶

Churnalism is sector-wide. Journalists face similar pressures across national and local titles to rapidly repackage largely unchecked second-hand sources of often dubious provenance, reliability or accuracy.

James Nesbitt's portrayal of nocturnal journalist Max Raban in the paranoid political thriller *Midnight Man* (ITV, 2008) might seem far fetched as he rakes through the bins of celebrity and establishment figures. In fact the real-life Max Raban, Benjamin Pell, aka 'Benji the Binman', unearthed among plies of rubbish documentary evidence of establishment corruption that eventually exposed the Jonathan Aitken scandal, though only after an aggressive cover-up attempt.¹⁷

In this case, the public interest was served but in many others the privacy is invaded of individuals who have not made a career for themselves in the name of the public. Media corruption also encourages the theft of personal information from public databases by private investigators, former police officers and civil servants. With breathtaking hypocrisy the same media that complain that public standards of decency are collapsing routinely rely on deceit, bribery and theft. "Many of these organisations have been the loudest voices in the law-and-order lobby, calling for tougher penalties against

villains, tougher action against anti-social behaviour, even while they themselves indulge in bribery, corruption and the theft of confidential material".¹⁸

Media failure is more directly related to the storms and stresses of class struggle than many students of media textual content are prepared to allow. Davies precisely dates the defeat of journalistic labour to Saturday 25 January 1986 – the night Rupert Murdoch broke the power of the print unions at Wapping. What followed was a decisive redistribution of resources from labour to capital in the news industry as profit-making escalated while thousands of print jobs were eliminated.

Ironically, the sectional strength of the print unions' closed shop was widely reviled at the time as 'greedy' and 'selfish' for forcing from employers relatively high wages and generous staffing levels. But journalists depended on it for the protection of their own conditions of work autonomy more than they perhaps realised. With the utterly ineffectual leadership of the labour movement, from the TUC to right-wing Labour leader Neil Kinnock, Murdoch's victory over the print unions some twenty years ago began a process, that as Davies argues, "released a chain reaction of internal changes which have had a devastating effect on truth-telling journalism".¹⁹

Union-busting strategies in 1980s Britain, like Murdoch's and the Great Miners Strike of the previous year, bore a close resemblance to 'the Mohawk Valley Formula' described by Miller and Dinan. Devised by US corporate propagandists in the 1930s, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) fought to defend corporate interests against the encroachments on capital posed by renewed labour militancy and the New Deal.

NAM thrashed out a union-busting strategy which integrated the symbolic violence of public relations with the physical violence of the employers and the state. The Mohawk Valley Formula, named after the site of the Remington Rand factory, "included discrediting union leaders by calling them 'agitators', threatening to move the plant, raising the banner of 'law and order' to mobilize the community against the union, and actively engaging police in strike-breaking activity, then organizing a back-to-work movement of pro-company employees".²⁰

Public relations here is not an added extra that tough-minded employers can use to merely present their case more effectively to win wider consent for their actions. It is thoroughly integrated into union-busting activities to coercively enforce worker compliance, create demoralisation among activists, and propagate a feeling that resistance is futile in any case.

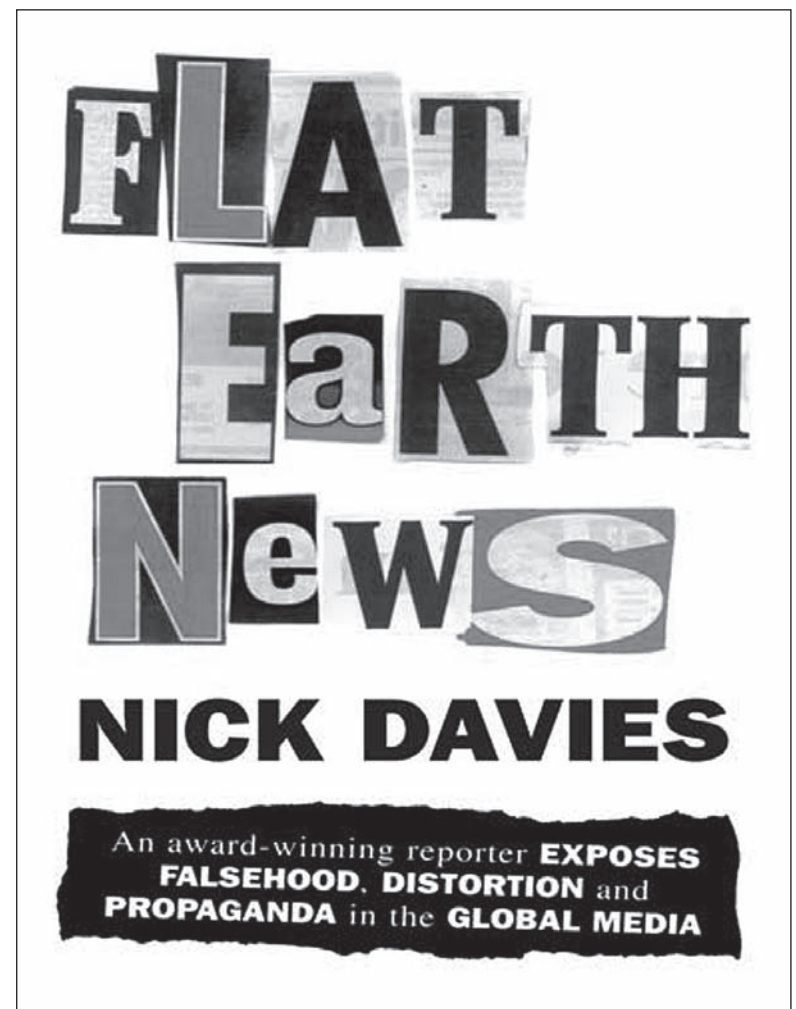
Grocery Bills

Deskilling is imposed on journalists by the ruthless corporate profit-seeking of owners and managers. Like so many other honourable professions, journalism is feeling the effects of proletarianisation through the loss of control and autonomy over the production of news values.

Under the grocer's imperative to cheapen the costs of production and raise the flow of revenue a transition has been effected. As the pressure mounts for individual journalists to produce a greater output in the number of stories processed, an earlier accent on the quality of news shifts to one of sheer quantity.

"Journalists who are denied the time to work effectively can survive by taking the easy, sexy stories which everyone else is running; reducing them to simplified events; framing them with safe ideas and safe facts; neutralising them with balance; and churning them out fast."²¹

The new rules of news production include the



demand to run only those stories that are cost-effective, that is to say, cheap, quick and safe to cover. In this way the new consensus of news values has been reorganized on a more thoroughly conservative basis. Anything too controversial or radical that crosses powerful corporate or political interests is avoided since it might prove fatally expensive.

Churnalists must therefore at all costs avoid the media 'electric fence' where a story conflicts with powerful vested interests. It has been traditionally left to the Official Secrets Act and libel law to safeguard dominant power. This is now supplemented by dense layers of electric fencing provided for powerful interests by professional lobbying groups. Davies gives the example of the pro-Israeli lobby, which ferociously harasses news editors with the costly charge of 'anti-Semitism' where stories offend against Israel's own public relations effort.

Under such pressures it is safer to seek cover under appeals to 'neutrality', 'objectivity' and 'balance'. If in doubt, churnalists can always produce a counter-claim to cancel out any implied criticism of powerful interests in the few maverick facts that escape the conservative consensus. This is less about gathering facts to produce a truthful account than it is a matter of convenience.

All facts are selected over other ones and arranged interpretively in some kind of narrative sequence. The danger arrives when official sources are accepted at face value as authoritative while scepticism is reserved only for non-official sources. Such naïve reliance on official sources informed the *Observer's* pro-war coverage of Iraq, leading to the dissemination of propaganda which was all the more effective since the *Observer* is a paper with a left-liberal reputation.

At the same time as propagandising the government's case for invasion, the *Observer* repeatedly suppressed a genuine story of world-historical importance from its US correspondent Ed Vulliamy. Supported by a well-placed ex-CIA source, in the midst of the patriotic agitation for anti-Saddam intervention created by a compliant media, Vulliamy established that Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction and there was no evidence linking Iraq to al-Qaeda.²²

"The great blockbuster myth of modern journalism is objectivity, the idea that a good newspaper or broadcaster simply collects and reproduces the objective truth. It is a classical Flat Earth tale, widely believed and devoid of reality. It has never happened and never will happen because if cannot happen. Reality exists objectively, but any attempt to record the truth about it always and everywhere necessarily involves selection ... In this sense, all news is artifice".²³

Contrariwise, 'balance' is rarely demanded to counter the consensus statement of fact reported as a matter of uncontroversial routine. When making the case for the Iraq war and occupation, the media did not routinely seek out its radical opponents to correct or balance government propaganda. What began as an honourable journalistic convention to tell the truth from all sides without fear or favour has become, Davies argues, "a coward's compromise aimed at dispatching quick copy with which nobody will quarrel".²⁴

It is little wonder that so much news even in the 'quality press' is dominated by inane and anodyne 'human interest' stories. As radical media critics have long argued, revenue can be increased if no one is affronted by unpalatable truths about the world. Just don't be boring. Send us trivia. Above all, don't offend against some fictitious idea of the average consciousness of the newspaper reading public. If this ideal readership is deemed by papers like the *Daily Mail* to be steeped in lower-middle class racist prejudices then newspaper content will 'reflect' this by excluding black people from their coverage unless they conform to criminal stereotypes.²⁵

Proprietors demand that newspapers realise their commodity value rather than serve as a public record of truth, accuracy and accountability. The Fourth Estate is in reality less different from an estate agent than its once revered traditions of investigative detachment and irreverence might suggest. Living on a diet of continually regurgitated morsels, the grocer mentality views the press as consumer diversion while the unremarked news industry consensus helps to deepen the homogenisation of values in the blanded-out incorporated world.

Complexity and uncertainty, openness and dialogue about gaps in knowledge, are reduced to a one-dimensional recycling of the diet of ignorance. As Davies notes: "A mass of human life – domestic poverty, world poverty, labour movements, the whole backstory about Islamist terrorism, real politics, international trade – is

consigned to the margins".²⁶ Little wonder then that many Americans were genuinely bewildered that their country could become the object of terrorist attack or their government despised in unfamiliar places with funny names and bizarre beliefs and customs.

Gaps in knowledge are smoothed over by the self-comforting clichés made available by the ready-made consensus. A real veil of ignorance is thrown over the divided, contested, uncertain and antagonistic nature of the world. As consensual stories are selected and re-told according to the commercial imperative of grocer-managers, more-and-more is pumped out about less-and-less.

By de-contextualising events and personalities, meaning is culled and the import of social and political processes, material interests and entrenched structures is lost. A phoney consensus consisting of the recycling of public relations designed to serve in the interest of dominant groups' demands that everyone does their patriotic duty and join in the latest moral panic.

Is Davies exaggerating for effect and perhaps notoriety, as some of his industry colleagues argue? Hardly. Newspapers that are engaged in often fierce market competition with each other nevertheless manage to arrive at a remarkable unanimity about what is selected for coverage, what angle to take, and how to present it. In part this is because they simply copy, plagiarise and steal from each other. If this involves falsehood, distortion and propaganda, the consensus ensures that it is in the interest of every title to keep the propaganda show on the road regardless. After all, taken from our habitual forms of perception the earth does indeed look flat.

Many industry insiders have reacted angrily to *Flat Earth News*. David Leppard, former editor of the *Sunday Times* Insight team and now assistant editor, who, while threatening legal action, *inter alia* objected to Davies's "breathhtaking arrogance", "substandard methods", "hypocrisy", "a toxic tissue of rumour and innuendo", "littered with falsehoods and the most bizarre conspiracy theory".²⁷ Instead of exposing the inner workings of the 'free press' to legal scrutiny, industry colleagues have encouraged Leppard to settle his differences with Davies, who in raising such unsettling matters is condescendingly dismissed as a utopian "romantic lefty of a certain age".²⁸ Others accept much of the general drift of his analysis but object to the tone. John Sweeney, a reporter on BBC's *Panorama*, itself subject recently to a consumerist makeover, described Davies' prose as "po-faced, flat-footedly on the high ground, ungenerous".²⁹

Davies' account of the transformation of the news industry from high journalism to debased churnalism is far too rosy-eyed in places about a lost 'golden age' of reporting, where truth-seeking once upon a time supposedly represented a defining goal. In addressing the institutional contradictions of the function of the news industry in a liberal democracy, Davies concludes pessimistically that the trouble with the British press is that it is becoming Americanised. In support he cites a passage from John Nichols and Robert McChesney's book *It's the Media Stupid*: "in the place of informed debate or political parties organizing along the full spectrum of opinion, there will be vacuous journalism and elections dominated by public relations, moronic political advertising and limited debate on tangible issues. It is a world where market and commercial values overwhelm notions of democracy and civic culture, a world where depoliticization runs rampant, and a world where the wealthy few face fewer and fewer threats of political challenge".³⁰

It is not the case that an otherwise untarnished British media is being corrupted by foreign imports. Here again the universal values of fair play, honesty, and decency of British nationalism slip by largely unnoticed.

Davies fails to engage with the critical analysis of industry outsiders like Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* or David Edwards and David Cromwell's *The Myth of the Liberal Media*.³¹ In both cases, media failure is

explicated through an 'institutional critique'. Herman and Chomsky account for American media failure through a refined model of the circuit of propaganda as a self-disciplining, self-selecting (and self-delusional) market system of 'filters'. Edwards and Cromwell plot a similar market propaganda operation in the British liberal media, which typically likes to see itself as a courageous defender of truth-seeking. Using Media Lens email correspondence, left-liberal journalists evince glib and complacent certainties about the veracity of the universal value of the highly selective, media biases they construct.³²

Davies likewise imagines that insider status gives journalists like himself privileged access to the truth when in fact some critical distance may be necessary from industry machinations, interpersonal rivalries and jealousies, and unspoken ideological assumptions. Having said this, Davies' identification of the commercial imperative behind deskilling and the degradation of craft skills in journalism accurately diagnoses the bases of media malfunction. Notwithstanding the tenacity of certain reporters in holding to the ideal of journalism as a craft, *Flat Earth News* represents a substantial contribution to dispelling unnecessary illusions about 'disinterested reporting' beyond the ranks of industry insiders.

Public relations: anti-social movement

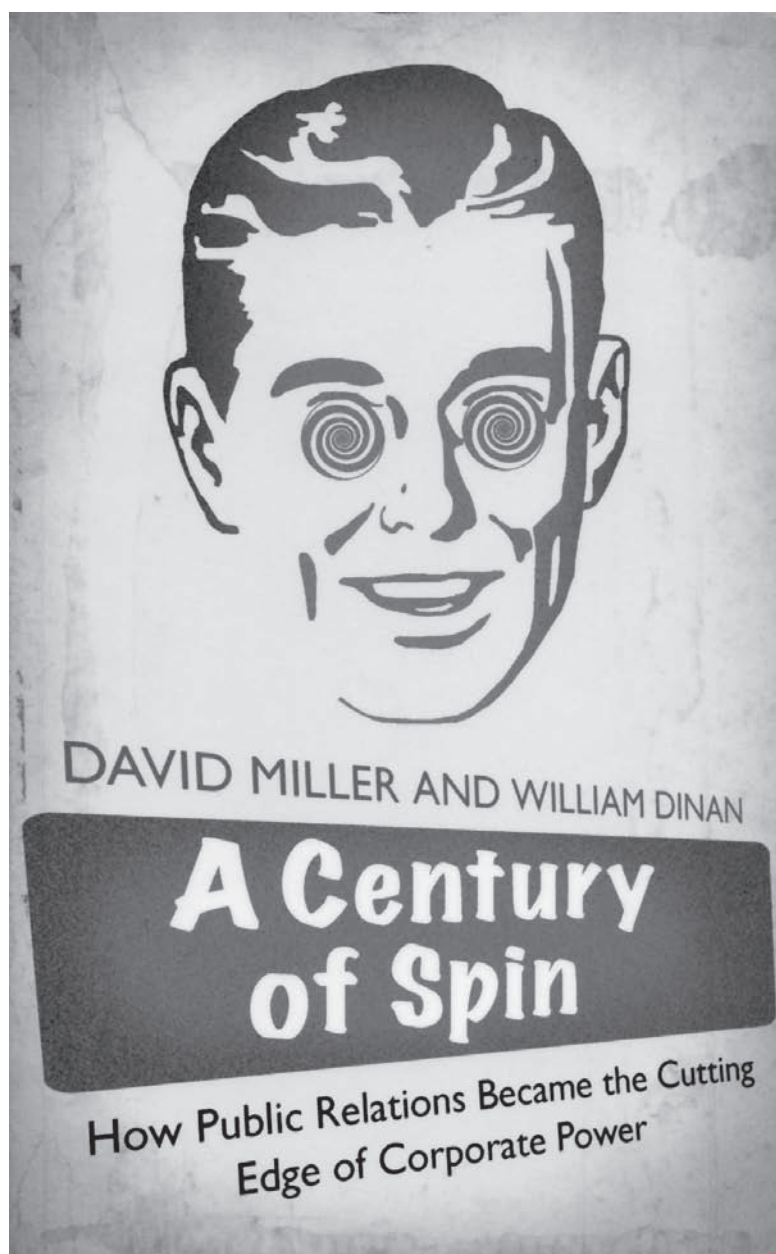
Work like Davies' performs a vital public service. Deep-rooted media failure corrupts the intellectual capacity to analyse reality competently and to discuss and debate democratically from well-informed positions. One example of this, for instance, is the echoing claim by corporate and technocratic interests that we live in or will soon enter something called 'the knowledge society'. In fact, the very opposite appears to be the case. If the news industry is an important source of knowledge about the world then we are sadly deluded about the creative, invigorating and emancipatory role the 'knowledge' supposedly plays in society.

'Propaganda society' is a more accurate term for the systematic circulation of untruth and ignorance. In fact the very idea of knowledge society is itself a public relations fiction, concealing as it does the degradation of knowledge-intensive work that Davies maps in the transformation of journalists into churnalists. In a rampant promotional culture, PR likes to conceal its own role in creating spurious 'pseudo-evidence', 'pseudo-incidents' and 'pseudo-groups' – or 'AstroTurf' because they lack any genuine grassroots support.

Whether it is fronting for big oil, tobacco, agribusiness, private health, pharmaceuticals or the porn industry, AstroTurf attempts to subvert democracy by manipulating public processes. AstroTurf can suck in unsuspecting bystanders behind phoney slogans of 'freedom', 'fairness', 'justice', 'choice' or 'science', as part of a sustained effort to discredit oppositional social movements or simply to confuse the issue and create doubt in the minds of the wider audience for its message.

Twenty years of employer onslaught on working conditions has made journalists vulnerable to the unrelenting pressures of the Fordist reorganisation of news production. In the news division of labour, churnalists rely on wire agencies and PR to supply the material for processing since they themselves lack the time and resources to create their own conditions of news production. But PR is no neutral source of verifiable reportage. It is always 'interested' material, advanced on behalf of social and political groups in a fight to define and shape reality according to specific stakes they hold in the game.

Fordism is an apt metaphor here since fabrication is the very essence of PR. It is the function of PR to make news happen according to a more or less predetermined script, whose narrative remains forever faithful to the interests of those that pay for their services. From its inception, PR has operated behind the scenes



of many of the key political events of the last century as a corporate social movement. Perhaps that ought to be 'anti-social movement' since it contrives to keep the corporate game going by representing the interests of dominant groups as the socially universal ones parroted by the media consensus.

Here Davies might have grounded his instructive examination of the PR sources of churnalism within a wider historical sociology of neoliberalism, something that Miller and Dinan see as essential to account for the rise of rise of corporate propaganda.

Public relations advance particular interests under the guise of the universal as a cartel might fix the market price of crude oil. There is – as Miller and Dinan note in a reference to the Woody Allen character who turns up at every major event – a Zelig-like quality to PR. It is impossible to do justice to the thick weave of PR organisations and individuals that Miller and Dinan assiduously unravel. Out of the welter of detail they construct an intelligible narrative of the historical rise of the industry in the UK and USA.

Three phases of corporate political activism emerge here. The first was a corporate response to resist and manage the threat of universal suffrage in the decades around the First World War. Most urgent was the elite fear of the mob, brought to a fever pitch with the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in October 1917. Organisations like the Economic League were formed out of the more frankly-titled business coalition National Propaganda to prosecute a "crusade for capitalism".

A second phase of corporate propaganda – a term which could no longer be used publicly because of its association with wartime militarism – attempted to cancel out social reformism and the nationalisation of key industries. In the 1940s and 1950s free market restoration was fiercely advocated by then fringe intellectuals like Friedrich von Hayek and through the conduit of the Mont Perlin Society (1947) and the American Enterprise Institute (1943). They did not carry out public propaganda directly but attempted to act as an intellectual clearing-house for winning hegemony among elite groups only. Such was the disdain in which the democratic masses were, and are still, held.

In the 1970s a new wave of corporate propaganda began to secure a firmer political base as the Keynesian-welfare settlement proved vulnerable to the onset of economic and political crisis. A fraction of the ruling elite in Britain even planned a military coup in order to break the labour movement.³³ More 'mainstream' anti-labour think tank propagandists like the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Social Affairs Unit and the Adam Smith Institute fought to exercise ideological leadership within the Conservative Party. An anti-labour, Atlanticist free market restorationism became the organising principle not only of think tanks but also of employer class-based organisations and, ultimately, the Thatcher and Regan governments.

In such ways, corporate propaganda prepared the ideological and political ground for the roll-out of neo-liberalism over the past thirty years. Miller and Dinan show how this was extended and deepened through the activities of what they call the social movement for global capital. Policy planning and networking has come to be organised on a transnational basis through obscure forums such as the Bilderberg Group (1957) and the Trilateral Commission (1973).

The emergence of transnational elite networks coincided with a proliferation of global PR. Far from being a minor cottage industry, PR is concentrated in the hands of a few gigantic firms. Their activities extend way beyond lobbying and public relations to include marketing, advertising, sponsorship, news and entertainment. It is no accident, as they used to say, that PR growth coincides with the neoliberal roll-back of the state. Here the same elite groups that formulated market restoration policies in think tanks and that lobby on behalf of business interests, are also the same

ones that benefit from promoting privatisation for governments, act as consultants in the tendering process, and market the public presentation of operational performance – truly, a finely integrated propaganda-industrial complex.

Public relations became installed as a matter of political routine in the 1980s in a way never quite seen before. Miller and Dinan argue that this represented a profound assault on the possibilities for democratic government in the public interest. Above all, this has had a pernicious effect on the Labour Party as a reformist alternative to market restorationism.

Reformism's seduction by corporate propaganda, Miller and Dinan argue, was carried by a right-wing Labourism besotted with the Cold War Atlantic alliance. A generation of Labour politicians shared with the CIA and corporate-funded think tanks the paranoid delusion that the party might be on the eve of being transformed into a radical, left-wing mass organisation of committed Marxists. Some left to set up the centrist Social Democratic Party. Others remained to support leaders like Neil Kinnock and John Smith. Their increasing appeasement of business interests culminated in the desperate act of the so-called 'prawn cocktail offensive' of the late 1980s in order to 'establish trust' with business leaders.³⁴

Ambitious young careerists embraced market restorationism and propaganda techniques more wholeheartedly than the demoralised ranks of Old Labour. An altered neoliberal course was set by Blair and Brown's New Labour. Although mired in Tory 'sleaze', lobbying, PR, private fundraising, and new think tanks conspired to give New Labour a resolutely pro-business flavour. New Labour think tanks like Demos displayed faddish virtuosity at repackaging corporate platitudes. Beyond the elite propaganda-industrial complex such efforts were viewed as little more than a lobbying front for corporate and political sponsors. Over the past decade "a new ruling nexus between New Labour, lobbying and PR firms, think tanks and corporations" established itself, although by May 2008 this nexus seems to be coming apart before our eyes.³⁵

This is not simply down to the superior propaganda of David Cameron and the New Conservatives. Lest anyone is confused about Cameron's base, Miller and Dinan spell out their commitment to naked class power through the range of market restorationist groups in which New Tories are active. As an ex-corporate communications executive with Carlton TV, Cameron is certainly steeped in the 'dark arts' of public relations. His elite supporters are deeply rooted in market fundamentalist, neo-conservative think tanks and lobby groups.

National *Illusio* and its Discontents

Miller and Dinan favour the term 'propaganda' despite its redolence of crude wartime jingoism and misinformation. Unlike 'spin' or 'public relations', propaganda smacks not only of manipulation but more accurately connotes the form of structurally organised power invested in the process. For them traditional debates about the relative importance of consent and coercion in political rule are misplaced when it comes to corporate propaganda.

Instead, Miller and Dinan claim that they develop "a new approach to the relations between power and communication".³⁶ This is elaborated more fully in their final chapter as one of understanding how power is reproduced by constantly setting ideas within the context of the struggle between material interests. Corporations are less interested in the hegemonic leadership over society through consent than they are determined to impose and enforce compliance to their rule. "Leadership here refers not to leadership of the popular classes but leadership of the elite."³⁷

Polemics about consent and elites have centred for a long time on the interpersonal comings and goings of ruling groups. Miller and Dinan similarly work at the level of interpersonal relations among elite groups. There is a long, honourable tradition

of this, from C. Wright Mills, through Ralph Miliband, to recent journalism of George Walden and Hywel Williams.

But it is doubtful if elites can be conceived adequately as a unified coherent subject organising and being organised by its own propaganda effort. An excessive focus on the immediate social and political milieu of elites produces its own blind spots. Changes in individual or group personnel of the ruling class (or elite) in no way changes the mechanisms by which this form of rule is reproduced.

It is essential to move beyond interpersonal relations to the operation of impersonal forces. This is where the 'normal' state of things – including the vision and division of the world into competing nations, states and corporations – inflicts violence in its most systemic form and is, therefore, the most taxing to arrest and overhaul.³⁸

How this is organised is an imperative from the point of view of capital accumulation, that is, as a specific form of class reproduction. However, neoliberal capitalism is not a smooth space for free market restoration and private interests. Both capital and state are internally divided by their own specific interest and position within the wider structures of accumulation and geopolitical advantage. To state the matter in this way in no way diminishes the hegemony of neoliberal accumulation strategies among the transnational ruling class, especially Anglo-Saxon capitalism.

Ruling elites are certainly interested in compliance. In Miller and Dinan's verdict, "one of the most important aspects of propaganda is that it organises conduct even in the absence of fully informed consent. It secures compliance". They seek to regulate the routine practices of propaganda and misinformation into decontextualised and depoliticised channels, to make contentious politics the stuff of expert or managerial technique, and reduce democracy to a docile promotional and presentational process.

Here it is vital to disentangle propaganda and compliance since they run from quite different sources and have distinct effects. While propaganda has its origins in the self-conscious acts of elites, compliance with a prefabricated consensus is brokered through what Pierre Bourdieu called 'symbolic violence'. "Symbolic violence is a violence practised in and through ignorance, and all the more readily in that those that practice it are unaware they are doing so, and those experiencing it unaware they are experiencing it."³⁹

In concealing the self-interested structure of its own particularity, propaganda relies on condescension towards the particular interests of inferior classes in society. The use of codified language by public relations as the universal lubricant of elite self-interest hopes to dispel or at least neutralise the expression of contrary interests by structuring what may be said legitimately.

Ideologies, such as those that take the existence of competitive nationalism and markets for granted, are all the more effective when they take the appearance of neutral, universal, objective social facts. Where it is exercised through symbolic violence as opposed to physical violence, domination and exploitation, exclusion and marginalisation, are not recognised as injustice.

Complicity with the necessity of the game, above all of market competition, is premised on a tacit consensus around disinterested and universalising norms, rules and conventions, something that all reasonable people observe and endorse. This is what Bourdieu further names *illusio*.

"*Illusio* is the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing that playing is 'worth the candle', or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort ..., to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognise the game and to recognise its stakes."⁴⁰

Bourdieu's focus on the *illusio* of symbolic violence is not at all the postmodern one of free floating discourses that so exercises Miller

and Dinan.⁴¹ Symbolic violence draws attention to the practical nature of consciousness under conditions of material domination and structural interests. Human beings do not pray because they believe in God; they believe in God because they get on their knees to pray. Similarly, people do not comply because they believe in propaganda or nationalism. On the contrary, propaganda and nationalism are the effects of the mundane quotidian practices of compliance.

If neoliberalism was the only game in town then the practical exigencies of compliance would be guaranteed forevermore. This is far from obviously the case for two reasons. First, the practices produced by neoliberalism are self-contradictory in a way that no amount of corporate propaganda can obscure. The baleful consequences of even partial market restoration undermine the positive claims made on its behalf by corporate propaganda, as the currently deepening financial and economic crisis testifies. This also means that even governments formerly committed to its tenets may be forced to revise the relationship between the state and private capital, though admittedly only after desperate measures to save the status quo are falsified by experience.

Second, propaganda can become self-deceiving. While corporations and governments may co-opt moderate NGOs and campaign groups, they are too divorced from political realities to sense when the ground is shifting from under their feet. Examples of this are evident in the anti-capitalist, global justice and anti-war movements. Even as they tried to recover from 'the shock of Seattle', where the World Trade Organisation was closed down by protest in 1999, "the new found confidence of the neo-liberal vulgate was quickly undermined and they went from defeat to defeat – in Iraq, at Cancun, with the 'Non' vote in the Dutch and French referenda on the EU constitution".⁴²

Bourdieu claimed that he may have been "indulging in utopia" in demanding that sociologists, journalists and cultural workers use their skills to minimise symbolic violence and, in this way, begin to roll back domination by the hidden forces of neoliberal communication. "I would like to imagine a critical programme bringing together scholars and artists, singers and satirists, with the aim of putting to the test of satire and laughter those journalists, politicians and media 'intellectuals' who fall in too glaring a fashion into abuse of symbolic power."⁴³

'Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media'

Nick Davies, London, Chatto & Windus, 2008

'A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power',

David Miller and William Dinan, London and Ann Arbor, MI, Pluto Press, 2008

Notes

1. A case most famously proposed by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991), p. 36. However, see the important critique of Anderson's thesis by Howard Wollman and Philip Spencer, "Can such Goodness be profitably discarded?" Benedict Anderson and the Politics of Nationalism', in Alistair McCleery and Benjamin A. Brabon, *The Influence of Benedict Anderson*, (Edinburgh, 2007). Available from Merchiston Publishing, Scottish Centre for the Book, Napier University, Craighouse Campus, Edinburgh, EH10 5LG.
2. Paul Kingsnorth, 'So, is it alright to be an English nationalist?', *New Statesman*, 21 April 2008.
3. Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995) remains an indispensable guide to understanding the operation in everyday routines of the self-deluding conceits and dangers of the big nationalisms of Britain and the United States.
4. Brian McNair, 'Broadcasting's devolution debate', *Media Guardian*, 13 August 2007. If global reputation is the criteria, then perhaps Scottish broadcasters should license themselves through Al Jazeera.
5. Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, (Oxford, 2000).
6. Iain McWhirter, 'And now for the news ... broadcast from Scotland', *Sunday Herald*, 12 August 2007.
7. John Scott and Michael Hughes, *The Anatomy of Scottish Capital* (London, 1980) provides the classic study of interlocking elite ownership of capital. Scott and Hughes chart continuities of ownership, control and communication through to the managerialist reorganisation of the propertied classes in Scotland.
8. Paul Hutcheon, 'Revealed: MSPs who put their family on the payroll', *Sunday Herald*, 23 September 2007.
9. A forthcoming book, *Neoliberal Scotland* (Cambridge, 2008), edited by Patricia McCafferty, Neil Davidson and David Miller, will attempt to provide some remedy for this in the case of one of the devolved nations.
10. Philip Schlesinger, David Miller and William Dinan, *Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists* (Edinburgh, 2001).
11. David Miller and William Dinan, *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power*, (London, 2008), p. 80.
12. Miller and Dinan, p. 81.
13. Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism* (London, 1998), p. 17.
14. See Media Lens, 'Flat Earth News – the Inside View', www.ukwatch.net/article/flat_earth_news_the_inside_view_part_two
15. Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*, (London, 2008), p. 53.
16. Davies, p. 153.
17. Davies, pp. 280-281.
18. Davies, p. 286.
19. Davies, p. 62.
20. Quoted in Miller and Dinan, p. 52.
21. Davies, p. 147.
22. Davies, p. 330ff.
23. Davies, p. 111.
24. Davies, p. 133.
25. Davies, p. 373 ff.
26. Davies, p. 136.
27. David Leppard, 'Book is toxic tissue of rumour and innuendo', *Press Gazette*, 17 February 2008.
28. Stephen Glover, 'These reporters should wage their war in the press, not the law courts', *The Independent*, 18 February 2008.
29. John Sweeney, 'More bad news', *New Statesman*, 21 February 2008.
30. Quoted in Davies, pp. 396-7.
31. Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, 1988); David Edwards and David Cromwell, *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media* (London, 2006).
32. See <http://www.medialens.org>
33. Miller and Dinan, p. 69. [*The Times* also openly advocated an authoritarian solution to the 'enemy within': "The most calm and respectable people come to believe that the only remaining choice is to impose a policy of sound money at the point of a bayonet."]
34. Miller and Dinan, pp. 139-140.
35. Miller and Dinan, p. 156
36. Miller and Dinan, p. 7.
37. Miller and Dinan, p. 180.
38. Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections* (London, 2008).
39. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Question of words: A more modest view of the role of journalists', in *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action* (London, 2008), pp. 321-2.
40. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 76-77.
41. See Miller and Dinan, chapter 11.
42. Miller and Dinan, p. 97
43. Bourdieu, 'Question of words', p. 323.