

Newspeak in the 21st Century

By David Edwards and David Cromwell
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A Book Review by

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This book is a hatchet job. Granted, it is detailed and precise and no doubt accurate, and the authors who co-founded the London-based Media Lens website in 2001 are completely open about the main aim of both the website and this book. It is to highlight “examples of bias, omission or deception in British mainstream media” with a particular focus on media thought to be objective (the BBC) or left-wing (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent*). They build on the work of Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model and borrow their title from George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in which Winston Smith’s research job in the Ministry of Truth was to falsify records and to embrace an ideological language (Newspeak) that sanitizes any heretical thoughts. So they do not hide their hatchets, which positively gleam, as they chop away at mainly well-intentioned but duped broadcasters and reporters.

It is their second swing at this target. Earlier they published (also with Pluto Press) *Guardians of Power: The myth of liberal media*. You know what you are getting. They do not tell us about their own backgrounds, but the Internet is helpful as ever. Both born in 1962, Edwards has a degree in politics from Leicester, and got interested in human rights and the environment after years of doing sales in a marketing corporation, while Cromwell is a physicist and oceanographer from Glasgow who had four years with Shell in the Netherlands. They have published in newspapers and magazines, but there is no indication that either has ever worked on a newspaper.

Their general thesis is that reporters learn to be obedient and subordinate from childhood (the Chomsky “filtering system”) if they are going to achieve positions of influence—no conspiracy, no self-censorship, you might call it conditioning. When they were challenged by a former *Guardian* writer who named dissenting voices on these papers (Robert Fisk and George Monbiot, and John Pilger on the *New Statesman*), they say only Fisk writes news reports—and they add that these writers have the effect of making the public feel their papers are honest and open. In total, they and the rest of us galley slaves have been bolstering the corporate power.

Yes, much of this is true. And they give in full detail many examples. One shocker (omission or suppression?) is the rejection seven times by editors on *The Observer* of the scoop its reporter Ed Vulliamy had that the CIA was reporting in the autumn of 2002 that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction. Did naïve Ed try to publish elsewhere?, the two

Dauids asked. No, he did not want to harm his career. And they pay back their mentor with a section “*The Guardian* smears Chomsky” by retelling how Emma Brockes (a bright young Oxford graduate) had by elipsis suggested in 2005 that he had said the Srebrenica massacre was exaggerated, and how the vital part of the tape she had recorded was missing. I agree (and so did the editor Alan Rusbridger) it reflected badly on the paper; but was there bias or even deception there? The argument—over paired letters and a spoof column—continued beyond the paper’s retraction and Rusbridger’s apology. One comes to understand why he and Roger Alton as *Observer* editor came to call Media Lens “pernicious” rather than persistent.

There are plenty of good examples—from the Iraq body count to the Falklands peace plan—that every journalist would do well to ponder. There is discussion about objectivity and bias. In some 58 years as a journalist, I can add a few examples from my own experience. During the Six-Day War in 1967, as an editorial writer on *The Globe and Mail* it took much arguing on my part to get an Arab viewpoint reflected on the comment page. In teaching the basics of journalism to former guerrillas (freedom fighters) in 1982 Zimbabwe, I never mentioned objectivity, but pressed the principle of fairness (to Joshua Nkomo as well as Robert Mugabe). Indeed, the American forerunner of Media Lens is called FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting). Earlier, in 1959 Rhodesia, when the governors of all three federal territories declared an emergency and detained hundreds, my magazine’s managing director told me not to fly up to Nyasaland (“we can cover it from here”); I resigned my editorship, flew to Blantyre with Anthony Sampson of *The Observer* and learnt many facts from a few still-free Nyasas. (Omission, or deception by my boss).

“The myth of liberal media”, say the two giant-slaying Davids. Please give the papers some credit at times. *The Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky, and *The Guardian* are the two papers on which I served that I most respected. Barry Bingham then owned, and Mark Ethridge Sr., ran the Kentucky group (radio and TV as well) that in 1954 steadily supported desegregation through the Carl Braden trial for “conspiracy to overthrow the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the United States”—his crime: handing over his house in a white area to a black professional. Carl was the labour reporter, and the FBI piled up “evidence” by dragging his library into court and I heard people in gas stations muttering, “What did he want with all them books?” And then in November 1956 Alistair Hetherington rallied much of the opposition to the Anglo-French invasion of Suez by a string of brave editorials in *The Guardian*. In its earlier incarnation *The Observer*, too, under David Astor was anti-Suez.

That is my main criticism of this book. Never having worked inside a newspaper, the authors do not feel, certainly do not make allowance for, the pressures—from governments, from advertisers, from older readers or veterans, from ethnic lobbies, from their own management -- that can bend an editor’s resolve. These are outside pressures, not lifelong conditioning. The authors might also read the account by Harold Evans (in his memoirs, “My Paper Chase”) of how *The Sunday Times* covered the Northern Ireland conflict with difficulty but with a fine balance. That was before Murdoch moved in, they will say, highlighting only the dark aspect. Oh well, there are points on both sides.

About the Reviewer

Clyde Sanger was until recently Adjunct Professor of Journalism at Carleton University. Early in his career he was editor of the *Central African Examiner* 1957-1959, Africa correspondent of *The Guardian* 1960-1965, and director of information at the Commonwealth Secretariat 1977-1979. Long time Canada correspondent of *The Economist*, his books include *Ordering the Oceans: The Making of the Law of the Sea*; *Safe and Sound: Disarmament and Development in the Eighties*; and *Half a Loaf: Canada's Semi-Role among Developing Countries*. He has also published two biographical studies: *Lotta and the Unitarian Service Committee* and *Malcolm Macdonald: Bringing an End to Empire*. For the last few years he has taught M.A. students at University for Peace, Costa Rica.

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