

How the US Propaganda System Works

Americans are told that other governments practice censorship and propaganda, but not their own. Yet, the reality is quite different with many reasonable viewpoints marginalized and deceptive spin put on much that comes from officialdom, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Many Americans assume the U.S. government speaks “the truth” to its citizens and defends their constitutional right to “free speech” (be it in the form of words or dollars). On the other hand, it is always the alleged enemies of the U.S. who indulge in propaganda and censoring of “the truth.”

In practice it is not quite that way. Washington, and many local American governments as well, can be quite censoring. Take for instance the attempt to censor the boycott of Israeli academic institutions – institutions engaged in government research that facilitates illegal settlement expansion and the use of Palestinian water resources.

In this case, the fact that a call for boycott is an age-old, non-violent practice also falling within the category of free speech, is mostly disregarded. Instead we get a knee-jerk impulse on the part of just about every American politician to shut down debate, even to the point where various state legislatures threatened their own state colleges and universities with a cutoff of funds if they tolerate the boycott effort on their campuses.

It is not only American academics who suffer censorship at the hands of a government that claims to defend freedom of speech. Academics of countries deemed unfriendly to the U.S. have been subjected to the same treatment. Take, for instance, Iranian academics. U.S. trade sanctions on Iran, put in effect in 1980, included strict curbs on academic exchanges.

Later, a few in Congress managed to ease these with a “free trade in ideas” amendment, but the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sabotaged the effort. That office violated the spirit of the congressional amendment by asserting that while there could now be exchanges of information with academics in sanctioned states, say, in the form of manuscripts submitted to U.S. journals for publication, they could not be “enhanced” by such practices as editing for style purposes. Violation of this regulation could result in fines and imprisonment for journal editors.

On the other hand, as far as we know, no OFAC official was ever fined, fired or imprisoned for violating the intent of Congress.

Several organizations, including the American Association of Publishers, took the U.S. government to court over the issue in 2003. In 2004, the matter was settled out of court, granting the right of publishers to use standard editing procedures for manuscript submissions from Iran.

However, the OFAC has failed to officially promulgate this change in regulations, and as a result many journal editors are ignorant of the revised regulation. Many still “play it safe” and simply return submissions from Iran marked “denied due to sanctions.”

More generally, there are now reports that the Internet provider Yahoo, which is used by a 63 percent of Iranians communicating through the worldwide web, has decided that it will not allow Iranians to create new e-mail accounts.

Cutting off access to Yahoo will require many in Iran to use the e-mail service provided by the Iranian government – which, of course, censors communications. Yahoo thus becomes complicit in the process of censoring millions of people.

Media Manipulation

Perhaps the grossest ongoing censorship of all is the culturally conditioned, narrow range of opinion fed to the vast majority of Americans by their own media. The differences in story lines and opinions in the “news” given by well-watched television channels such as ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN, or those of the nation’s major newspapers and news magazines, is minuscule.

One venue that stands out is Fox TV, and its “news” and opinion offerings verge on the mendacious. The narrow range of views offered creates a uniform background noise hiding most of what is at variance with the standard message. In other words, media practices constitute de facto censorship.

So well does this process work that it is probably the case that many news editors and broadcasters and most of the public taking in their reporting do not understand that their reductionism has rendered the constitutional right of free press ineffectual.

Really meaningful contrary opinion and reporting (particularly of the progressive persuasion) is so infrequent and marginalized that it stands little chance of competing with the orthodox point of view.

An exception is to be found on the TV channel Comedy Central. There Americans can find the popular “Daily Show with Jon Stewart.” This show presents the only ongoing, nationally televised critique of the foibles of U.S. government leaders and their policies. But, of course, it all must be done in the form of comical political satire.

As successful as media conditioning is, some elements of the U.S. government feel they must go the extra mile to guarantee that the public receives an acceptable view of events. Take the revelations given in a recent report by Amnesty International on the trial of the so-called Cuban Five (five Cuban residents of Florida arrested for espionage on the part of the Cuban government).

Amnesty's official report on the trial of the five defendants alleges that "the United States [government] paid journalists hostile to Cuba to cover the trial and provide prejudicial articles in the local media asserting the guilt of the accused."

Under such circumstances the "free press" was transformed into a vehicle for government propaganda and this, in turn, helped to generally devalue the right of free speech. We do not know how often the government acts in this corruptive way.

Et Tu, Obama?

In a report issued late in 2013 by the Committee to Protect Journalists, President Barack Obama, a liberal within the U.S. political spectrum, has been accused of pressuring journalists to toe the line. He has done this by "attacking sources, conducting surveillance, creating a climate of fear, and prosecuting double the amount of cases for alleged leaks of classified information as all previous administrations combined."

As a consequence the global index on media freedom issued annually by the conservative Freedom House alleges that in 2014 the U.S. suffered a sharp erosion of press freedom and the right of the citizen to know what his or her country is doing. The report cites "attempts by the government to inhibit reporting on national security issues" as a major reason for this situation.

At the same time, President Obama makes speeches critiquing foreign governments, such as that in Egypt, for limiting freedom of the press and speech. There is no doubt that the governments he targets are guilty of gross violations of these rights and many more besides.

But what is equally true is that the vast majority of Americans can listen to the President castigate these governments with no sense of cognitive dissonance. They do not know that they too are victims of propaganda and manipulation.

How could they? They are culturally conditioned to believe that their country is the foundation of freedom and truth. And, beyond their local area, they haven't the knowledge, or often the interest, to fact-check what their leaders and media

agents tell them. That is why it is accurate to describe the U.S. information environment as closed.

Actually, there is nothing particularly unique about the self-censoring environment under which Americans live. All states and cultures, to one extent or another, practice this sort of manipulation of the information environment whereby reality is distorted.

Thus we can ask, is the United States the great defender of its own constitutional freedoms? It is when it suits the purposes of policy makers. When it doesn't, hypocrisy prevails.

The system is successful because all but a few people are culturally conditioned not to notice or care. Such a manipulative process as this at once helps keep societies cohesive and at the same time creates the conditions wherein hate is easily bred and vast numbers are made willing to charge enemy machine guns.

Those who see through their conditioning and manipulation are, if you will, cultural mistakes. They are also the human race's best, albeit slim, hope for a saner, more tolerant world.

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