

The 'Post-Truth' Mainstream Media

Exclusive: U.S. mainstream media sees itself as the definer of what's true and what's "propaganda," but has gotten lost in a fog of self-delusion and is now the principal purveyor of "post-truth" news, writes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

For several months, Western officials and media outlets repeated thousands of times that there were between 250,000 and 300,000 civilians trapped under Syrian and Russian bombardment in East Aleppo. Western reports rarely mentioned the Syrian government's estimate that there were only one-third that number of civilians in the rebel-controlled enclave – nor that its estimates were solidly based on what it had found in Homs and other rebel-held areas after it restored state control.

Once East Aleppo fell to government forces, it turned out that there were less than 90,000 people there, about what the Syrian government estimated but only a fraction of the much higher numbers confidently repeated *ad nauseam* by Western officials and media.

Part of the reason for this misreporting was that Syrian rebels had publicly killed Western and independent journalists to secure a monopoly on information coming out of rebel-controlled areas. Given the West's disdain for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and sympathy for his opponents, the mainstream Western media then became reliant on anti-government rebels and allied activists for what was going on in those parts of Syria.

Now the complicity of Western media in the success of this strategy has been exposed as a systematic and deadly lapse in journalistic standards. So we should by now have seen widespread corrections and retractions from mainstream media that helped the rebels broadcast propaganda that conveyed a misleading, one-sided picture of the crisis in Aleppo.

The absence of corrections or retractions reflects a "new normal" in Western media practice. The mainstream media reports propaganda, usually produced by Western governments but in this case even by Al Qaeda splinter groups, as uncontested fact. Then, when the bubble bursts and the propaganda is exposed, it is quickly swept down the memory hole as the same reporters, editors and producers who got it all wrong unapologetically move on to other equally unsubstantiated narratives, in this case, "Russia hacked the election," and even, "Russia hacked the electric grid."

'Post-Truth' Media

It is thus fitting that the Oxford Dictionary has chosen "post-truth" as its "word of the year" for 2016 (although ironically the word is usually hurled by the mainstream media against people who don't accept Western propaganda as truth). Yet, so much of what we are now told by politicians, newspapers and talking heads has little basis in the real world beyond the media echo chamber. The real human experiences that once provided the raw material for "news" have been displaced by statements and press releases from government officials and corporate P.R. staffs that post-truth editors, producers and reporters repackage as their lead stories.

The resulting talking points are then repeated ad nauseam on infotainment TV shows to give Americans an utterly misleading picture of the world beyond our borders. That this is the only view of the world many Americans ever see fuels an ever-widening and dangerous gap in public perceptions between Americans and the rest of the world, crippling international efforts to solve many of the most serious global problems, including endless war.

Commercially-driven media corporations have adopted the "talking heads" model mainly because it is much cheaper and easier to produce than real news reported by real journalists who actually live, work and know their neighbors in countries all over the world. The increasingly monopolistic U.S. infotainment industry has, in a couple of decades, reprogrammed many Americans to accept this talking-heads model as a substitute for real journalism, simply by offering them nothing else.

When I tell friends and relatives that they're being misled by cable news, the most common response is, "But where else can I go to find out what's happening?" The growth of alternative and independent media and easier access to foreign media are gradually providing Americans with more informative and reliable options, but most Americans still rely on domestic TV and radio as their primary sources of "news."

The astonishing reality is that the mainstream media often leaves the public more ignorant and confused than if they ignored them altogether. This is in fact what polling by Fairleigh Dickinson University's Public Mind Poll has found: that people who said they didn't follow the news at all were better informed about international events than either Fox News or MSNBC viewers, and about as knowledgeable as CNN viewers. People whose main news source was Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* scored second highest of all, outscored by NPR listeners but better informed than Sunday talk show and "talk radio" junkies as well as cable news viewers.

Pollsters found the same pattern in media coverage and public understanding of the reasons behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq, arguably the most critical foreign policy issue of our generation. A PIPA poll three months after the invasion found that only 7 percent of Americans by then understood that there was no connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda, while 52 percent believed that U.S. invasion forces in Iraq had found “clear evidence” that Saddam Hussein was working with Al Qaeda. This number was actually higher among people who were tuning in regularly to U.S. news media to try and make sense of the crisis, rising to 78 percent among “Republicans following Iraq news closely,” which was higher than among Republicans at large.

Incredibly, a Zogby poll of U.S. troops in Iraq a full three years into the U.S. occupation found that 85 percent still primarily defined their mission as “to retaliate for Saddam’s role in the 9/11 attacks.” This can only have exacerbated the murderous brutality of the U.S. occupation, especially when coupled with illegal rules of engagement and no training in their responsibilities toward Iraqi civilians under the Fourth Geneva Convention – training that is legally required by the Convention.

Al Qaeda’s Social Media

In Syria, “social media” reports approved by Al Qaeda and its allies and, in many cases, funded directly or indirectly by Western governments have provided a new stream of inexpensive material to spice up the talking heads format and assist corporate news make more money from the reductionist, profit-driven logic of its business managers. But these selective, sometimes fabricated, reports come at a moral price, which is that they take corporate media even deeper into the looking-glass world of propaganda, sensation and even pure fiction.

The corporate media’s selective crocodile tears over the plight of civilians in East Aleppo stand in sharp contrast to their diametrically-opposed framing of the similar plight of an estimated 1.5 million civilians in Mosul, under siege and daily bombardment by the U.S. and its allies. While the plight of civilians in East Aleppo was blamed entirely on the attacking forces and not on their Al Qaeda-linked captors, the crisis facing civilians in Mosul is blamed entirely on ISIS, while the forces gradually destroying the city with artillery and air strikes are presented as the people’s liberators.

In reality, U.S. air strikes have killed thousands of people in and around Mosul, destroyed all the bridges over the Tigris, and struck at least two hospitals, the university, food warehouses, dairies, flour mills, factories, banks, apartment buildings, private homes, telephone exchanges and water and electricity plants.

After months of escalating siege, artillery bombardment and air strikes, much of the population has lost access to food, water, medicine, electricity and other necessities of life, but still have no means of escape from the twin dangers of American bombs and Iraqi government death squads on one side and ISIS's murderous rule on the other.

Can we hope that U.S. corporate media will now pay more attention to the plight of civilians in Mosul, or even acknowledge our country's leading role in the destruction and misery that is engulfing them?

'Russian Aggression'

Another meme established by endless repetition in Western media is the term "aggression" applied to Russia. Western officials and media use it to refer to the annexation of Crimea, support for the armed resistance to the post-coup government in Eastern Ukraine, military operations in Syria, cyber-warfare and Russian foreign policy in general.

But the word "aggression" has an actual legal meaning in international relations, referring to the crime of aggression, the planning and launching of a war or armed attack against another country in violation of international treaties and/or customary international law.

When American judges convicted German officials of aggression at Nuremberg, they called aggression the "supreme international crime," for which they sentenced many of them to death by hanging. Germany, like the U.S., was a signatory to the Kellogg-Briand Pact, in which the world's major powers renounced war as an "instrument of national policy." The judges ruled, on the basis of that treaty, that, "those who plan and wage such a war, with its inevitable and terrible consequences, are committing a crime in so doing." The Kellogg-Briand Pact is still in force today, now reinforced by the U.N. Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force by any country.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) convicted the United States of aggression against Nicaragua in 1986, and international lawyers regard the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the U.S.-U.K invasion of Iraq and U.S. drone strikes as crimes of aggression under international law. Many believe that the invasion of Afghanistan, the overthrow of the government of Libya, the U.S. role in the Saudi-led war on Yemen and the U.S. bombing of Syria are also crimes of aggression for which the United States and its leaders should be held criminally accountable.

But the U.S. has carved out a regime of impunity for its crimes by withdrawing from the binding jurisdiction of the ICJ after its conviction in *U.S. v.*

Nicaragua, undermining the new International Criminal Court, and using its U.N. Security Council veto twice as often as the other Permanent Members combined since the 1980s. U.S. government lawyers therefore enjoy the privilege, unique in their profession, of issuing legally indefensible but politically creative legal cover for war crimes, secure in the knowledge that they will never have to defend their opinions before impartial courts or the Security Council.

Imbalanced Accusations

To loosely use the term “aggression” to describe any Russian action that conflicts with U.S. or Western interests is to trivialize what the judges at Nuremberg called the “supreme international crime.” If U.S. officials or commentators were serious about the legitimate enforcement of international laws against aggression, they would first call for the prosecution of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and then try to make a reasonable case that President Putin’s actions meet the same standard of criminality.

But that would be difficult because of other legal principles that justify or mitigate Russian actions:

–Russian forces are operating in Syria at the invitation of the internationally recognized government, unlike U.S. forces bombing Syria since 2014.

–Russia’s sovereignty over the Republic of Crimea has not been internationally recognized. But its annexation was a direct and arguably proportional response to the U.S.-backed coup in Kiev, which followed NATO’s decision to accept Ukraine as a prospective new member at a meeting in Bucharest in 2008 and therefore threatened to hand Russia’s most strategic naval base at Sevastopol over to NATO. Plus, the people of Crimea voted overwhelmingly to separate from Ukraine in two referenda – by 94% in 1991, and then by 97% in 2014. So Russia’s annexation of a territory that had been part of Russia since 1783 was also a response to the long-held and clearly expressed loyalties of most Crimeans. In contrast with the bloody, intractable wars unleashed by recent U.S. aggression, only two Ukrainian troops were killed before Ukrainian forces withdrew from Crimea.

–After the U.S.-backed coup in Kiev, two Russian-speaking provinces in Eastern Ukraine refused to accept the post-coup government and declared independence as new “People’s Republics.” The Kiev government formed new “National Guard” units, drawing from Svoboda and Right Sector, the neo-Nazi groups that had provided the shock troops for the coup, and sent them to fight the rebels in the East. The rebels appealed to Russia for help, but the true nature and extent of Russian support to the rebels is hotly disputed. Russia is now working with France, Germany and the new Ukrainian government to resolve the conflict under the Minsk

II agreement.

–Nobody denies that the U.S. engages in cyber warfare and tries to influence elections in other countries, so the unsubstantiated charges against Russia over the 2016 U.S. election are only that they do the same as we do. In any case, Julian Assange of Wikileaks has explained in interviews that Russia was not the source of the emails he published. Former U.K. Ambassador Craig Murray, who risked and ultimately lost his career for telling the truth about CIA complicity in torture in Uzbekistan, claims that there were two separate sources, both American, and that he met with one of the sources (or a representative) in Washington last September.

Murray's record of integrity as a whistle-blower and truth-teller makes him a highly credible informant, which may explain why U.S. officials and corporate media have chosen mainly to ignore him instead of trying to impeach his credibility. Assange has also pointed out that nobody has challenged the authenticity of the emails he published, so, if their publication somehow lost the election for Hillary Clinton, it was because voters reacted to what she and her staff wrote in them, not to anything he, the Russians or anybody else said or did.

–As for some kind of generalized “aggression” or threat to its neighbors, Russia has not been involved in an attack on another country since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Instead it is the U.S. that has surrounded Russia with missile batteries, nuclear-armed submarines, *Aegis* missile destroyers, military bases and exercises on a scale that Russian military leaders could only dream of, since their military budget is only one-tenth of ours.

When a truly aggressive military power falsely slanders a rival nuclear-armed power as an aggressor, we should all be afraid, very afraid, not so much of the target of this campaign, but of the proven aggressor that threatens the very existence of human life on Earth by stoking these dangerous rising tensions.

Three Minutes to Doomsday

The dangers of a “New Cold War” are not distant threats that might materialize at some point in the future. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, advised by Stephen Hawking, 17 Nobel prizewinners and 20 other eminent scientists and experts, has been warning for two years that we are already as close to Doomsday as at any time in our history except for the period from 1953 to 1960, after the U.S. and the Soviet Union first deployed hydrogen bombs. As the U.S.-Russian confrontation escalated in Ukraine and Syria, the atomic scientists advanced the hands of their “Doomsday Clock” from 5 minutes to midnight to 3 minutes to midnight, with this warning:

"The threat is serious, the time short. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists does not move the hands of the Doomsday Clock for light or transient reasons. The hands of the clock tick now at just 3 minutes to midnight because international leaders are failing to perform their most important duty – ensuring and preserving the health and vitality of human civilization."

And yet, in the midst of these real existential dangers to human society, Orwellian "post-truth" media are leading the public into a kind of dream world in which words like "aggression," "propaganda," "terrorism," "defense," "security," "threat" and "violence" are exclusively appropriated as tools in the hands of powerful political interests and deprived of their objective meaning as useful terms for discussing the real dangers we are facing.

A recent campaign by an anonymous and shadowy Web site – given credibility by the *Washington Post* – sought to brand *Consortiumnews.com* and other independent alternative media as "Russian propaganda." The blacklist of some 200 Web sites was produced by a new group called PropOrNot (which hides the identities of its participants and may be linked to the U.S. Army's Intelligence and Security Command or Cyber Command at Fort Belvoir in Washington D.C.).

PropOrNot and the Post abused the term "propaganda," which was defined by Edward Bernays in his classic 1928 book, *Propaganda*, as involving the use of mass media to plant ideas in the mind of the public on behalf of powerful political and commercial interests. Ironically, this is exactly what the *Washington Post* and PropOrNot are doing and the exact opposite of what independent alternative media do, so this campaign has given Americans one more reason to trust independent news sites with long records of producing genuine journalism over profit-driven servants of power like the *Washington Post*.

President Obama has just signed into law a "National Defense" bill that includes \$160 million for new U.S. propaganda operations, nominally designed to counter "Russian propaganda." But the Keystone Cops PropOrNot operation suggests that this escalation of U.S. information warfare will produce more blacklists, trolling, hacking, denial-of-service attacks and demonization of alternative, independent media by U.S. military psy-ops, "intelligence" agencies and P.R. firms, which will be loyally amplified and reinforced by censorship, rote repetition and circular analysis in the echo chamber of the corporate media, including by "social media" corporations like Facebook.

Like many institutions in our society, the U.S. media system has been degraded by the inherent corruption of the neoliberal order that has been consolidating its power over our lives and society for the past generation. Just as commercially driven corporate control has proven to be a destructive model for education, healthcare and other public services that leads only to corruption

and declining quality, handing over the responsibility for informing the public about what is happening in the world to increasingly monopolistic for-profit corporations is eroding yet another vital pillar of American life.

Understanding the world we live in is a basic human need, and an informed, educated population is the most basic building block of any form of democratic society. So we desperately need independent media institutions that genuinely and honestly shed light on the world around us, instead of profit-obsessed media corporations cynically exploiting and abusing our concerns for our world and our future as bait for advertising and propaganda.

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