

How the Establishment Imposes 'Truth'

A new "press freedom" paradigm has taken hold in the Western world, imposing establishment narratives as "truth" and dismissing contrarian analyses as "fake news," a break from the Enlightenment's "marketplace of ideas," says Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

For the last quarter century or more, Western foreign policy has claimed to be guided by promotion of "democratic values," among which none shines brighter than freedom of speech and the related freedom of the press. European Union institutions have repeatedly been quick to denounce authoritarian regimes in the greater European area for arrests or murders of journalists and for the shutting down of media outlets that crossed some government red line.

In the past year, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey may have headed the list in Brussels for such offenses, especially since the crackdown that followed an attempted coup last summer. The E.U.'s supposed guardians of the free press also put Vladimir Putin's Russia on the short list of countries where journalism is said to be severely constrained.

However, against this backdrop of European moral posturing, there are troubling examples of how the E.U. itself deals with journalists who challenge the dominant groupthinks. The E.U. finds its own excuses to stifle dissent albeit through bloodless bureaucratic maneuvering.

For instance, in April 2016, I wrote about how a documentary challenging the Western narrative of the circumstances surrounding the death of Kremlin critic Sergei Magnitsky in 2009 was blocked from being shown at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium.

The last-minute shutting down of the documentary, "The Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes," was engineered by lawyers for William Browder, the influential chairman of the investment fund Hermitage Capital and an associate of Magnitsky.

Based in London, Browder has been an unrelenting crusader for imposing sanctions on Russian officials allegedly connected to Magnitsky's death in prison. Browder successfully pushed for the U.S. Congress to approve the 2012 Magnitsky Act and has lobbied the European Parliament to pass a similarly punitive measure.

Then, in April 2016, Browder pulled off a stunning show of force by arranging the cancellation of "The Magnitsky Act" documentary just minutes before invitees entered the auditorium at the European Parliament building for the showing.

Browder blocked the documentary, directed by Andrei Nekrasov, because it carefully examined the facts of the case and raised doubts about Browder's narrative that Magnitsky was an innocent victim of Russian repression. The E.U.'s powers-that-be, who had fully bought into Browder's Magnitsky storyline, did nothing to resist Browder's stifling of a dissenting view.

Which appears to be part of the West's new approach toward information, that only establishment-approved narratives can be presented to the public; that contrarian analyses that try to tell the other side of a story are dismissed as "fake news" that should rightly be suppressed. (When the Magnitsky documentary got a single showing at the Newseum in Washington, a Washington Post editorial misrepresented its contents and dismissed it as "Russian agitprop," which was easy to do because almost no one got to see what it said.)

Bureaucratic Runaround

I got my own taste of the E.U.'s bureaucratic resistance to dissent when I applied to the Media Accreditation Committee of the European Commission on March 2 seeking a press pass to act as the Brussels reporter of Consortiumnews.com.

This Committee issues accreditation for all the European Institutions, including the only one of interest to me, the European Parliament. The Committee is a law unto itself, a faceless bureaucratic entity that deals with applicants only via online applications and sends you back anonymous emails. The application process includes several steps that already raise red flags about the Commission's understanding of what it means to be from the "press" or a "journalist" deserving accreditation in the Twenty-first Century.

First, under the Committee's rules, a journalist must be a paid employee of the given media outlet. This condition generally cannot be satisfied by "stringers" or "freelancers," who are paid for each assignment or an individual story, a payment arrangement that has existed throughout the history of journalism but has become more common today, used by mainstream media outlets as well as alternative media, which generally pay little or nothing. I satisfied that requirement with a Paypal credit note from Consortiumnews.

The Commission also must have the media outlet on its approved list. Regarding Consortiumnews, an Internet-based investigative news magazine dating back to 1995 and operating in the Washington D.C. area, the Commission apparently wasn't sure what to do.

So, like bureaucratic institutions everywhere, the Committee played for time. It was only on June 6 that I received the review of my application. The finding was that 1) I needed to present more proof that my employer is paying me regularly,

not just once, and 2) I needed to supply further articles showing that I am not merely published regularly, as was clear from my uploaded articles with the initial application, but that I am published precisely on the subject of activities at the European institutions.

I was assured that pending delivery of these proofs and completion of my request, I could ask for ad hoc accreditation "to the individual institutions for specific press events you would need to cover."

In fact, I had withheld from my application my most recent published essay on a panel discussion in the E.U. Parliament devoted to censuring Russia's alleged dissemination of "fake news." That discussion was run by a Polish MEP and former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs from the determinedly anti-Russian party of the Kaczynskis. The title of my essay was "Europe is brain dead and on the drip." I had felt that this particular piece would not further the cause of my press pass.

Still, the insincerity of the E.U. press accreditation committee's response to my application is perfectly obvious. A journalist can write articles about the European Institutions when he or she has free run of the house via a press pass and can ascertain what is going on of interest. Without a press pass, you do not know what or whom is worth covering.

And in this connection, "specific press events" are among the least desirable things going on at the E.U. for purposes of a genuine practicing journalist. They are useful only for lazy journalists who will send along to their editor the press release and a few canned quotes obtained by showing up at a press briefing in time for the coffee and sandwiches.

In short, I will not be issued a press pass and the Committee will not bother to address the real reason for refusal: that Consortiumnews is not on the Committee's short list of acceptable media. Not to mince words, this is how the E.U. bureaucracy manages skeptical media and stifles dissenting voices.

NBC's New Star v. Putin

Meanwhile, the mainstream Western media continues to hammer home its propaganda narratives, especially regarding Russia. Another case study unfolded over the past week with NBC's new star reporter Megyn Kelly interviewing Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 2 on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

This latest NBC crime against professional journalism becomes apparent when you compare the full version of the interview as it was broadcast on Russia's RT network and the edited version that NBC aired for its American audience. The

most shocking discrepancy involved a segment in which Kelly aggressively questioned Putin about what she said was Americans' understanding of his government, namely one that murders journalists, suppresses political opposition, is rife with corruption, etc.

In the NBC version, Putin's answer has been cut to one empty introductory statement that "Russia is on its way to becoming a democracy" bracketed by an equally empty closing sentence. In the full, uncut version, Putin responds to Kelly's allegations point by point and then turns the question around, asking what right the U.S. and the West have to question Russia's record when they have been actively doing much worse than what Kelly charged. He asked where is Occupy Wall Street today, why U.S. and European police use billy clubs and tear gas to break up demonstrations, when Russian police do nothing of the sort, and so on.

Simply put, NBC intentionally made Putin sound like an empty authoritarian, when he is in fact a very sophisticated debater, which he demonstrated earlier in the day at an open panel discussion involving Kelly who became the event's laughingstock. Regarding the bowdlerized interview, NBC management bears the prime responsible for distorting the material and misleading its viewers.

Interviews by serious news organizations can be "hard talk," as the BBC program of the same name does weekly. The journalist in charge can directly and baldly challenge a political leader or other public personality and can dwell on an issue to arrive at exhaustive responses that then allow viewers to reach their own conclusions.

However, in the interview at hand and in the earlier panel discussion, Kelly repeated the same question about alleged Russian meddling in the U.S. election even after she had received an exhaustive answer from Putin several times. Clearly she was reading from a script given to her by management and was not permitted to react to what took place in the interview exchange.

Given that Putin's answers then were shredded in the NBC cutting room, we may explain the objectives of NBC's executives as follows: to present themselves and their featured journalist to the American audience as being so respected by the Kremlin that the Russian president accorded an exclusive interview. Second, to show the American audience that they used the opportunity not to allow the Russian President to pitch his views to the U.S. home audience but instead to hit him with all the charges of wrongdoing that have been accumulating in the American political arena.

In other words, NBC got to show off Kelly's supposed boldness and the network's faux patriotism while sparing the American people from hearing Putin's full answers.

A Harvard Dissent

Although this emerging paradigm of righteously suppressing challenges to mainstream narratives appears to be the wave of the future – with the modern censorship possibly enforced via Internet algorithms – some voices are protesting this assault on the Enlightenment's trust in human reason to sort out false claims and advance factual truth.

At the May 25 commencement at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard President Drew Faust delivered an impassioned defense of free speech. She spoke about the institution and its obligations as generator and protector of “truth” and knowledge arrived at by free debate and challenge of ideas.

This is not to say that there was perfect clarity in her message. She left me and other attendees somewhat uncertain as to whose rights of free speech she was defending and against what sort of challenge. Given the political persuasion of students and faculty, namely the middle-of-the-road to progressive wings of the Democratic Party, one might think she had in mind such causes célèbres as the ongoing verbal attacks against Linda Sarsour, a Muslim (Palestinian) graduation speaker at CUNY.

Indeed, in her speech, Drew Faust pointed to the more vulnerable members of the student body, those from minorities, those from among first generation college students who might be intimidated by hurtful speech directed against them. But it is more likely that she drew up her speech having in mind the controversy on campus this spring over the rights of speakers disseminating hated ideas to appear on campus. That issue has come up repeatedly in the student newspaper *The Crimson*, and it may be said to date from the scandal at UC Berkeley over the cancellation of controversial far-right speaker Milo Yiannopoulos.

However, I believe the main weight of her argument was directed elsewhere. Primarily, to the processes by which truth is determined. She was defending the appropriateness of sharp debate and airing of views that one may dislike intensely on campus:

“Universities must model a commitment to the notion that truth cannot simply be claimed, but must be established – established through reasoned argument, assessment, and even sometimes uncomfortable challenges that provide the foundation for truth.”

Though this idea rests at the heart of the Enlightenment, it has faded in recent years as various political and media forces prefer to simply dismiss contrary evidence and analysis by stigmatizing the messengers and – whenever possible – silencing the message. This approach is now common inside the major media which

lumps together cases of fact-free conspiracy theories and consciously “fake news” with well-researched information and serious analyses that clash with conventional wisdom.

No Sharp Edges

From my experience as an organizer of public events over the past five years, I learned that the very word “debate” finds few defenders these days. Debate suggests conflict rather than consensus. The politically correct term for public discussions of even hot issues is “round tables.” No sharp corners allowed.

But Faust said: “Ensuring freedom of speech is not just about allowing speech. It is about actively creating a community where everyone can contribute and flourish, a community where argument is relisted, not feared. Freedom of speech is not just freedom from censorship; it is freedom to actively join the debate as a full participant. It is about creating a context in which genuine debate can happen.”

Besides the value of honest debate as a method for ascertaining truth, Faust also noted that suppression of diverse opinions can blind those doing the suppression to growing unrest among the broader public, an apparent reference to the surprising election of Donald Trump.

Faust continued: “Silencing ideas or basking in intellectual orthodoxy independent of facts and evidence impedes our access to new and better ideas, and it inhibits a full and considered rejection of bad ones. From at least the time of Galileo, we can see how repressing seemingly heretical ideas has blinded societies and nations to the enhanced knowledge and understanding on which progress depend.

“Far more recently, we can see here at Harvard how our inattentiveness to the power and appeal of conservative voices left much of our community astonished – blindsided by the outcome of last fall’s election. We must work to ensure that universities do not become bubbles isolated from the concerns and discourse of the society that surrounds them.”

Of course, the inconvenient truth is that Harvard University has long been a “bubble,” especially in the area of policy research that most interests me and may be vital in avoiding a nuclear catastrophe: Russian studies.

Over the past few years of growing confrontation between the U.S. and Russia, amid vilification of the Russian President and the Russian people and now encompassing the hysteria over “Russia-gate,” colleagues with long-standing and widely acknowledged expertise in Russian affairs including Ambassador Jack Matlock and Professor Stephen Cohen have been repeatedly denied any possibility

of participating in “round tables” dedicated to relations with Russia that might be organized at Harvard’s Kennedy Center or the Davis Center.

These policy centers have become pulpits to stridently expound orthodoxy per the Washington consensus. Thus, the flaccid argumentation and complacency of U.S. foreign policy are aided and abetted by this premier university, which, along with Columbia, created the very discipline of Russian studies in 1949. So, by wallowing in this consensus-driven groupthink, Harvard contributes to dangerously biased policies that could lead to World War III. In that case, truth – or as Harvard might say, Veritas – would not be the only casualty.

No doubt there are other faculties at Harvard which also are desperately in need of renewal following President Drew Faust’s call for debate and free speech. Nonetheless, Dr. Faust’s celebration of open debate and free speech represented a welcome tonic to the close-mindedness of today’s Russia-bashing.

Her speech is all the more noteworthy as it marks one of the first steps by liberals and Democratic Party stalwarts to acknowledge that those whom Hillary Clinton condemned as “deplorables” must be heard and reasoned with if U.S. democracy is to become great again.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His last book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015. His forthcoming book, *Does the United States Have a Future?*
