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# PRESS

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## The News Managers

By Herb Greer



MANIPULATION of the media, so-called news management, is very old—older even than Saul's thousands and David's ten thousands. The earliest versions of the sport seem to have been a normal facet of the priestly or governing ritual, quite respectable and taken for granted as a means to preserve the name and fame of rulers or gods through time into eternity. Anyone with a taste for savouring the activity of those days can stroll through the Assyrian and Egyptian exhibits of the British Museum and see it preserved in stone.

Today the media, like religion, have become less important in the eternal context than in the urgent and noisy hallways of the here and now. *Réclame* is no longer a luxury to be created and shaped by Gods or Emperors and their lackeys, but a banal necessity to the common man in almost every field of human endeavour, from the economic process through politics to warfare. This means trying to influence, coerce, bribe, or (if one is lucky) interest the modern successors to stone-gravers, scribes, and literate priests—the journalists.

In most of the world the species remains to a great extent what it was in ancient times, responsible primarily to the powers that be and their henchmen, in the style currently approved or demanded by UNESCO. In the Western world and among those influenced by its values, things are different. The journalist is not content to serve in the manner of his forebears; he himself demands a share in the old hieratic izzat, a benefit of clergy and status apart from and prior to all

other professions, equivalent if not superior to those who govern. Like the old clerics and clerisy they are pleased to appear as carriers of (hidden) truth among their fellow human beings, as a club of mediators between reality and the deluded dreamers who make up the rest of mankind. This illusion is also fostered by many sensible and weighty people outside the profession, who speak flatteringly of the "power" of the media who "form our symbolic environment."<sup>1</sup> It is a recognition that media professionals, while complaining bitterly of "news management" by others, have their own particular and collective interests in shaping what they transmit; that they indulge those interests and defend the indulgence, just as any pressure group defends its exercise of privilege.

Because of this the "power" of our media is an important issue. In the real as opposed to the rhetorical world, power is the ability to compel obedience, most often through a sense of legitimate authority or fear. The serious media-professional, full of ideas about "the Fourth Estate" and all that, does aspire to just such power, speaking with the air of a politician, a representative of "the People" with consequent political authority. In a totalitarian or other tyrannical system, where the journalist is an *apparatchik* of government, he may have a share in its authority. In the democratic world, though journalists may be influential, they are not like that. Machiavelli's distinction between Prince and private citizen still holds good, even when "the Prince" is elected.<sup>2</sup> Our ritualistic contempt for politicians does not cancel out the fact that they *rule* with electoral consent, backed by a strong fabric of established custom. This makes the electorate look to them with genuine expectations, including the hope or the demand for the solution of problems which might make God Almighty hesitate a while. No such expectations or hopes attach to the media professionals; the best they can manage is the role of popular orator, sometimes rising to the office of lynch-mob leader.<sup>3</sup> In these roles, however, they can and do influence popular expectations, usually swelling them up beyond reason (most often regarding the power of government to control the economy).

Much, perhaps most, discussion of media "power" rides on the assumption that the public is a homogeneous, passive, and infinitely malleable chunk of human clay. The obvious truth is that this "mass", like the media profession, is made up of individuals, each with a bag of metaphysical tools. The "symbolic environment" is formed by shared use of these tools within and between both groups, with the public by no means always on the receiving end of the action. This can be a healthy process in a free society, but it does have its pathological side. The public-media dialogue contains an element of conceptual and linguistic entropy, in which convenient but sloppy usages are taken up, reinforced, and then frozen. Thus an important area of political awareness can be badly blurred—as in the current use of "peace" in public and media discourse. This entropy helps pressure groups to exploit the media, and enables journalists or editors, for reasons of their own, to exacerbate and deploy the emotions of pressure groups and public alike.

This manipulation can descend to the use of blunt falsehood;<sup>4</sup> but with so many competing journalists waiting to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jeane Kirkpatrick in *ENCOUNTER*, November 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prince*, Ch. IX, "The Constitutional Principality." Some politicians flatter the media accordingly, some do not. Many British journalists are hostile to Mrs Thatcher because she treats them like journalists instead of, presumably, like Cabinet members.

<sup>3</sup> As in Watergate, in the Parkinson affair, and in others where embarrassing publicity loomed large.

<sup>4</sup> Even *The Times* can print a lie. See the issue of 16 September 1983, where Robert Fisk wrote of "imaginary" terrorists in the Sabra and Chatila camps before the notorious Lebanese massacre of Palestinians. In fact the presence of gunmen, firing on Israelis, was well attested in both visual and printed media. A November 1981 *TV Eye* report on Czech dissidents contained false statements which caused serious trouble for the subjects of the report in Czechoslovakia.

catch each other out, this is relatively rare today, and seldom very effective. Journalists in general prefer to work *on* the truth rather than against it. Some of their techniques (e.g. the atrocity story) are older than writing itself. For this and other gambits, still pictures can be printed with the sort of headline or caption that makes literacy a moot point. Stories can be warped or slanted by selectivity, by the use of adjectives to heighten or damp down a particular point (“alleged”, “so-called”), by placement in column or on the page, by the use of type-face, frequency of appearance, or by illustrations which reinforce or contradict what is printed. In the visual medium, journalists have learned to operate with a sophistication undreamed of by the scribes and scribbling monks who were their forebears. They can bypass literacy altogether in the violent, abreactive idiom of moving pictures coupled with sound. This offers enormous scope for the jiggling-and-poking of news and documentary material, with cinematic tricks of montage or juxtaposition that push the viewer’s emotions where the reporter or presenter wants them to go. He uses variations in the lengths of shot; conducts prompting interviews which lead the subject into views and vocabulary preferred by the *engagé* reporter; inserts “talking heads” to present an apparent balance of opposing views (but offering a less attractive spokesman for the view which producer, editor, and presenter wish to denigrate); goes in for prosecutory questioning which forces self-incrimination; films emotionally powerful images to overwhelm reasoned argument.<sup>5</sup>

ALL THE MEDIA—print, aural, and visual—manipulate reportage with a kind of voodoo language, in which certain terms are employed to give the material force and direction, often in an attempt to compel political action, or to establish some kind of guilt. Like the lawyer presenting a brief, the reporter or presenter works by raising a good old cause (peace; human and other “rights”; jobs; accountability; united Ireland; self-determination; a “homeland”, etc.)—or some awful villainy (racism; unemployment; “loss of hope”; hunger; conspiracies in commerce or politics; deprivation; police brutality; “cuts” in public spending; poverty, etc.) into the forefront of the judging public’s attention. If there are awkward complications hanging on behind the plausible façade, these are skimmed, obscured, or simply ignored. (An example of this is the tribal complexity among black South Africans. Most reportage of the troubles there presents the situation as a simple Black-White dichotomy.)

The voodoo-prosecutor approach is particularly favoured in British and American media treatment of the conflict between the American government and the Marxist-Leninist junta which runs Nicaragua. The example is interesting because it displays all the techniques I have mentioned, plus one or two others. It is also an instance of journalists working

as ideological lobbyists to influence foreign policy rather than as the informants they claim to be. The primary villains are the “*Contra*” forces which are invariably described in Britain as “CIA-” or “American-backed”, while mention of Soviet or Cuban backing for the Sandinistas is deliberately omitted or put in more anodyne terms. Questioned about this, BBC news executive John Wilson admitted that much British media reporting is under the influence of “small-*l* liberalism.” He excused the differently slanted treatment of “backing” for *Contras* and Sandinistas on the grounds that Soviet support for the Junta is “not a readily examinable policy”, while CIA support for the *Contras* is “confidently asserted.” This sophistry is endorsed by others (eg. ITN news editor Norman Rees) to justify the open prejudice of reporting on Central America.

In one notable media variant, certain faults of the Sandinistas—censorship, suppression of civil liberties, harsh economic measures, the largest armed force in the region—are freely admitted; but this is not connected with the patterns of increasingly totalitarian power of Marxist-Leninist régimes everywhere else. They are said to be something special, due to harassment by the *Yanquis* through their *Contra* surrogates. Pro-Sandinista reporters like *The Observer*’s Hugh O’Shaughnessy deny that the Sandinistas are really Marxist-Leninist at all—at least not in “the style of Czechoslovakia.” After O’Shaughnessy made this statement on the BBC religious programme *Sunday*, I asked him if he would make the more relevant comparison with Castro’s Cuba. He declined on the voodoo ground that it would be “simplistic.” He did not explain why the comparison with more distant Czechoslovakia was not simplistic.

*Sunday*, theological as it is supposed to be, has on several occasions given air-time to pro-Sandinista nuns (atrocity stories about the *Contras*). Hugh Kay, editor of the Catholic magazine *The Month*, defending the Pelagian “Liberation Theology” on television, has insisted that Nicaragua under the Sandinistas is “free.” He said to me that the Sandinistas “give Christianity concrete form in working toward reconstruction of the social order. . . .” BBC TV’s *Heart of the Matter*, purporting to explore the ethical aspects of the conflict, portrayed it as a simple result of Reaganite hostility; but it omitted any mention of earlier US aid to the Sandinistas—\$118 million over two years, more than Somoza received in two decades. Notice of this obviously might have entailed an explanation of why it was stopped—namely, the huge increase in Nicaraguan armed forces while help was still coming from the US government; suppression of domestic opposition during the same period; subversion in other Central American countries, also during the same period. Presenter David Jessel concentrated instead on the Sandinista claim that *Contras* engage in a policy of systematic atrocities against civilians. His interview of a US State Department official, who denied this, was prosecutory; it was marked by phrases like “Oh, come *on*!” The official’s denial of the charge included a remark that atrocities do take place in all such wars. It was edited to make it look like a *de facto* admission which contradicted the denial, muffling any suggestion that *Contra* atrocities were not at all the systematic sort adduced by the Sandinistas.

<sup>5</sup> Psychologists hold that visual techniques affect the right hemisphere and sub-cortical structures of the viewer’s brain, making resistance or correction by pre-existing or subsequent verbal information—lodged in the left hemisphere—more difficult than the simple refutation of argument.

On 12 March 1982 Jon Snow of ITN made Sandinista foreign-office material part of a straight news-broadcast, not acknowledging the source. The material was contentious and inaccurate, but the ordinary viewer had no way of knowing this. Channel 4 News has employed an active anti-American specialist as an adviser on Central America.<sup>6</sup> The same channel broadcast a month-long weekly series of one-hour documentaries on Nicaragua, all of them heavily pro-Sandinista. Granada's *World in Action* (25 November 1985) dealt with the children fighting for the Sandinistas and for the *Contras*, implying a balanced view of both sides. The Sandinista kids were shown as taking up arms purely in revenge for parents murdered by the *Contras*; they defended their poor little farms, ploughing with a gun on one shoulder; they were shown as very well-informed about the dangers, and cheerfully accepting the risks of what they were doing. None was shown wounded (though casualties were mentioned in the commentary). The *Contra* children were almost all "kidnapped"; forced into service under hideous conditions; never told about the risks of combat; sent as innocents into Nicaragua to be killed or wounded. (There was plenty of footage of wounded children in crude field hospitals.) The message of the "balanced" documentary was clear: the Sandinistas and their brave child volunteers were struggling against a band of criminals who ruthlessly kidnapped frightened kids and used them as cannon fodder.

For years there has been a steady drip of pro-Sandinista and (in this context) anti-American reporting in the British media, complemented by an equivalent—anti-Reagan rather than anti-American—from "liberal" editors and reporters across the Atlantic. But the US-Nicaragua clash is not unique in attracting such *engagé* attention. On the Arab-Israeli war Robert Fisk of *The Times* has been conspicuously pro-Arab and anti-Israeli in the tone and content of his reportage. In the Middle East the Western media generally have taken pains to truckle to the militant Arab factions—for instance, concealing their violent intimidation of Western journalists during the Israeli siege of Beirut (which would account for a good deal of the pro-Arab bias of so much reporting at the time), while condemning the Israelis for "news management"

and "censorship."<sup>7</sup> The British and American media have presented IRA and INLA terrorists less like criminals than as members of a legitimate opposition party, on the excuse of "informing the public about their case"—as if this case (the demand for a United Ireland) were not already known *ad nauseam* to the public.<sup>8</sup>

THESE AND MANY OTHER instances have to be seen in the light of journalists' insistence that they are impartial or "independent" observers—mere passive messengers who record events and pass them on. Of course no one, not even the journalistic profession, really believes this any more, if they ever did. Certainly wider sectors of the public do know better, by now. So much evidence has piled up to prove that in the media, no less than in physics, Heisenberg's famous Uncertainty Principle operates with a vengeance. Now and again a media defender will admit that the very act of coverage does influence events. Paul Friedman (London Bureau Chief of the American Broadcasting Company), did this in trying to justify his company's exploitation of hostages during the TWA hijacking in Beirut. It was "arguable", he said, that (ABC) television actually helped to get the hostages released sooner than they might have been without the coverage. Indeed, it is equally "arguable" that the possibility and then the fact of coverage, plus the eagerness of companies like ABC to deal with terrorists (an eagerness which was very apparent in Beirut), created the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for this hijack and others, and that the ensuing publicity prolonged and *worsened* the agony of the hostages and their families. In either case the media stand convicted as admittedly active agents, with their "mere messenger" claim exposed as nonsense.

It is clear that the media are not "used" or "managed" solely by governments and special-interest groups outside the profession. Journalists and editors on the inside take part in the activity as well. They defend this in various ways, as with this peculiar definition of journalism:

"Journalism is not a profession. It is the exercise by occupation of the right to free expression available to every citizen."<sup>9</sup>

This is, of course, wordy waffle; but interesting because it aims to cast a verbal spell, levitating journalists on to a vaguely democratic height. The idea is to place them above the *undemocratic* professionals like doctors, scientists, university lecturers, lawyers—and, naturally, elected politicians—while conferring on journalists honorary membership in the mass of the common people who surge along below these élites. Thus the élitarian wagon-train is democratically surrounded by the valiant journalists. The "Bennspeak" verbal mummery is not the exclusive property of the Left but of a wide selection of politicians and academics who agree that journalism has a special status, a condition of what might be called social celibacy: of, and yet outside, society. When journalists insist on this they tend to pontificate loudly about "rights": "the people's right to

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Pearce of the Latin America Bureau, a publishing and research house largely dedicated to anti-Yankee propagandising. Miss Pearce's book on Latin America, *Under the Eagle*, highly selective and extremely hostile to the US, has been used as source material by British journalists reporting on Central America.

<sup>7</sup> See *Commentary* (January 1983) for a detailed account of this by Kenneth R. Timmerman. In the spring of that year I wrote to *The Times* about his report; the letter was unprinted. Journalists in Beirut during the siege had to carry a press pass, issued by the Palestinian agency WAFA, for safe conduct. Those who reported facts unfavourable to the Arab side did not get the pass. When I asked whether Robert Fisk carried it, *The Times* refused to discuss the question.

<sup>8</sup> An egregious instance of this was the famous BBC TV interview with an INLA terrorist shortly after this cabal had murdered Airey Neave at the House of Commons. Richard Francis, head of BBC TV News at the time, still defends this interview.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Robertson, *People Against the Press* (1983). The words are Mr Robertson's, like the populist title. But the idiom is characteristic of Tony Benn; hence the term "Bennspeak" (see below).



know”; “the right to free speech” (or, as above, “expression”); or “the right to enlighten democratic choice.” The first two of these formulae mean, in practice, the journalist’s privilege of saying anything he or she likes to the public *with impunity*, even if this is like shouting “FIRE!” in a crowded theatre; even when it extends to *de facto* support for a cabal whose aim is the destruction of rights; even when it means the arbitrary ruin of a private citizen or public official, for no better reason than the feeding of trivial (but journalistically lucrative) quidnuncery.

THE THIRD CATCHPHRASE, about “informing democratic choice”, moots the question of whether media professionals actually *mean* to function simply as informants, or whether they are stepping covertly into the game of professional politics. Are they informing or are they persuading with their shaped information, using resources not available to “every citizen”? Some of what they use for persuasion is doubtless solid and useful and, let us say, democratically salutary. Some of it is trumpery, selective to the point of mendacity, politically malicious or damaging in an interested way, prejudiced, slanted, and harmful to the public interest in the way that it is trimmed up and passed on.

The professional defence of this is that any kind of information must be available, however partial or deliberately warped, because without all of it, good and bad, voters cannot judge what is true and what is not, and thus make the decisions that affect their lives. There are several answers to this. One is that “all” of the information is never available. The question is not one of reporting the “truth” but about the selection process, who operates it, why, and in whose interests. This bears heavily on the public’s perception of what is true and what is not, and has to do with the orienting or “tribal” function of the media.

For most people the world is not chaotic, but is understood within a scheme of received ideas. When this scheme is disrupted the effect is painful and outraging. With a sense of their audience, editors and journalists in the printed medium are likely to avoid this, selecting and presenting their material accordingly. Fans of *The Guardian* or the *Daily Mail* or *The Observer* are more likely to find confirmation of their views in the paper of choice than to find anything that will radically alter them. Despite polls indicating public scepticism about journalists in general, a reader is thus liable to believe rather than reject out of hand what *his* newspaper contains—whatever is said by those who like to sneer at the press.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. The Communist *Morning Star*, the neo-fascist *Bulldog*, the unilateralist *Sanity*, the “ethnic” *Race Today*, the loony-Left *Militant*, etc., etc.

<sup>11</sup> See my “Terrorism and the Media” (in the August 1982 ENCOUNTER). As I pointed out then, terrorists and journalists have certain interests in common (the Big Story and getting it on the Front Page); and this affects the way terrorism is reported in the highly competitive context of the media.

<sup>12</sup> But see Thomas Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions* (1980), p. 38: “In political competition accurate knowledge has no decisive, competitive advantage, because what is being ‘sold’ is not an end result but a plausible belief about a complex process.”

This should not be taken to mean that the Western press is a congeries of small-scale *Pravdas* or *Völkischer Beobachters*, pandering exclusively to special interest groups, parties, or sections of the community. We do have such publications.<sup>10</sup> But what I am describing amounts to a bespoke tailoring of news and comment in major outlets, but with a selection of news that is generally wider and richer than that found under systems with official censors; this includes the freedom to *épater* readers, government, or anyone else if the editors and journalist think it useful or necessary. Yet this also includes the freedom to comfort, flatter, or cater to prejudice with a nudge and a wink: for example, the way that President Reagan is reported and caricatured in, say, *The Observer*, which is calculated to appeal to the crudest anti-American sentiments among readers. In the British press the hostile coverage of Mark Thatcher’s part in an Omani government contract provided a perfect instance of using simple news to mount a political attack. Without clear proof (but noting that Mrs Thatcher had helped to secure the contract for a British company), newspapers and TV hinted darkly at nepotistic corruption without actually making open accusations.

Bias on radio and television appears to arise from a personal conviction as to what they *ought* to believe. In “documentaries” (really tracts and pamphlets using audio-visual material) by journalists like Jon Pilger or Jonathan Dimbleby—and occasionally in news feature spots like the BBC’s *Panorama* or ITV’s *TV Eye*, *Diverse Reports*, or *World in Action*, and even in the “straight” news broadcasts like *Channel 4 News* or *Independent Television News* or *Newsnight* on BBC 2—the ingredient of manipulation appears as more overt, and the *parti pris* attitude more obvious. The reporting of the troubles in Ulster has often cast doubt on the deep-down attitudes of certain reporters and producers to terrorism. A great deal of television coverage of the “H-Block” hunger-strikes, for example, with powerful images of demonstrations and men starving themselves to death, gave a lurid impression of widespread popular support for the Provisional IRA in Ulster. Also, with interviews and in the tone of coverage, it gave an air of political legitimacy to the “men of blood.”<sup>11</sup> The viewer may sense partiality in coverage of that kind; but the resultant loss in credibility can be compensated (or even cancelled out) by the illusion of immediate reality and the powerful cerebral effect of visual images.

WHERE DOES THIS leave the man-in-the-street, the voter, the citizen who is being informed, or persuaded, or manipulated? Does it impair his ability to make the “decisions which affect his life”? Isn’t democracy being usurped by the hidden influence of a Fourth Estate which, unlike the Third, has been elected by nobody? To some extent, surely—but only to the extent that the electorate in a democracy really operates solely on the basis of media-supplied information. However, even in the relationship between media and public I have described above, this is rather unlikely, at least in any sustained and general sense.<sup>12</sup> On immediate single issues the conclusion would probably be different. But it is worth remembering that in our political life voters make very few of

the decisions which affect their lives. They elect and pay politicians to make them, reserving under the prevailing constitutional system the right to turn out the office-holders if what they do becomes too upsetting.

Politicians do not, any more than voters, make their decisions on the basis of media-supplied information; but it can sway them through its possible effect on their electoral chances. Bearing in mind the *Belgrano* affair (and, more recently, the way both sides of the Westland Helicopter Company battle worked through the media), it is clear that politicians, with electoral and other considerations in mind, will use whatever influence they can muster, including administrative authority, to shape information before (and even after) a story reaches the media professionals. It seems

obvious enough that the attitude of the professionals to a given politician and/or his party, plus the other special interests of journalists themselves, will help to determine what form the information takes and how it is expressed by the time it reaches the public. The relationship between an enlightened democracy and Jeffersonian “free expression” for journalists is neither so clear-cut nor so clean as our Fourth Estate likes to pretend. On the contrary it can be obscure, not to say positively dirty—for the special interests of journalists are like those of any other exclusive group in one important respect: they will not always coincide with the public interest. I mean to discuss the implications for this for media freedom in further pieces on censorship and the ethics of journalism.

## From an Urban Bestiary

### 1. House Mouse

The picture on the box the trap came in  
is a travesty. Your fur is a beautiful grey,  
eyes polished jet and whiskers amazingly long.  
You are the only wild life we have seen this year  
and we have slaughtered you.

### 2. White Fly

You are so numerous you have no singular.  
When we put out the tomato plants in a polythene bag  
we hoped we'd seen the last of you.  
You beat against the clear plastic  
like a perpetual motion confetti.

### 3. Bull

Even from the car we can see  
you are bad-tempered,  
as if you're fed up at being got at  
for treating cows as sexual objects.  
Cheer up, old bull. Think of the Ministry's stud bulls,  
Artificial inseminators, making love to sexless objects.

### 4. Blue Bottle

What is so disgusting about your bulky bustle  
is that you may not be insignificantly squashed  
like a mite.

### 5. Go Go Lion

Our local strip-tease artist's lion  
brought the reporters in  
when it peeped over the wall at a neighbour hanging washing.  
*Gentle as a kitten* the owner protested, but they never are.  
Also, she has a python for her act.

*Robert Crozier*