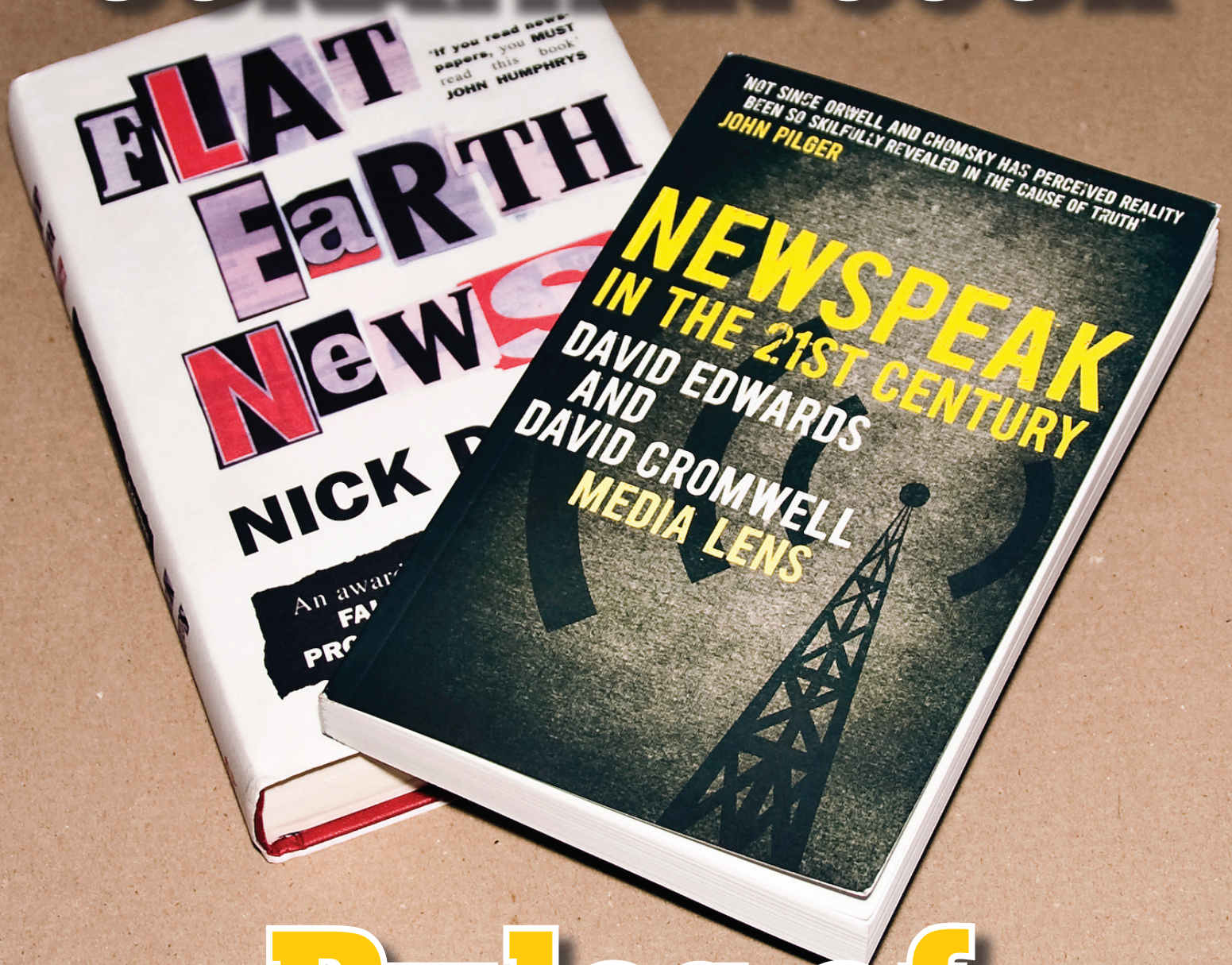


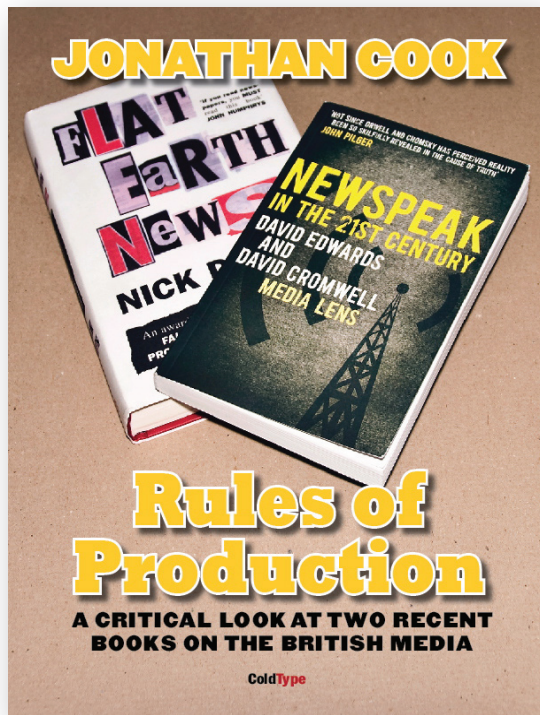
JONATHAN COOK



Rules of Production

**A CRITICAL LOOK AT TWO RECENT
BOOKS ON THE BRITISH MEDIA**

ColdType



THE AUTHOR

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THE BOOKS

Flat Earth News, Nick Davies, Vintage, £8.99. NB: An excerpt from this book appeared as an Extra to The ColdType Reader Issue 24 – www.coldtype.net/reader.html

Newspeak in the 21st Century, David Edwards and David Cromwell, Pluto Press, £16.99

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In this essay, Jonathan Cook dissects and compares the key arguments in two recent books on the British media, Nick Davies's, **Flat Earth News**, and **Newspeak in the 21st Century**, by David Edwards & David Cromwell.

It's worth noting that, while Davies's book was discussed, reviewed, and applauded, far and wide in both print and broadcast media, *Newspeak* (published in September) has so far had just two, largely dismissive, reviews in mainstream outlets, in the *Guardian* and *Times Higher Education* (THE), totalling exactly 1,000 words. Edwards' and Cromwell's previous book, *Guardians of Power* (2006), has never been mentioned, let alone reviewed, in any mainstream national UK newspaper. There's nothing surprising about that – dissident media analyses are consistently ignored this way. So Cook's comparison of Davies's mainstream view of the media with an analysis based on Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model of media control" is a rare event

With the internet's rapid growth and an associated flourishing of alternative journalism, the traditional disseminators of information to western audiences – our print and broadcast media – have come under scrutiny as never before. There is a growing sentiment, particularly on the left but also to be found elsewhere, that mainstream journalism is failing us, even if a variety of reasons are proposed for this failure.

One of the more influential recent analyses has been put forward by Nick Davies, a journalist with Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, in his book *Flat Earth News*. Many working journalists, myself included, would agree with his conclusion that the media are ill-equipped to realise their stated goal of truth-telling. His dissection of the causes of this failure – his 10 “rules of production” – should be studied by anyone aspiring to work in the media and any reader interested in inoculating him or herself against many of the media's worst excesses. The rules describe in a very convincing fashion some of the main practical reasons why mainstream reporting ends up distorting or misrepresenting real events. But do his rules of production provide the complete picture of media failure, as Davies claims and most of the book's reviewers have accepted? That is much less certain.

Davies argues that, following the takeover of our major newspapers by large corporations, the media have become concerned solely with profit. In this cut-throat commercial environment, news reporting comes to be treated no differently from car-making. Efficiency on the assembly line of the “news factory”, like that of the car factory, demands constant cuts in staffing and overheads. As a result, claims Davies, overworked journal-



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ists are deprived of the time and resources needed to search for truth.

The consequence, Davies argues, is felt in limitations – which he groups together as “rules of production” – on the ability of journalists in a commercial environment to aspire to truth-telling. The rules, which encourage journalists to play safe by avoiding troublesome or time-consuming stories, include: running non-controversial stories that are unlikely to attract public criticism; relying on official sources and adopting the line of powerful lobbies to avoid the danger of legal challenges; basing stories on consensual assumptions, whatever their validity, to avoid incurring unwelcome scrutiny; artificially balancing stories with a he said-she said approach that strips them of their true significance; trivialising news, pandering to common prejudices and stripping out complexity in the hope of increasing circulation; and promoting unsubstantiated “moral panics” to prevent readers deserting to rivals.

“Journalists who are denied the time to work effectively,” he concludes, “can survive by taking the easy, sexy stories which everybody else is running; reducing them to simplified events; framing them with safe ideas and safe facts; neutralising them with balance; and churning them out fast.” Most journalists want to do good, to change the world, to be Woodward or Bernstein, but the limitations imposed by their working environment rarely make achieving this ideal possible. They sacrifice the needs of journalism for the easy gratification of “churnalism”. Faced with commercial pressures, under-staffed newsrooms and unsympathetic bosses, and under pressure from government officials and the public relations industry, journalists make bad choices.

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There is an obvious problem with Davies' reading of journalistic intentions. He assumes, with what appears to be a mixture of naivety and professional self-delusion, that journalists are basically idealistic individuals whose desire to do good is inadvertently crushed by the corporations who run our media. The free-spirit journalist is cast as Cinderella, labouring unappreciated by her abusive and dominating corporate sisters.

But why should we believe that journalists are motivated primarily by the common good? Are they not like other professionals, a mix of good and bad? Is it not likely that many journalists do not care about truth or doing good but about staying employed, advancing their careers or enriching themselves? (Interestingly, in this regard, Davies ignores the wealth of evidence provided in his fascinating chapter the Propaganda Puzzle that the intelligence services, especially the CIA, have secretly financed media organisations in many foreign countries and infiltrated publications in the US to place journalists whose job it is to spread misinformation).

Reading Davies, one longs for a return to the golden era of an incorruptible and conscientious media. But did such an era ever exist? Strangely, Davies devotes almost no space in his book to examining the history of journalism or to testing his implied hypothesis that journalists were once successful at truth-telling.

This weakness in Davies' argument, however, does not substantially undermine the significance of his chief observation that the media as a whole is failing. Even if journalists are driven by a variety of goals – some good, some bad – the result is still a uniformly poor performance by the corporate media. How do we explain the inability of the good



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journalists to make much of an impression on the media they serve? Again, Davies finds succour in his rules of production. The need of journalists to submit to commercial pressures has ideological consequences, he argues, reflected in the media's adoption of a conservative worldview. The rules of production, he writes, "tend to favour the status quo. All of them, furthermore, are reinforced by the impact of PR which... is primarily a tool for the powerful."

In other words, the problem of journalism, in Davies' view, is one of consistent cock-up.

Conspiracy Theories

Davies rejects other explanations for the failure of journalism, especially what he terms "conspiracy theories" promoted by media outsiders. Corporations may have taken over the media, but Davies is unwilling to concede that their interests have any noticeable influence on the agenda or ideology of our media. The argument that rightwing or corporate bias in our media reflects the influence of either advertisers or proprietors is dismissed as describing a phenomenon of only marginal significance. From his conversations with fellow journalists, Davies relates, he and they ascribe "only 5% or 10% of the problem" to such interference.

Davies argues that in 30 years of working in the media he has never come across an instance of an advertiser influencing an editorial line. "Nor can I find any other journalist who has ever known it to happen. And nor, as far as I know, can the critics who promote the idea." Well, let me offer an example. Al-Jazeera's English-language channel has been unable to secure a proper cable distribution deal in the US, where it might attract a

significant following among disillusioned Americans keen for a different perspective, particularly on the Middle East. All the indications are that this is because Washington and corporate America have jointly made clear that they will not support the channel.

Interestingly, exactly the same problem afflicts Al-Jazeera Arabic, which has never been profitable, and has to be heavily subsidised by the emir of Qatar, even though it is the most popular news channel in the Arab world. Western analysts usually ascribe Al-Jazeera Arabic's problems to the fact that it is an *independent* broadcaster trying to operate in the undemocratic environment of the Middle East. What does this suggest about Al-Jazeera English's problems?

Clearly, any fledgling commercial media organisation – if it did not already understand the commercial imperatives facing a broadcaster in the West – would have been able to draw obvious conclusions from Al-Jazeera English's treatment. In fact, one could plausibly argue that Al-Jazeera is starting to draw the right conclusion itself, toning down its own coverage to ensure it does not sound too much like its more “controversial” Arabic sister channel. And it may yet choose to make further compromises in the hope of gaining entry to the US market.

Similarly, it seems naive on Davies' part to reject outright the idea that the corporate owners of much of the British media, most obviously at the popular and widely read end of the market, create a very strong climate of bias in favour of their own interests.

During a libel case in Britain over the summer it emerged that Richard Desmond, owner of the nationally read *Express* and *Star* newspapers, had once punched a senior editorial executive with



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whom he disagreed in the stomach in full view of the newsroom. Presumably, proprietors rarely need to strong-arm their staff to that extent. On the issue of editorial interference, Desmond told the court: “If I ordered the editors or the reporters to write a feature they would not do it.” Maybe not (though I doubt it), but any career-minded journalist on the *Express*, or other British newspapers, should not need to be told what to write by their proprietor – they already know.

Furthermore, one would not need to be psychic to work out what Desmond is likely to think on a host of political and economic matters. Helpfully, like other proprietors, he regularly gives voice to his opinions. Thus, we know that he thinks that corporation-friendly British prime minister Gordon Brown is using tax to “squeeze the middle classes out of existence”; that “it's not fair” that immigrants come into the country; and that he regards himself as a socialist because he understands socialism to be a political creed that gives poor people the freedom to get filthy rich, as he has done – or, in his words, to achieve “the redistribution of wealth [with] no privilege for the upper classes”. Maybe ensuring his journalists understand his worldview is what he meant when he referred to his role at his papers in the following terms: “The editors are the chefs and I'm the owner saying, ‘Why not just put a cherry on the cake?’”

Is Desmond an aberration? That seems unlikely. Can there really be any doubt that other current and former corporate owners of the British media, from Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell to Conrad Black and the Barclay Brothers, have not had the same kind of controlling influence as Desmond on their staff? If a proprietor like Murdoch needed to

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be courted by a prime minister like Tony Blair in a desperate bid for the tycoon's support, are journalists really likely to be any more principled? Owners like Murdoch, after all, have the power to make or break a journalist's career.

The Propaganda Model

A rival model for explaining media failure is the theory that its much-prized independence is in truth a facade and that in reality it is organically tied to elite interests. Perhaps not surprisingly, Davies reserves particular disdain for this argument, casually dismissing it as one made by those either ignorant of newsroom practices or in thrall to radical leftwing agendas. Noam Chomsky, one of the most trenchant critics of the modern western media, is presumably the chief object of his scorn, though Chomsky's name appears nowhere in Davies' book – an unforgivable omission in a work claiming to offer a no-holds-barred analysis of journalistic failure.

Chomsky himself would probably not be surprised that the dustjacket of Davies' book is adorned with enthusiastic reviews from the great and the good of British journalism. The mostly warm reception of Davies' book by fellow journalists will doubtless not be accorded to the latest book from two of Chomsky's most astute students on media matters, David Edwards and David Cromwell, editors of the British website Media Lens. Their book, *Newspeak in the 21st Century*, published in August by Pluto Press, garnered praise from only one journalist, John Pilger, the leading dissident reporter of our era.

Pilger, it should be noted, is also enthusiastic about Davies' book, and with good reason. Together these works – one by a media insider and the other by



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two media outsiders – should be read as companion analyses, both offering highly critical accounts of journalistic behaviour but from opposing perspectives. An understanding of the media's failure is broadened and deepened by reading them together.

Edwards and Cromwell adopt the “propaganda model” – developed by Edward S Herman and Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent* – to argue that the failure of the media is neither cock-up nor conspiracy, but rather structural and therefore systemic. Like Herman and Chomsky, they claim that media organisations rarely need to intervene directly in journalists' decisions; instead the media “filter” out unwelcome ideas through, in Herman and Chomsky's words, “the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalisation of [elite] priorities and definitions of newsworthiness”.

On this view, the media's goal is not truth-telling, as Davies maintains, but the presentation of a view of the world, often distorted, that promotes the interests of the powerful corporations that have come to dominate our societies. That is the mainstream media's rationale, even if their staff are unaware of it. Journalists do not need consciously to choose to serve corporate power to be useful to its goals. At their website, Edwards and Cromwell invite visitors to help dissect instances of media failure as they occur, often challenging by email the journalists responsible. Reading the journalists' defensive – and invariably baffled – responses is enlightening.

A possible reason why a journalist like Davies appears incapable of considering the arguments for the propaganda model, let alone rebutting it, was explained by Chomsky during an interview in 1996

with another senior British journalist, Andrew Marr, then of the *Independent* newspaper and today of the BBC. Marr and other senior journalists, said Chomsky, had risen to their present positions precisely because their work did not challenge the corporate interests they served. A discomfited Marr maintained that he had never self-censored and that there were lots of “disputatious” people in journalism. Chomsky replied: “If you believed something different, you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.”

To journalists like Davies and Marr, this sounds like conspiratorial nonsense. Surely, for the propaganda model to be true, some group must be policing journalism to ensure that anyone found to be violating the rules is dismissed. How could such a cabal be kept secret from the journalists themselves?

Edwards and Cromwell, however, retort that no conspiracy is needed, no rules have to be imposed. The media’s own lengthy selection processes weed out journalists who do not subscribe to the profession’s core value, which is supporting a world subordinated to corporate power. Dissenting journalists are excluded from positions of influence in our mainstream media – though a token dissident or two, they admit, are usually incorporated into the more liberal publications, usually in their commentary pages, in an attempt to give the impression of diversity and pluralism. A truly dissident corporate journalist is, in their view, as rare as a Trotskyite banker, and for much the same reason.

Edwards and Cromwell offer an interesting analogy. “When a shoal of fish instantly changes direction, it looks for all the world as though the movement was synchronised by some guiding hand. Journalists – all trained and selected for



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obedience by media all seeking to maximise profits within state-capitalist society – tend to respond to events in the same way.”

Conformist Journalism

In a recent alert on their website, Edwards and Cromwell set out what they see as the problem of professional journalism. Western journalists “do consistently promote the same propaganda obscuring the same crimes in defence of the same vested interests. Most journalists manage to misperceive the world in an identical, system-supportive, career-furthering way.”

Davies’ book offers a wealth of factual information about the media that appears to back such a conclusion, even if he himself is unable to reach it. Edwards and Cromwell have no such inhibitions. The pair would doubtless agree with Davies that his rules of production provide serious practical limitations on a journalist’s ability to accurately and fairly cover news. But to these 10 rules, they would add an eleventh, more important one that subsumes the other 10:

“The corporate media system, while masquerading as an honest, *independent* source of unbiased news and views, has in fact evolved to protect the powerful corporate and political interests of which it is a part. The corporate media is not owned by big business, as is often claimed – it is big business. It does not watch over concentrated power – it is power. The media system does not fail in its task of guarding the people against power – it *succeeds* in its task of protecting power at the expense of people and planet.”

Power is protected domestically, they argue, by a media whose role is “brain-washing under freedom”. Journalists are

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there to reassure us that we live in a morally superior universe. Western leaders “are presented as sober, dignified and rational – serious people who have ascended (with a little divine inspiration, and perhaps even intervention) to the summit of a meritocratic and benevolent social order”. By contrast, journalists invariably portray foreign leaders who challenge the interests of Western power as enemies, “both foolish and menacing”.

Journalists manage to serve power without being aware of their complicity, argue the pair, because they are “able to perceive only that which allows them to thrive as successful components of the corporate system”. Edwards and Cromwell point to the extensive psychological literature on self-deception and “group-think”. They quote psychologist Daniel Goleman: “when one can’t do anything to change the situation, the other recourse is to change how one perceives it.” In other words, there is nothing self-conscious or cynical in the way journalists promote power; they believe what they write, even when it is easily refuted or obviously distorts reality.

Davies and others, however, point to the BBC and the *Guardian* as proof that the corporations do not control all our media. After all, they note, both the BBC and the *Guardian* are run by trusts while the BBC is funded by a licence fee levied on the British public. That is a red herring, Edwards and Cromwell counter. The BBC is organically tied to powerful elites through its government-controlled funding and its oversight by directors and a trust comprising individuals drawn from corporate Britain. Likewise, the *Guardian*’s Scott Trust is dominated by business leaders, while the newspaper itself, like all the Guardian Media Group’s publications, is heavily dependent on ad-



Alan Rusbridger, editor of the *Guardian*, twists and turns as he concedes in an interview with Edwards the obvious reality that newspapers are susceptible to the pressures of advertising and owners but still balks at the inevitable conclusion that the media cannot therefore be truly independent, let alone the watchdogs of power they profess to be

vertising.

In a revealing chapter on manifestations of journalistic self-deception, Edwards and Cromwell highlight the implacable refusal by corporate journalists to accept that the media’s absolute dependence on proprietors and the advertising industry influences its agenda. In particular, Alan Rusbridger, editor of the *Guardian*, twists and turns as he concedes in an interview with Edwards the obvious reality that newspapers are susceptible to the pressures of advertising and owners but still balks at the inevitable conclusion that the media cannot therefore be truly independent, let alone the watchdogs of power they profess to be.

A Dissection Of Media Failure

Rather than taking on easy examples of media failure, such as coverage of the millennium bug that supposedly threatened the world’s computers or stories about the royals, as Davies tends to do, Edwards and Cromwell tackle some of the most important issues of our time. The pair take an especial interest – as they did in their earlier book, *Guardians of Power* – in the coverage of two long-running major news stories: Iraq and climate change.

Regarding Iraq, the pair concentrate on British and American journalists’ consistent refusal to make reference to the most probable death toll of Iraqis as a result of the 2003 invasion of their country by the US and UK. The significance of this topic is that a high death toll would undermine both the moral case made for the war against Iraq and the media’s assumption that western forces are waging the “cleanest” fight possible in difficult circumstances. Much of the legitimacy of the war, at least for supporters who claimed it would end a savage tyranny

and bring western-style democracy to Iraq, therefore hangs on the question of the numbers killed in Iraq.

The most credible academic study of the deaths caused by the invasion – published by the world’s leading medical journal the *Lancet* and already three years out of date – put the most likely total at 655,000. Instead journalists uniformly rely on the very limited assessment made by a group known as Iraq Body Count that tots up Iraqi deaths reported by the western media and a few reliable local sources. Their figure has been much lower, at about a tenth of the academic study’s.

Even using Davies’ 10 rules of production, it is difficult to account for this consistent failure by journalists. The well-publicised carnage in Iraq makes a very high figure credible, even commonsensical; a respectable study offers insurance against criticism, ridicule or legal action; the unpopularity of the war (particularly among many liberals) means few readers of newspapers like the *Guardian* and *Independent* would object; and there has been plenty of time for journalists to familiarise themselves with this aspect of the Iraq story. One of Davies’ rules – that of balance – should at the very least encourage journalists to mention this figure at the same time as they cite the Iraq Body Count’s numbers.

In addition, most journalists’ professional training should enable them to understand that in an anarchic and war-torn country like Iraq there is little hope that most deaths are being reliably recorded by the media. To most correspondents trapped in the relative comfort of the Green Zone, it must be obvious that the Iraq Body Count’s figures are only a fraction of the real death toll. Edwards and Cromwell quote James Forsyth, on-



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line editor for two magazines, the *Business* and *Spectator*, making just this point: “Iraq is the most difficult conflict in any of our lifetimes to report... Much normal reporting is simply impossible.”

So why do journalists still turn, just like the White House and Downing Street, to the Iraq Body Count for their death toll figure? For Edwards and Cromwell the answer is to be found in a corporate interest in promoting the legitimacy of the war and its aftermath. Big business has much at stake in continuing to be allowed to pillage a war-torn Iraq, exploiting its oil resources and creating new markets vulnerable to western penetration. In addition, corporate capitalism needs to create a facade of western moral sensitivity in the treatment of Iraq to prop up the assumption in media coverage that our governments have only the interests of the Iraqi people at heart.

Assessing the media’s coverage of another topic, climate change, is possibly the most significant gauge of the strength of Edwards and Cromwell’s argument. According to the proponents of a truly free press, even one hampered by the limitations enumerated by Davies, our media should revel in the chance to report on a simmering threat that may in the not-too-distant future wipe out the human species – climate change is the ultimate moral panic. But for critics of this theory such as Edwards and Cromwell, climate change is more likely to create the ultimate clash of interests for a media that, on the one hand, is faced with the irrefutable science of imminent catastrophe for which evasive action needs to be taken and which, on the other, depends for its own survival on the need to generate the very consumption destroying the planet.

If Edwards and Cromwell are right, we ought to see a great deal of equivo-

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cation and evasiveness from the media on climate change. In fact, on the basis of their argument, we ought to see the media dealing with climate change very similarly to the corporations: that is, by acknowledging the threat of climate change but at the same time adopting a variety of strategies to downplay its significance so that we, the customer, continue to consume as eagerly as ever.

Which theory fits the reality of the media's coverage of climate change?

Edwards and Cromwell's contention is: "The mainstream media do report the latest scientific findings on climate change ... [but] the content of these reports and related commentary comes with gaping holes. The material surrounding them also serves to powerfully dissipate their impact." The pair look at the role of the *Independent* newspaper, widely regarded as the champion of environmental issues in the British media. They examine, for example, its coverage on the day it published probably the boldest frontpage on climate change ever adopted by a British newspaper. The banner headline of December 3 2005 read "Climate Change: Time for Action" and listed the likely scenarios facing humanity: "killer storms, rampant disease, rising sea levels, devastated wildlife, water shortages, agricultural turmoil".

Deserved as these scare tactics were, Edwards and Cromwell point out that the coverage was framed by dozens of pages of "relentless propaganda promoting mass consumption", including adverts for Vauxhall cars; PC World's X-Box game consoles; "1p flights" from flymonarch.com; Dior Christal watches; British Airways London-Malaga return flights for £59; Canon offers on cameras, camcorders and printers; Citroen cars; and so on.

Statistics show that the *Independent*,



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like other newspapers, survives economically only because of the many millions of pounds of revenue it receives each year from advertisers promoting luxury products. That may explain why the only practical advice the paper offered its readers to avert the doomsday predicted on the front-page was "10 things you can do at home", including turning off electrical appliances not in use. Similarly, an editorial warned that individuals should take responsibility by cycling or walking rather than driving. "A failure to act now," it concluded, "will not be forgiven by future generations".

Even in the best-case example – the *Independent* of December 3 2005 – argue Edwards and Cromwell, a whole set of vital issues concerning climate change were simply incapable of being discussed, such as: the legal obligation on corporations to prioritise profit over human welfare and the environment; the goal of advertising to generate artificial needs and thereby promote unsustainable consumption; the collusion between corporations and western governments in installing compliant dictators in client states to exploit their resources; and the use of loans and tied aid to trap poor countries in debt so that the West can control their markets and development.

In 2006, on a rare occasion when precisely these types of concerns were raised by the Commons all-party climate change group, their proposals for "turning established principles of British economic life upside down" were aired seriously only in an *Independent* news report. A commentary by the London *Times* ridiculed the parliamentary group as a "cream-puff army", while the rest of the British media averted their gaze. Revealingly, none of the media used the group's findings as an opportunity to explore or investigate

these issues further.

Edwards and Cromwell conclude that, despite the media's stated concern that readers would be bored by endless discussion of the detailed reasons for climate change, "the same journalists go on repeating the same empty blather about 'the need for all of us to act now'." The media's message is that "something must be done", but the argument never progresses beyond admonitions to cycle and recycle more, and turn off electrical appliances. "Journalists and editors, and perhaps much of the public," they say, "fail to notice that the discussion on climate change has somehow managed to stay on 'square one' for the past 20 or 30 years. Our point is that the media are structurally *obliged* to remain on square one. After all what can a corporate business like the *Independent* possibly say about the impact of corporate advertising of mass consumption on environmental collapse, on the stifling of change?"

In both these cases, Davies' theory is put severely to the test. He argues that most journalists want to search for truth but are usually constrained by practical pressures resulting from the commercial environment in which they work. This, possibly, might explain why the majority of journalists – especially those working for the most commercial outfits, such as the tabloids – fail to cover stories like climate change or the Iraq death toll in a convincing way. But it can hardly explain why almost all journalists, even on the most serious newspapers, fail in this task. Surely, according to Davies' reasoning, there ought to be exceptional journalists, especially specialists and those with tenure in the liberal papers, who consistently get it right. How can it be that the *Guardian* and *Independent's* Middle East correspondents cite the unlikely Iraq



Many modern journalists try to insinuate that the strangely consensual worldview of our media reflects the fact that it is now a professional media. The professional journalist, they suggest, is trained to seek out facts from which he or she constructs an "objective" news report

Body Count figures as regularly as the hacks of the tabloid Daily Mail?

News As A Science

To Davies' credit, he does not fall back on the conventional defence for journalistic conformity, one that might account for the media's failures even in cases like the Iraq death toll and climate change. Many modern journalists try to insinuate that the strangely consensual worldview of our media reflects the fact that it is now a professional media. The professional journalist, they suggest, is trained to seek out facts from which he or she constructs an "objective" news report. On this view, journalists select facts in the same way that, adopting an analogy used by Edwards and Cromwell, a geologist collects rocks for research. "Geologists have no emotional attachment to their rocks – journalists should be similarly disinterested." This view of journalism has become increasingly prevalent both inside and outside the trade.

Rightly, however, Davies joins Edwards and Cromwell in dismissing the idea of journalistic objectivity as nonsense. He points out the obvious truth that all reporting involves selection – of the subject matter of a report, of the tone in which it is narrated, of the values that inform the reporter's research, as well as of the facts included, the people interviewed, and the quotes used. The process of selection is governed not by objective criteria but by the assumptions a journalist or his news organisation brings to a story. Davies usefully illustrates this point with several examples of consensual wisdom from other periods of history, including sympathetic reports from mainstream US newspapers about Ku Klux Klan activities in the pre-civil rights era.

But if journalism is not about objec-

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tivity, but rather about adopting a viewpoint, then newspapers ought to be a cacophony of competing and conflicting views. Davies tries to explain the stultifying atmosphere of consensus with his 10 rules of production. He is helped by the fact that he has so many different rules that it is easy to find at least one that covers every example of mis-reporting he unearths. But how plausible is it that these rules are solely responsible for distorting media coverage?

His argument might be more persuasive if journalistic failure occurred primarily in the case of breaking news and fast-moving events. That is when journalists are most vulnerable to a whole range of pressures: from the reliance on official sources and the fear of making costly mistakes, to the danger of not being first with the news. But Davies appears to want his rules of production to serve as a tool for explaining long-term reporting failures too, such as the Iraq death toll or climate change, even though, as we have seen, they appear inadequate to the task.

Even more significantly for Davies' theory, it is difficult to see how the rules of production can account for the fact that a whole array of opinions are largely excluded in the commentary of our "quality" media. Reporters hunting in packs for royal scandals are one thing, but why are the same kinds of group-think evident in the comment pages of the broadsheets, even of the so-called liberal papers? Although a broad range of opinions can be entertained in our most liberal media, there are nonetheless many reasonable, persuasive and sometimes plain commonsensical views that is all but impossible to get published anywhere in the mainstream.

Why have there been no op-eds ar-



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guing, for example, that Tony Blair and George Bush are war criminals, no different from Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic, who need to stand trial at the Hague? And why does that very suggestion make me automatically sound like a "radical leftist", as Davies would dismiss those he disagrees with, or as a Trot, crackpot or loony as the talkbackers who dominate the websites of liberal media like the *Guardian* describe those espousing progressive opinions.

Is Comment Really Free?

One of the problems for dissident journalists that very effectively excludes them from expressing an opinion of this sort in the corporate media is what might be termed a manufactured "climate of assumptions". This climate of assumptions is shared by all western media whatever their ostensible political orientations. Thus, the *Guardian*, like the rightwing *Telegraph* or *Mail*, holds that western governments are led by those who have the best interests at heart not only of their own people, but of other peoples around the globe and even of the planet itself. In Iraq, Tony Blair and George Bush made mistakes – they thought there were WMD when there were not; they misread the intelligence; they misunderstood international law – but they did not act in bad faith or actively pursue goals that they knew to be illegal, immoral or damaging to the delicate fabric of global relations. They are not war criminals, even when all the evidence shows that this is precisely what they are.

Edwards and Cromwell make a useful point about the media's vital role in reinforcing a set of assumptions that "our" leaders are morally superior to "their" leaders. "Controlling what we think is not solely a matter of controlling what we

know – it is also about influencing who we respect and who we find ridiculous. Western leaders are typically reported without adjectives preceding their names ... The leader of Venezuela, by contrast, is ‘controversial left-wing president Hugo Chavez’.”

In practice, this means that, although the British liberal media have run commentary hugely critical of the Iraq war and of Blair, the criticism is almost entirely restricted to the government’s handling of the details of the war rather than questioning the war’s goals or the motives of those who led it. Jonathan Steele has been one of the war’s harshest opponents in the *Guardian* but has always maintained that Blair and Bush, and their neocon advisers, wanted to bring democracy to the Middle East. They were badly advised and unrealistic in adopting that position, says Steele, but they were never less than idealistic. They may have used immoral means (doctored intelligence and so on) but they never pursued immoral ends. Or as Edwards and Cromwell argue, “balance” in the commentary pages “tends to involve presenting a ‘spectrum’ of views ranging from those heavily supportive of state policy to those mildly critical”.

I have experienced this climate of assumptions myself when trying to write op-eds about my specialist interest, Israel and the Middle East. There are many rational positions that cannot be adopted on the regional conflict in either the British or American media. It is impossible, for example, to question the media consensus that Israeli concerns about Iran’s nuclear ambitions (assumed, of course, to be military ambitions) are rooted in a justified fear that Tehran wants Israel’s destruction. The far more likely explanation for Israel’s panic – that it might lose



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its regional monopoly on nuclear weapons, and consequently its dominant and exclusive military alliance with the US – is considered unsuitable for discussion.

Nor is it possible to cover the vigorous debate in Israeli academia on whether Israel can be classed as a democracy when it is a self-declared ethnic state. Equally, there is no hope of being allowed to argue that all the evidence suggests that all Israeli leaders have been in bad faith in the so-called peace process, not just Benjamin Netanyahu, and none has wanted to reach an agreement on a viable Palestinian state.

Also, for most of the time since the occupation began in 1967 it has been forbidden to suggest that Israel operates a system of apartheid in the occupied territories (let alone inside Israel). Thankfully, there are the first signs that this traditional taboo has been dented by publication of Jimmy Carter’s recent book ‘Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid.’

The climate of assumptions is essential in ensuring that there is no danger of a free marketplace in ideas – a cacophony of opinions – in our liberal media. Strikingly, there are a whole host of progressive voices – some of them the greatest thinkers of our age – who simply cannot get into print. Where are the op-eds by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, for example?

Similarly, there are other voices – people eminently qualified to speak on topical issues at the time when they most need to be heard – who are denied space, too. Where, for example, was Scott Ritter, the former UN weapons inspector in Iraq, during the build-up to the Iraq war? At that time, his opinion ought to have been one of the most sought-after for the global media. Not only was he not contacted by reporters when compiling their

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news stories, but he was relegated to writing commentaries on obscure websites. How do Davies' rules of production explain the failure by "truth-seeking" journalists in our liberal media to invite an indisputable expert to comment on Saddam Hussein's arsenal in the build-up to war?

Edwards and Cromwell, at least, do provide an answer: "an opinion barely exists if it doesn't matter, and it doesn't matter if it is not voiced by people who matter. The full range of opinion, then, represents the full range of power." In other words, Ritter's voice was excluded because his outspoken views on the lack of WMD in Iraq challenged the US and UK's case for war. Similarly, influential intellectuals and public figures in the West who speak out in dissident ways are rapidly neutralised by being mocked by the media for their political views, which supposedly reflect a flaw in their character. Edwards and Cromwell highlight the campaigns of ridicule heaped on figures such as John Le Carre, Chomsky and Harold Pinter: "if even high-profile dissidents can be presented as wretched, sickly fools, then which reader or viewer would want to be associated with them?"

That thinkers like Chomsky and Zinn are rarely given a platform in the corporate media is often ascribed to the fact that their ideas either sound like conspiracy theories, as Davies suggests, or are difficult for ordinary readers to grasp. This is a self-serving argument, and another way of describing the power of the climate of assumptions. This climate is manufactured by our media through its consensual presentation of a certain view of the world. If western governments are always shown to be pursuing laudatory, if occasionally erroneous, goals, then critics of western power who challenge that



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assumption sound like conspiracy theorists, or – in the language of the talkbackers – like "loonies".

Mainstream Dissidents

If Davies ignores the fact that there are many critical thinkers excluded from our media, he still has one trump card up his sleeve. How do those who support the propaganda model explain the existence of dissident writers in the British liberal media? If Chomsky's theory is right, how is it that Seumas Milne and George Monbiot write for the *Guardian*, Robert Fisk does so in the *Independent*, and John Pilger has a platform in the small magazine the *New Statesman*?

It should be noted that this list is almost exhaustive. Genuine progressive writers are extremely thin on the ground, even in the liberal media. (Rightly, I suspect, Fisk would not want to be included alongside these other progressives. His key concern, justice for the peoples of the Middle East, is not unrelated to fairly traditional liberal Arabist positions long adopted by officials in the Foreign Office, though ignored by other branches of the British establishment. He is certainly on the extreme margins of this group, but closer to them than he is to Pilger or Milne.) In fact, the inclusion of a few progressive thinkers in the liberal media, it can be argued, actually serves its corporate interests. Using the propaganda model, it is possible, I would suggest, to identify several goals newspapers like the *Guardian* and *Independent* achieve by including occasional dissident voices.

First, they gain extra circulation by attracting a small but still significant readership of progressives. In doing so, they also diminish the danger that these readers might search elsewhere for more consistently progressive news and com-

mentary. A trend that, if realised, might eventually lead to the emergence of more prestigious radical internet publications, or to the development of different kinds of new media that could challenge the power of the corporate media. A fringe benefit, at least for the corporate interests behind our media, is that progressive readers who are persuaded to buy liberal newspapers because they include a Monbiot or a Milne are likely over time to have their views tempered simply from being constantly bombarded with the non-progressive news and views contained in the rest of the paper.

Second, the existence of dissident writers in the liberal media usefully persuades its core readership that their newspaper of choice is genuinely liberal and tolerant, and that it offers a platform even to those who subscribe to heterodox opinions. It reassures the bulk of readers that the newspaper is upholding the values it espouses. Importantly for the liberal readership it offers what might be termed the “smugness factor”: I do not agree with you, but I’ll defend to the death your right to be wrong.

And third, the inclusion of a few progressive voices – and the extra readers they buy the paper – actually comes at very little cost to the corporate interests the media represent. The arguments adopted by dissident writers challenging the goals of western power sound so alien to readers daily tutored in the manufactured climate of assumptions that they are hard to stomach for most readers. The very “strangeness” of such views simply highlights the extent to which they have been excluded in the first place. Because Monbiot or Milne’s columns appear in an ideological vacuum, because they remain isolated dissidents surrounded by more conventional opinions, their arguments



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appear to most readers as extremist, driven by conspiracy theories, or crackpot, and are therefore easily dismissed.

The boundaries of legitimate discourse are set by the acres of conventional commentary; by stepping outside those boundaries, dissidents sound no more reasonable than their opponents on the far-right. The “sensible centre” precludes Monbiot and Milne just as easily as it does the British National Party and David Duke. By being pitted against the climate of assumptions, progressive dissidents are forced into a battle they are likely to lose from the outset.

With that said, it should be noted that this situation is far from static. The corporate media in the West is facing a crisis both of financial viability and of legitimacy that could yet destroy it. As readers look to other media for their information, such as the internet, Monbiot and Milne sound increasingly credible to a growing number of readers. That sets up a demand for more such writers that it will be hard for the liberal papers to ignore if they are to survive. The media have so far held shut the floodgates but it is not given that they will continue to do so. Dissident writers in the liberal media may in the end play a significant role in destroying such media from within.

Watchdog Or Lapdog?

Because Davies simply dismisses the assumptions of the propaganda model, he makes no serious attempt to defend his own theory against it. Which requires me – presumptuously – to try to make the case on his behalf against those I shall refer simplistically to as the “Chomskians”, or supporters like Edwards and Cromwell of the propaganda model, in an effort to test the value of their respective arguments.

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Davies could try to defend his theory by pointing to the media's track record of exposing establishment malpractice. He could highlight, for example, the media's extensive coverage in recent months of the expenses scandal involving Britain's elected representatives. He could likewise point to revelations by his own newspaper, the *Guardian*, over the summer that Rupert Murdoch's tabloid paper the *News of the World* illegally hacked into hundreds of private phones to dig up dirt on MPs, cabinet ministers, royals, actors and sports stars, and then covered its tracks by paying at least £1 million to those victims who threatened to expose its crime spree. Does this not prove Davies' contention that the bottom line for the corporate media is guaranteeing profits rather than supporting the powerful? Scandal sells papers, and the powerful are often the victims of such exposes.

But for a Chomskian these examples fall far short of making Davies' case. It is interesting that the revelations about the British MPs emerged in the immediate wake of a far more important scandal involving the banks' extortion of western governments to save themselves from liquidation, and the later feathering of their own nests from public finances. Whether it was the goal or not, the trickle of reports of parliamentary graft over several months very effectively distracted attention in Britain both from the banks' shocking behaviour and forestalled a tentative debate about the profound crisis facing corporate capitalism.

In addition, a Chomskian might suspect that the timing of the attack on our elected representatives, using information leaked to the establishment's favourite newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, had a beneficial consequence for the embattled finance sector. With their own integrity



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in question, British MPs and ministers lost the moral high ground and with it any hope, admittedly already feeble, of turning on the bankers. With the parliamentary system in crisis, the banking system faced little threat of significant reform, which would have required an unprecedented assertion of political will.

Even efforts to make the banks more accountable lost momentum during this period. In fact, while our elected representatives were being flayed by the media, the bankers quietly went back to business as normal. By personalising the issue of graft and directing popular anger at a few individuals – at first, the most visible bankers and then many MPs – the economic system itself was given a reprieve from a serious debate about its merits and failings.

Another possible line of defence by Davies might concern the media's relentless pursuit of embarrassing stories involving wealthy celebrities, including the *Guardian's* revelations that the *News of the World* hacked into private data concerning football managers, actors, politicians and models. The Murdoch paper even targeted members of the wealthiest family in Britain, the royals. How does the hounding of the royal family, for example, square with Edwards and Cromwell's theory that the media serve power? The royals, after all, are powerful – in fact, they are the heart of the establishment.

But again, Davies' theory looks weaker once this incident is examined. For the British media, the royals are chiefly celebrities. In a post-monarchy society, nothing is left of their role apart from providing spectacle. Without it, one might wonder how long the House of Windsor would survive. For Chomskians, the media's endless cat-and-mouse games with

wealthy individuals already in the public eye – whether actors, politicians or royalty – are part of the distraction from far more important issues that, if properly covered by the media, might bring into question the moral basis of our political and economic systems. The press’ persecution of the royals gives the misleading, but useful, impression of an independent media that refuses to be cowed even in the face of great wealth.

In fact, it could be argued that the obsession with royal-baiting substantially weakens Davies’ case. His rules of production, with their presumption of the media’s dependence on official sources and of its fear of angering the rich, who might retaliate with costly legal action, should make the royals untouchable. But the opposite is true. Is that because Davies fails to distinguish between types of power in a corporate society, as well as types of scandal? And, if so, is this failure not a sign of his and the media’s own inability to unmask the real centres of power? These are questions we will return to shortly.

There is another aspect of the *News of the World*’s data-hacking that is worth highlighting. The police, it seems, had been aware of the Murdoch paper’s illegal activities when the incidents occurred several years earlier. To prevent legal action, Murdoch had paid off the victims. As the new revelations mounted, it became clear that the police had failed to investigate these incidents properly at the time they first emerged apart from in the case of a single reporter, and that the prosecution service and courts had been happy to ignore the affair, too.

As the *Guardian* dug deeper, the police continued actively colluding with the Murdoch tabloid in an attempt to avert the threat of the investigation’s scope be-



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ing expanded. Why were the police high command so keen to distract attention from the full implications of the *News of the World*’s systematic law-breaking, seemingly approved by its senior management? By misleadingly suggesting that this was a misdemeanour committed by one rogue reporter – again, by personalising the story – the police assisted the law-breaking paper.

For a Chomskian, the cover provided by the police to the news organisation might look suspiciously like one part of the system of corporate power – the rule of law, embodied by the police – demonstrating its inherent sympathy with another part of the same system – the manipulators of popular perception, the media. Interestingly, Davies’ book is replete with examples of the police and courts protecting the media from the legal consequences of their transgressions, though he draws no conclusions from this.

One aspect of the story, the *Guardian*’s tenacious investigation, appears more difficult to explain. Should the paper not have sided with its corporate sister and kept quiet? Nonetheless, the *Guardian*’s determination can be explained too. The broadsheet has its own commercial imperatives, including its interest in discrediting a more powerful media rival. But more significantly, at least for a Chomskian, the investigation not only failed to threaten the corporate system to which the *Guardian* belongs, it actually reinforced the system’s credibility. The *Guardian*’s self-declared liberal values were entirely consistent with an attack on law-breaking by journalists at the *News of the World*. For the *Guardian*’s journalists and readers, the paper’s investigation was proof of the veracity of its – and the wider media’s – claims to being accountable as well as independent. The

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role of the media as enablers of corporate power was never threatened by the investigation.

For a Chomskian, the episode illustrates the fact that, while corporate journalists can debate some values, such as what constitutes immoral or illegal behaviour, all still believe without question in the moral superiority of the corporate society to which they belong. For the *Guardian's* journalists, its revelations concerned a story of failure by individuals. The story certainly did not raise questions about the media's relationship to corporate power.

Interestingly, when the *Guardian's* editor, Alan Rusbridger, was summoned before a Commons committee to explain his paper's investigation – paradoxically, alongside Nick Davies – he was at pains to highlight his opposition, not only to increased regulation of the media, but also to the law's enforcement against the *News of the World's* senior editors. Questioned about the *Guardian's* motives in pursuing the story, he told MPs: “It wasn't a campaign to reopen the police inquiry, or to call for prosecutions or to force anybody to resign. We have not called for any of those.”

In other words, a Chomskian would argue, this was an example of grand corporate hypocrisy. Rusbridger supported the investigation in so far as it both helped boost the newspaper's circulation and revenues and reinforced the credibility of the corporate media of which his paper is a major component. But he opposed the legal consequences of the investigation in so far as it threatened that same system with greater scrutiny, regulation and safeguards. It is interesting to note that all British newspapers favour without question the continuing self-regulation of the media even when, as is the case



The pro-Israel lobby, he writes, is “the most potent electric fence in the world”, its mission to crush all critical debate of Israel. Interestingly for such a controversial – and, for most non-journalists at least, counter-intuitive – remark, Davies makes no effort to explain why

with the *Guardian*, they admit that such self-regulation has woefully failed.

The Electric Fence

The most revealing of Davies' rules of production is number 3, which concerns what he calls an “electric fence” sealing off certain topics from debate. Davies highlights one issue – Israel – above all others as being taboo for the western media. The pro-Israel lobby, he writes, is “the most potent electric fence in the world”, its mission to crush all critical debate of Israel. Interestingly for such a controversial – and, for most non-journalists at least, counter-intuitive – remark, Davies makes no effort to explain why. His confidence that his conclusion is self-explanatory is misplaced. As a journalist who has spent many years reporting from Israel, and suffered more than most at the hands of its lobby, I want such a statement justified.

What is it, does he think, that makes the Israel lobby so powerful and able to exert such absolute control over its favoured cause? How is this lobby capable of exercising so much influence when the size of Britain's Jewish population is so small and Israel's significance to the UK relatively marginal? And if the pro-Israel lobby can shape British (and western) media coverage so decisively, why does Davies not presume that other more obviously important lobbies – particularly the banking and finance lobby, and the military industries lobby – are able to exert at least as much, if not more, influence?

Is it not possible that the reason Davies can identify the phenomenal power of the pro-Israel lobby is precisely because it has to work so hard and openly to get its way? Could it be that this lobby's very dependence on the other pow-

erful lobbies mentioned above makes its influence so visible? Journalists “feel” the weight of the Israel lobby precisely because it has to resort to intimidating the media to stop coverage of its otherwise only too obvious activities.

Conversely, could it not be argued that the ability of the finance and military industries lobbies to cover their tracks more effectively than the Israel lobby is a sign of their greater power?

Unlike the Israel lobby that imposes its will on behalf of a cause few people share, these other lobbies have created a presumption – through the media – in favour of their cause that almost no one questions. We may now despise the bankers for their behaviour, but who wants to see the end of the current banking system, or of our savings and pensions? We may oppose wars, but who wants tens of thousands of workers laid off from the industries that depend on western military adventures? We may worry about climate change caused by the extravagant needs created for us by corporations, but who wants to see a reversal of growth in our economies, let alone their collapse? We may worry about the evidence of global warming, and fret for the polar bears, but who wants to eschew air travel or to live without a car?

And here lies the crux of the problem with Davies’ theory. In promoting a view of journalistic failure that can be explained only by laziness, cost-cutting and public relations pressures he grapples with the visible but marginal problems of our media. The much larger structural issues – the media’s selection processes, its ideological strait-jacket, its profound connectedness to the interests of a corporate capitalist society – are invisible to him. Our media cannot engage in a debate about the merits of the current



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orthodoxy – that corporate capitalism represents the summit of human material and moral achievement – precisely because its very rationale depends on the maintenance of that orthodoxy.

Conclusion

There is much that Davies’ and Edwards and Cromwell’s books share: both view the media as essentially a corporate media; both dismiss the idea of objective journalism as a nonsense and agree that journalists must, and do, take sides; and both regard the media’s reporting as an unreliable guide to what is really happening in the world. But on the issue of the causes of this wholesale failure, a gulf separates them.

One day we may not need newspapers – certainly we may not need ones tied to corporate interests that depend on advertising and our ever-greater reliance on air flights and luxury cars that are destroying the planet. In an era of profound economic and ideological crisis, our media’s inability properly to address these problems makes Davies’ book begin to look like an excessively indulgent excuse for this failure. Edwards and Cromwell’s book, by contrast, seems to have much greater power to explain the strangely consistent blind-spots from which our media suffer.

I was once a journalist of the Davies’ school, believing that our media enjoyed an inalienable freedom both to get it right and, as often, to get it wrong. The disturbing conclusions reached by Edwards and Cromwell are easier for me to accept today in part because I have spent so long in Israel, an overtly ideological and ruthlessly colonial society whose leaders have so transparently co-opted their own media. Israeli journalists, even of the most liberal variety, have been recruited to

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the task of mobilising local Jewish public opinion in the pursuit of racial goals, such as maintaining Israel's ethnic purity, that are shocking to an outsider but go unquestioned by the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews. Israeli journalists are as blind to the idea that they are manufacturing consent for an aggressive ethnic state as journalists like Davies are to the idea that their role is to prop up a

political and economic system that benefits corporate power.

It is precisely Davies' intimate familiarity with the British media that makes him a fascinating but ultimately unreliable companion as he surveys the media's role. In this case, outsiders like Edwards and Cromwell prove the more useful guides.

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