
Book Review

David Edwards and David Cromwell – Media Lens *Newspeak in the 21st Century*
Pluto Press, London, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-7453-2893-5.

Lawrie Hallett

Communication and Media Research Institute
University of Westminster

To start with an analogy, for many, reading this book will be like the experience of eating Marmite! The way in which the subject matter is dealt with will be loved by some and hated by others, according to personal taste, politics and ideology. Although dealing with contentious issues of recent history, this book immediately reminded me of some of the early publications from the Glasgow University Media Group, such as 'Bad News', which I first read when completing a radio journalism course back in the 1980s. That said, the book is none the worse for pursuing similar angles to those earlier titles, and for many students, at undergraduate level in particular, the modern context will certainly make some of the issues involved a little more accessible.

As an organisation, Media Lens has been examining and challenging the news coverage of the press and broadcasters since 2001. The organisation's web-site (<http://www.medialens.org/>) describes its role as “*correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media*” a strap line which encompasses clearly the premise upon which the organisation is based. In 'Newspeak' the authors write in an accessible style about a range of issues, amongst others including BBC balance (which they describe as “*The Magnificent Fiction*”) and the climate change debate, as well as coverage of stories from Iran and the Israel Palestine conflict. In their opening acknowledgements, the authors credit the involvement of numerous friends and colleagues, including very well known names such as John Pilger, and Noam Chomsky. Given the wider focus of this WPCC issue, I have chosen to use some of the various contributions included from Chomsky as part of this review.

The twin issues of balance and bias are central to this book and from the outset, the authors highlight the inherent difficulty of achieving so called 'balanced' reporting:

Facts are not sacred, pristine, untouchable – they are gathered by human beings guided by mundane, earthy, often compromised beliefs and motives. To choose 'this' fact over 'that' fact is already to express an opinion. To highlight 'this' fact over 'that' fact is to comment. (p. 3-4).

Beyond this intrinsic difficulty, a further and more contentious premise of this book is the suggestion that balance is further eroded by deliberate and organised bias. In essence, does the news media operate on the basis of conspiracy or 'cock-up'?

In the opening chapter of the book, *"Solving the Propaganda Puzzle"* the authors quote an interview discussion between Chomsky and Andrew Marr, back in 1996, in which Chomsky attempts to explain his theory that a filtering system exists which ensures that, for the most part, it is largely those that are comfortable with the status quo that comprise the bulk of mainstream journalists. As Chomsky suggests of Marr, "if you believed something different you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting" (p. 9). The authors use Chomsky's view as a starting point for discussions about what happens to those that do try to express something different, suggesting that stepping too far out of line can have serious detrimental impacts on individual careers.

Being a reader with a background in broadcasting, the chapters of the book which deal with the BBC ('BBC Balance – The Magnificent Fiction', and 'An A to Z of BBC Propaganda') were of particular interest. Although the first of these two chapters was essentially a re-run of long standing arguments over the degree of independence that the corporation achieves, once again the debate was carefully tied into recent events such as the Iraq war. The underlying claim of the authors is that the BBC fails to provide coverage of dissenting opinion, for example in relation to coverage of a presidential visit to Israel they suggest that:

The BBC could have approached commentators ... for a dissenting challenge to Bush's claim, but that is unthinkable – it is simply understood that Western leaders are to be portrayed as men and women of peace. If the BBC had provided a contrary view, it would have been interpreted as a sign that the BBC was 'anti-American'. To be balanced is 'biased' – propaganda is 'neutral'. (p. 22).

The second chapter about the BBC works its way through an A to Z of various issues, each challenging the actions of the BBC or particular employees of the corporation. One of the problems I have with this approach is that it can come across as focusing on the individual rather more than the particular issue at hand.

Moving away from broadcasting, there are various points in this book where Chomsky takes centre stage. One particular example in the chapter '*Brilliant Fools*' is presented under the heading "Where Egos Dare: The Guardian Smears Chomsky". An interview with Noam Chomsky¹ is described by the authors as being "a carefully constructed smear" (p. 223). Over the following pages, the authors dissect the interview, setting out their analysis of its errors and providing a detailed summary of how the story developed thereafter. There is no space to examine the specific details here, but suffice to say it is a complex analysis which covers a considerable amount of ground and makes a wide range of points and criticisms. The authors include reference to the Guardian's 'Corrections and Clarifications' section, which, under the heading "The Guardian and Noam Chomsky"², retracted various elements of the original interview. Here again, the readers view of the underlying objective of the original Guardian interview will be coloured by their individual view. Would the perpetrators of "a carefully constructed smear" publish such a retraction, or is it more likely that such an action is that of an organisation trying to correct errors caused simply by sloppy journalism? A quote from Chomsky referring to his interviewer (Emma Brockes) states his view that:

As for her personal opinions, interpretations and distortions, she is of course free to publish them, and I would, of course, support her right to do so, on grounds that she makes quite clear she does not understand. (p. 224)

From a personal perspective, whilst I feel that this book makes some valid points in places and shines light into a few depressingly dimly lit corners, it also however generates quite a bit of heat. Part of the difficulty with this title is that whilst it challenges the views expressed by mainstream media, highlighting what the authors perceive as bias, the counter-views expressed can, of course, also be seen as being biased, it all depends on the reader's particular viewpoint. Perhaps inevitably, the criticism that opinion is delivered as fact by mainstream newspapers and broadcasters will be levelled by some about Newspeak.

This is not a book that includes a great deal of media theory; rather its focus is on examining the real-world coverage of various contentious issues. Taking the approach of dealing with distinct and separate issues means that this book is very easy to 'dip into' on a chapter-by-chapter basis. The inclusion of two chapters that specifically examine the actions and attitudes of the BBC makes it relevant to television and radio students, whilst other chapters, in particular those that examine the actions of the press (including "*Liberal Press Gang*" and "*Brilliant Fools*")

1 The Greatest Intellectual? Noam Chomsky interviewed by Emma Brockes in The Guardian (31st October 2005) <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20051031.htm>

2 The Guardian, Corrections & Clarifications (17th November 2005)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/nov/17/pressandpublishing.corrections>

will be of more relevance to students of that medium. The book's final chapter "*Compassion, Awareness, Honest Journalism*" is, in effect, a plea for a different approach to reporting and news coverage. Despite some of the limitations referred to above, for students of either journalism or of media-studies, as a tool for exploring issues such as political context and bias, this book will be of interest, even if the reader does not agree with its underlying premise. Contentious it may be, but, as such, it airs some important issues and thus is pretty much guaranteed to help generate some interesting debate.