

David Edwards
& David Cromwell

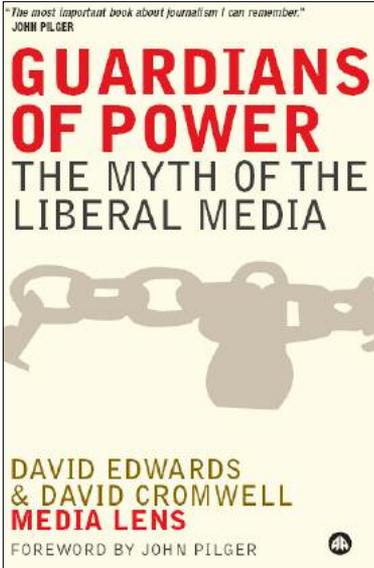
DISCIPLINED MEDIA

How
Professional
Journalists
Conform
to Power



AN EXCERPT
FROM THE BOOK
**GUARDIANS
OF POWER**
The Myth of
the Liberal Media

ColdType



AN EXCERPT FROM

GUARDIANS OF POWER

THE MYTH OF THE LIBERAL MEDIA

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ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Can a corporate media system be expected to tell the truth about a world dominated by corporations? Can newspapers, including the 'liberal' "Guardian" and the "Independent," tell the truth about catastrophic climate change – about its roots in mass consumerism and corporate obstructionism – when they are themselves profit-oriented businesses dependent on advertisers for 75 per cent of their revenues? Can the BBC tell the truth about UK government crimes in Iraq when its senior managers are appointed by the government? Has anything fundamentally changed since BBC founder Lord Reith wrote of the establishment: "They know they can trust us not to be really impartial"? Why did the British and American mass media fail to challenge even the most obvious government lies on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction before the invasion in March 2003? Why did the media ignore the claims of UN weapons inspectors that Iraq had been 90-95 per cent "fundamentally disarmed" as early as 1998? This book answers these questions, and more.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Edwards is author of *Burning All illusions* (South End Press, 1996) and *The Compassionate Revolution* (Green Books, 1998). **David Cromwell** is author of *Private Planet* (Jon Carpenter Publishing, 2001). He is a researcher in ocean circulation and climate at the National Oceanography centre, Southampton, UK.

The Media Lens website is www.medialens.org

DISCIPLINED MEDIA

How Professional Journalists Conform to Power

HOW DO YOU SHOOT BABIES?

Facing execution for his role in the murder of more than 1 million people, many of them children, Auschwitz commandant, Rudolf Hoess, reflected on his life and works: 'Today, I deeply regret that I did not spend more time with my family' (*Auschwitz, The Nazis and the Final Solution*, BBC2, February 15, 2005). Hoess, of course, lies at the extreme end of the spectrum, but his inability to recognise the extraordinary horror of what he had done is by no means exceptional. Mike Wallace of *CBS News* interviewed a participant in the American massacre of Vietnamese women and children at My Lai.

Q: You're married?

A: Right.

Q: Children?

A: Two.

Q: How old?

A: The boy is two and a half, and the little girl is a year and a half.

Q: Obviously, the question comes to my mind ... the father of two little kids like that ... how can he shoot babies?

A: I didn't have the little girl. I just had the little boy at the time.

Q: Uh-huh ... How do you shoot babies?

A: I don't know. It's just one of these things. (Quoted, Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, Pinter & Martin, 1974, p. 202)

One of the delusions promoted by our society is the idea that great destructiveness is most often rooted in great cruelty and hatred. In reality, evil is not merely banal, it is often free of any sense of *being* evil – there may be no sense of moral responsibility for suffering at all.

We are all familiar with the words that typically accompany the shrug of the shoulders when someone is asked: 'How could you do it?' Time and again during the war on Iraq we have heard obviously well-meaning US and British military personnel insisting that they

were just doing their jobs. A typical response is: 'I'm just doing what I'm paid to do.' Repeated often enough, these responses can even come to seem reasonable. But consider, by contrast, these comments made by US soldier Camilo Mejia who refused to return to his unit in Iraq after taking leave in October 2003:

People would ask me about my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors – the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood or an innocent man was decapitated by our machine gun fire. The time I saw a soldier broken down inside because he killed a child, or an old man on his knees, crying with his arms raised to the sky, perhaps asking God why we had taken the lifeless body of his son. I thought of the suffering of a people whose country was in ruins and who were further humiliated by the raids, patrols and curfews of an occupying army.

And I realized that none of the reasons we were told about why we were in Iraq turned out to be true ... I realized that I was part of a war that I believed was immoral and criminal, a war of aggression, a war of imperial domination. I realized that acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military, and I decided that I could not return to Iraq. ('Regaining My Humanity', <www.codepink4peace.org/National_Actions_Camilo.shtml>)

Normally, the implicit assumption is that signing a contract and being paid to do a job absolves us of all further moral responsibility. We have signed an agreement to do as we are told – an ostensibly innocuous act. If the people with whom we made this agreement then choose to send us to incinerate and dismember civilians, that is *their* moral responsibility, not ours.

The psychologist Stanley Milgram noted that this is a classic evasion used by people unwilling to accept responsibility for their own actions:

The key to the behaviour of subjects [willing to torture and kill on command] lies not in pent-up anger or aggression but in the nature of their relationship to authority. They have given themselves to the authority; they see themselves as instruments for the execution of his wishes; once so defined, they are unable to break free. (*Obedience to Authority*, p. 185)

Other studies, on the psychology of torturers, have come to similar conclusions. Lindsey Williams, a clinical psychologist, notes: '... apart

from traits of authoritarianism and obedience, and ideological sympathy for the government, there is little evidence that torturers are markedly different from their peers – at least, until the point where they are recruited and trained as torturers' (*Amnesty*, May/June 1995, p. 10). The *fundamentally* immoral act, then – the disaster that clears the way to vast horrors in the complete absence of a sense of responsibility – is the simple one of accepting that we are obliged to 'do as we are told'.

But in our society exactly this self-surrender is promoted and affirmed by the fact that it is demanded of us by every corporation that 'employs' us (like a tool), requiring us to sign our agreement to strict terms and conditions, and by the fact that huge costs are imposed on those of us unwilling to be 'team players'. We are trained to see this as 'just the way the world is' – something to be accepted rather than thought about. But as Noam Chomsky observes, the consequences can be horrendous:

When you look at a corporation, just like when you look at a slave owner, you want to distinguish between the institution and the individual. So slavery, for example, or other forms of tyranny, are inherently monstrous. But the individuals participating in them may be the nicest guys you can imagine – benevolent, friendly, nice to their children, even nice to their slaves, caring about other people. I mean as individuals they may be anything. In their institutional role, they're monsters, because the institution's monstrous. And the same is true here. (Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott and Joel Bakan, *The Corporation*, <www.thecorporation.tv/>)

THE 'GUSHING' PHENOMENON

Like military personnel, journalists also sign themselves over to authority. Executives are obliged by corporate law to maximise profits for shareholders – corporate journalists are not exempt from the need to prioritise the company's welfare (in an unforgiving political and economic environment) in everything they say and do. Thus, individuals may come and go but, year after year, in an all but unvarying pattern, news reports end up demonising official enemies, prettifying our government's crimes, and overlooking the corporate greed that informs so much politics. Like military personnel, reporters view what happens next as someone else's moral responsibility.

In January 2003, Media Lens wrote to BBC news presenter Fiona Bruce asking her why she had described the build-up of troops in

Kuwait as being 'to deal with the continuing threat posed by Iraq'. Bruce replied simply: 'I'll forward your point to the news editor – thank you' (*BBC News* at 18:00, BBC1, January 7, 2003; Bruce, email to Media Lens, January 7, 2003).

But if we refuse to accept responsibility for the very words that come out of our mouths, have we not lost our humanity? The result, all too often, is that other people lose their lives.

In February 2005, ITN's John Irvine reported on 'the hermit state' of North Korea where people celebrated the birth of the country's leader in a 'display of people in perfect unison – cynics might call it "Come Dancing, or else!"' (*ITV News* at 22:30, ITN, February 16, 2005). The North Korean people, it seems, had been 'treated to hours of gushing television' in honour of the leader. 'When it comes to propaganda', Irvine concluded, 'this is a broadcaster beyond comparison.'

There are ugly ironies here. The first, of course, is that British TV viewers are also familiar with the 'gushing' phenomenon. When Baghdad fell to US tanks on April 9, 2003, British journalists gushed uncontrollably (see Chapter 4). John Irvine, himself, declared: 'A war of three weeks has brought an end to decades of Iraqi misery' (*ITV Evening News*, ITN, April 9, 2003). This, at the height of an illegal invasion based on a set of outrageous lies in which literally tens of thousands of Iraqis were being killed. British journalists also gushed over the June 2004 'transfer of sovereignty' in Iraq and over Iraq's 'first democratic elections for 50 years' in January 2005, just as they had gushed over the 'humanitarian intervention' to end the Serbian 'genocide' in Kosovo in 1999.

The deeper irony is that Irvine's comments on North Korea were made from the heart of the West's own propaganda system – a system that also consistently demonises 'rogue states'. In April 1950, a US National Security Council Directive stated: The citizens of the United States 'stand in their deepest peril', being threatened with the 'destruction not only of this Republic but of civilisation itself' by 'international Communism' (quoted, Mark Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power – British Foreign Policy since 1945*, Zed Books, 1995, p. 43). The threat was a fraud. Privately, former under-secretary of state and future deputy secretary of defence Robert Lovett pointed out (March 1950): 'If we can sell every useless article known to man in large quantities, we should be able to sell our very fine story [regarding the communist 'threat'] in larger quantities' (*ibid.*, p.44).

In May 1985, Ronald Reagan declared a 'national emergency' to deal with the 'unusual and extraordinary threat to the national

security and foreign policy of the United States' posed by 'the policies and actions of the Government of Nicaragua' (World Court Digest, <www.virtual-institute.de/en/wcd/wcd.cfm?107090400100.cfm>).

In September 2002, Tony Blair declared in his foreword to 'the British dossier assessing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq':

It is unprecedented for the Government to publish this kind of document. But in light of the debate about Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), I wanted to share with the British public the reasons why I believe this issue to be a current and serious threat to the UK national interest. ('Full Text of Tony Blair's Foreword to the Dossier on Iraq', *Guardian*, September 24, 2002)

John Morrison, an adviser to the parliamentary intelligence and security committee and a former deputy chief of defence intelligence, told the BBC: 'When I heard him using those words, I could almost hear the collective raspberry going up around Whitehall' (quoted, Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Official Sacked Over TV Remarks on Iraq', *Guardian*, July 26, 2004). Morrison was sacked for his honesty. A year later, Blair was up for re-election, while his 'retired' spinmeister Alastair Campbell appeared on the quiz show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* Campbell has also been quietly 'welcomed back' into the New Labour fold.

In a companion piece to John Irvine's report on North Korea, Ian Williams of *Channel 4 News* reported on celebrations marking the fall of Saigon to Vietnamese forces in 1975. The tone was of unrelenting mockery: 'Stern-faced communist leaders looked on under slogans proclaiming freedom and independence.' Veterans also participated: 'it must have been a challenge to remain upright under the weight of all those medals' (*Channel 4 News* at 18:30, April 30, 2005). The report continued in the same vein:

Well there aren't many regimes left that can still mount a spectacle like this and keep a straight face about it. Still, the emphasis of today's speeches was as much about economic change, reform, as it was about liberation.

Recall that Williams was here commenting on a cataclysmic slaughter that had consumed the lives of fully 3–4 million Vietnamese, a war fought to rid the country of an authentically despotic, mass-murdering South Vietnamese regime imposed by American power. The tone was light-hearted but callous: impoverished farmers suffering the ravages

of bird flu ‘perhaps thought it wiser to bring along a few plastic animals’ Williams quipped of one sorry-looking part of the parade. A model aircraft on a float ‘looked suspiciously like a model produced by the “imperialist” Americans’.

Over on the BBC, a documentary on the fall of Saigon lamented: ‘A twenty-year attempt to build a nation had failed’ (*55 days – The Fall of Saigon*, BBC2, May 6, 2005).

On BBC’s *Newsnight*, Tim Wheeler observed that Libya is a rogue state which ‘made mischief for the West for so long’, so how could it become ‘such a good boy’? (*Newsnight*, BBC2, December 22, 2003). Also on *Newsnight*, Amman correspondent Jon Leyne challenged the Syrian minister for ex-pat affairs, Buthaina Shaba’n:

Minister, the President spoke of the need to improve the economy and tackle corruption. Is the President prepared to challenge the wealth and power of those handful of people – known to everyone in this room – who earn so much of Syria’s riches? (*Newsnight*, BBC2, June 6, 2005)

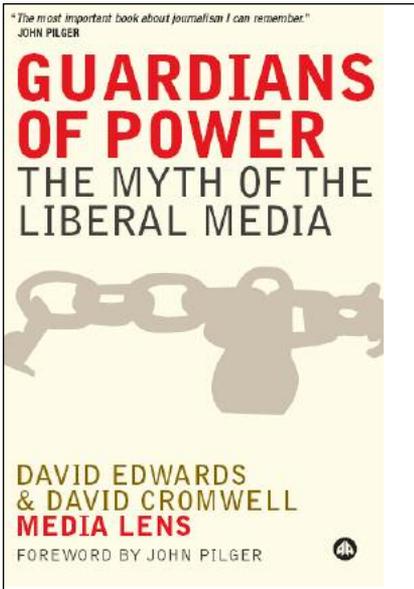
Journalists take it for granted that officially designated ‘rogue states’ should be targeted for fierce criticism and arrogant contempt. It is inconceivable that any BBC journalist would ask a comparable question in a comparable British or US press conference. Imagine Leyne referring a Bush spokesperson to US political corruption, asking: ‘Is the president prepared to challenge the wealth and power of those handful of giant corporations – known to everyone in this room – which earn so much of America’s riches?’

The companion to media demonisation of the ‘bad guys’ is the hagiolatry of Western leaders and apologetics for their crimes. Thus Simon Tisdall wrote in the *Guardian*: ‘Groundbreaking elections in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Palestine and Iraq, extolled in President Bush’s “dawn of freedom” inaugural address, have encouraged western hopes that democratic values are gaining universal acceptance’ (‘Bush’s Democratic Bandwagon Hits a Roadblock in Harare’, *Guardian*, February 16, 2005).

On the BBC’s main news, Clive Myrie described America as ‘the champion of democracy’, referring to ‘a roll call of newly-minted democracies’ (*BBC News* at 13:00, BBC1, February 23, 2005). On *Newsnight*, Paul Wood observed, with scrupulous BBC neutrality, of the illegal invasion of Iraq: ‘it is a benign occupation, or ostensibly a benign occupation’ (*Newsnight*, BBC2, December 16, 2003).

We need to be clear that the commandant of Auschwitz did not for one moment see himself as evil or destructive. Nor did the troopers at My Lai. And nor, of course, do our well-heeled, well-educated, Oxbridge journalists. They may have tempers and egos – they are surely not mass murderers.

But journalists who reflexively reinforce an authorised, Manichean view of the world – a world made up of ‘humanitarian interventionists’ (‘Us’) and ‘Monster States’ (‘Them’) – *are* vital cogs in the machinery of industrial killing.



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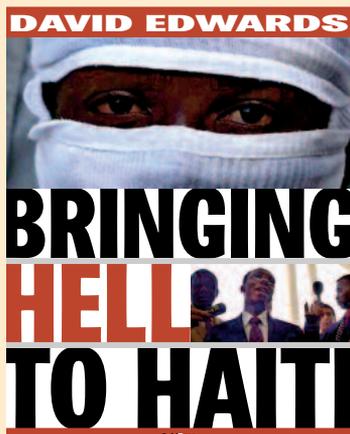
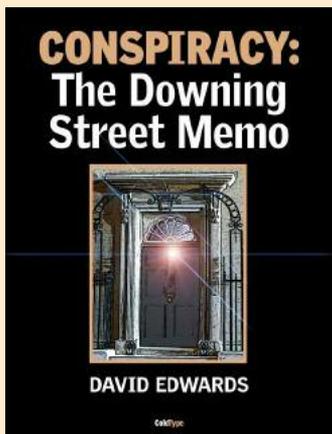
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