

CAUGHT IN THE MATRIX

ColdType

Lies and Distortion in the Search for Truth

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Political debate in the mainstream in the US and UK increasingly resembles the dystopian vision encapsulated in the film the Matrix. Here the reality of human bondage to the system is disguised by a sophisticated virtual reality – the matrix – from which it is difficult, to break free.

– In matrix world, Iraq had and may still have Weapons of Mass Destruction. In the real world it did not.

– In matrix world there were links between Iraq and Al-Qaeda. In the real world there were not.

– In matrix world Lord Hutton is a respected judge who produced an independent report. In the real world Hutton was a whitewash.

– In matrix world Katherine Gun and Clare Short are deeply irresponsible for breaching trust and revealing secret information. In the real world they blew the whistle on illegal and immoral official behaviour.

To many people who have witnessed the lies and deception of the past couple of years, Britain's leader seems deranged. Blair and his clique seem to have a tenuous grip on reality. How can it be – people wonder – that they can go on and on and on about Weapons of Mass Destruction when even the head of the Iraq Survey Group has concluded that they probably never existed? How can they appear to take so seriously statements that most of us now know are built on foundations no more secure than the shifting sands of the Iraqi deserts which they no longer even pre-

tend to search?

The attack on Iraq has revealed as never before the yawning gulf between the political elite and the rest of us. It discloses an increasing separation between 'matrix world' – where official pronouncements are treated with some seriousness, even if subject to criticism – and 'real world' where their lies are seen through and their crimes recognised. Matrix world and real world exist in a kind of parallel universe. But the matrix is not entirely hermetically sealed from the real world. Every so often the distance between the two becomes too great and the matrix has to readjust. In the film itself this is denoted by a glitch in the matrix where the character played by Keanu Reeves sees the same black cat twice within seconds.

Take the case of the Hutton report. After Lord Hutton had finished reading his prepared statement the matrix appeared to be performing its work. The government was cleared of impropriety and the BBC damned. Tony Blair appeared almost immediately in the House of Commons, his face split by a victorious grin. But Hutton's report was just too efficient and the real world started to crash in to the edges of the matrix. Within hours the relief was gone and even key sections of matrix world were able to show their disbelief. The next day's *Independent* cleared the front page leaving acres of white space and the single word 'Whitewash'. Blair's key ally Peter Mandelson regretfully tried to recuperate the defeat for the matrix: 'It was as if we won a football match 5-0 but the reporters covering it decided it was a draw and a couple of days later decided we had lost.'¹

When former minister Clare Short made allegations about UK involvement in spying on the UN Secretary General the matrix shuddered again. Showing their penchant for footballing

metaphors, an anonymous Blair 'aide' said "It was as if we were playing football and someone suddenly pulled out a knife.'² For them, this is a game. A game with civilised rules. To point out a breach of the rules is itself a breach of the rules. The 'great game' of power politics necessitates suppressing uncomfortable facts, not least of which is its lethal consequences, especially for people with brown skins. Their game of football towers over the knife puller in its barbarity leaving up to 40,000 dead including over 10,000 civilians. Their deaths are so inconsequential that they are airbrushed from the mainstream.

Yet, increasingly, whole sections of the population are breaking from the common sense fostered by our rulers. The phenomenon was visible on the streets of London as thousands protested against the Bush visit in November 2003. It was the day after the bombings against British interests in Istanbul. TV journalists repeatedly asked demonstrators the former dread question about 'playing into the hands of terrorists'. But protestor after protestor responded by saying that Bush and Blair were to blame for the bombings. Even more dramatically, the Aznar government in Spain was swept from office by similar discontent, reportedly spread partly by word of mouth, email and text message – but also crucially by a counter common sense shared instinctively by increasing sections of the population. The conclusion to draw from this is that the ideological strength of our rulers is wavering as their common sense is challenged more and more consistently from below. The more this happens, the more desperate they become and the more extreme the lies. Lies and the propaganda machinery necessary to produce them are, in other words, built into the very fabric of neo-liberal governance.

What we are seeing in the UK are the birth pains of the neo-

liberal political order – the institutionalisation of lying and the destruction of democracy. In order for it to flourish neo-liberalism needs to foster a fundamentally distorted version of reality – the matrix. This version must be believed or at least signed up to by the political elite in the Conservative and Labour parties (and the Democrats and Republicans) in the military and intelligence agencies and in the transnational corporations.

The mainstream media are also part of the system and dissent is generally kept within manageable bounds. What about the *Mirror* and the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, say the defenders of the status quo? Isn't it in fact the case that the media have 'taken up the role of "critique" of all governments, liberal and conservative, that was once the province of the left parties'³ as the 'eloquent apologist for the invasion of Iraq'⁴ and theorist of the 'market state', Philip Bobbit puts it. Or, as another Blair advisor, Anthony Giddens has argued: 'I doubt that corruption is more common in democratic countries than it used to be – rather, in an information society it is more visible than it used to be. The emergence of a global information society is a powerful democratising force'.⁵

Typically such grand statements mask an almost total lack of evidence on how the media actually perform (never mind how they legitimise or undermine great power) and are but a further indication of the close integration of key sections of academia into the power elite – into the matrix. Just for the record, empirical studies and all the available evidence shows that the mainstream media are systematically if variably biased in favour of official pronouncements.⁶ There is dissent at the margins and dissent has been more prominent in the UK media over Iraq than in the gulf war of 1991. But as the stunning analyses produced by

Media-Lens show, there are not only limits to the dissent possible in even anti-war papers, but the much of the coverage in papers like the *Guardian* and even the *Independent* conformed pretty well to the official consensus in the run up to the attack on Iraq. The Diplomatic editor of the *independent*, the self proclaimed 'arch sceptic' on WMD on the paper, notes that: 'no one would have risked having this paper, or probably any other,' question the existence of any serious WMD in Iraq because 'The whole government-generated consensus was the other way' and 'you have to remember how strong the consensus was on Iraq's weapons capability'⁷ This speaks eloquently of the limits of possible dissent in the mainstream media, but also of a constipated and unresponsive political system.

Wholesale lying and misinformation by the political elite has been learnt in part from the private sector and the PR industry which has done so much to advance the interests of mobile global capital.⁸ Unsurprisingly the PR industry is now being welcomed into the heart of government in the UK. Practically unnoticed in the mainstream, the Phillis report opened the way for PR agencies to bid for government contracts. Phillis abolished the Government Information and Communication Service which has acted as a brake on spin. This was unsurprising since the committee was heavily weighted with private sector PR agencies keen to open up a relatively new market.⁹ Within weeks the Scottish Executive had led the way by advertising a contract to cover advertising, web design and PR for itself, ten agencies, 23 health bodies, 35 quangos and several government bodies. These include the PR activities of the Scottish Parliament. The obvious structural conflict of interest if the Parliament, to which the Executive is supposed to be accountable, has the same PR

agency, appears not to be a barrier. The contract is unsurprisingly regarded as 'highly attractive by the advertising and PR industry'.¹⁰

Meanwhile in Iraq, one of the few British companies to get a contract from the US administration is Bell Pottinger, part of the Chime PR conglomerate. It 'will oversee a massive public relations and advertising drive to begin the transformation of Iraq into a successful democracy' reports the *Guardian*.¹¹ Actually what Chime will do is attempt to ensure that neoliberal 'market democracy' is constructed. This is after all what the company headed by Lord Tim Bell has done in the UK and elsewhere since its creation in 1989.¹²

We live in an age of fakery; spin in government and PR manipulation in business are used to force through unpopular policies or undermine democratic decision making. All over the world our rulers are attempting to hold the matrix together with ever extending propaganda programmes. The GM food lobby leads the way. In Johannesburg the third world farmers demonstrating at the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in favour of GM foods were 'fake'. Bussed in, marshalled, press released and given T shirts with English slogans, a language they didn't speak.¹³ On the internet, GM interests have created 'fake persuaders' to manipulate debate on scientific discussion groups and marginalise their critics.¹⁴ In the US, the Bush administration pays actors to produce fake news reports in favour of its policy on Medicare¹⁵ In Turkey, BP's consultation on the Baku, Tibilisi Ceyhan pipeline included a telephone survey of the Turkish village of Hacibayram that, 'had been deserted for many years, its houses having fallen into ruins. There were neither telephones nor anyone to answer them.'¹⁶ In the UK, the Blair government

'consultation' on GM simply ignored the overwhelming opposition of the public. It was, in other words, a fake consultation.

At root, the fakery and the misinformation are the necessary bi-product of neo-liberal politics. In the post war period in conditions approaching social democracy, popular demands had some impact on the governmental apparatus whether Labour or Tory. The historic compromise between capital and labour which led to the introduction of the welfare state, the NHS and the nationalisation of key industries meant there was some link – however tenuous – between popular demands and political and economic decision-making. Under neo-liberalism the main parties are indistinguishable and their policies have no popular basis. They must be imposed by manipulation, fakery and deception.

The accelerating propaganda programmes and the machinery to put them into practice needed to attempt to keep the matrix functioning. But the decline of trust in governments, and the consequent disengagement from the matrix manifested by millions of people across the globe are, as Noam Chomsky has put it 'natural consequences of the specific design of "market democracy" under business rule'. ¹⁷ The lies in other words will not end when Blair or Bush go, they are the necessary product of the neo-liberal political system. The necessity to lie will only be undermined when governments start to enact the will of the people, in other words after the current system is fundamentally reformed.

Thanks to Emma Miller and Jean Shaoul

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CAUGHT IN THE MATRIX

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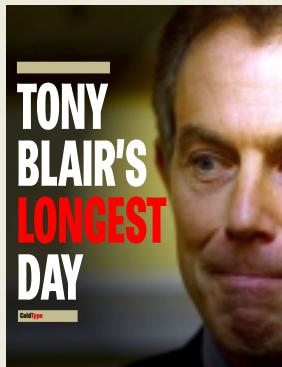
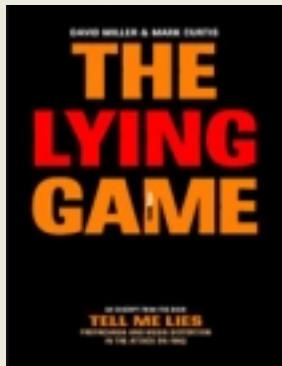
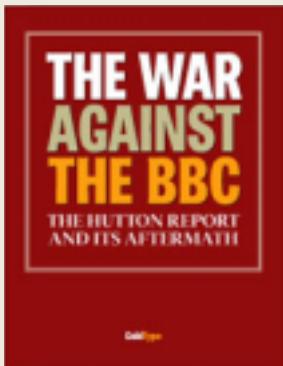
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