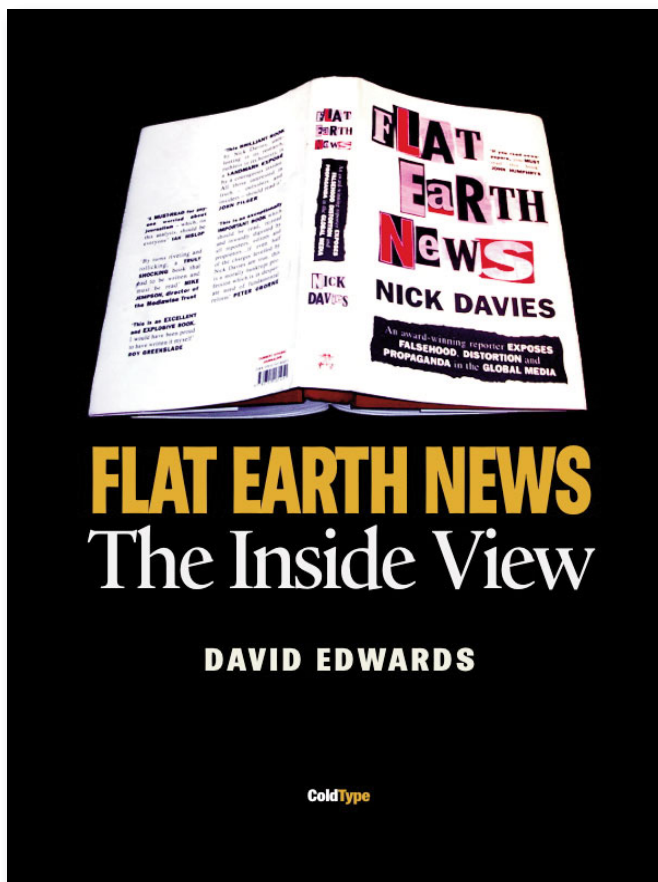


FLAT EARTH NEWS

The Inside View

DAVID EDWARDS

ColdType



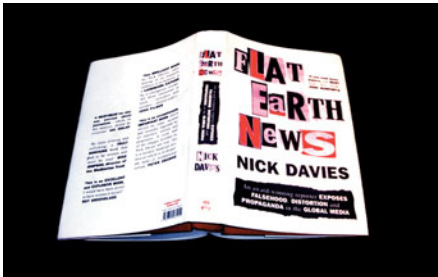
David Edwards is co-editor, with David Cromwell, of the British media watchdog, Medialens – www.medialens.org – Their book, **Guardians of Power: The Myth Of The Liberal Media**, was published in 2006 by Pluto Books

© David Edwards 2008

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
<http://coldtype.net>

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS



NICK DAVIES'S latest book, *Flat Earth News*, is a “no-holds-barred assault on the British media,” according to Michael Savage writing in the Independent. (Savage, ‘Kamal Ahmed: “Nick is a coward”. Ahmed bites back,’ The Independent, February 11, 2008)

In the same newspaper, Stephen Glover declared: “There can be no more serious allegations against journalists than those made by Mr Davies.” The book, he added, “is gold dust”. (Glover, ‘Damning allegations that, if true, bring disgrace upon 'The Observer',’ The Independent, February 4, 2008)

In the Observer, Mary Riddell commented: “Dog does not eat dog. This, as Nick Davies says, is an old Fleet Street convention. His latest book is 'a brazen attempt to break that rule'. It is a task that Davies more than fulfils, swallowing the leash and kennel for good measure.” (Riddell, 'Failures of the Fourth Estate,' The Observer, February 3, 2008)

These ought to be shocking comments. If Davies’s book really does swallow the kennel, then he has succeeded in bucking a trend that has lasted more than 100 years. For the fact is that, over this time, genuine no-holds-barred assaults on the media have been ignored by those media. And *Flat Earth News* has certainly not been ignored. Sometimes several mentions, commentaries, reviews and extracts have appeared in the same papers and magazines, including: the Guardian, the Observer, the Independent, the Independent on Sunday, the Times, the Telegraph, the New Statesman, the Spectator, and across the BBC.

To be sure, there has been severe criticism – mostly that the book goes too far and is tainted by personal animosity. Riddell, for example, urged caution: “Many of Davies's arguments are powerful and timely, if unduly pessimistic. British papers, for all their faults, have much left to commend them.”

Peter Preston, former editor of the Guardian, was discomfited by the tone: “rather too quickly, the tone grows shrill and devoid of humour”. (Preston, ‘Journalism: Damaged limitations: Hold the front page: the news machine is in a mess,’ The

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

Guardian, February 9, 2008)

I have not found one suggestion in any review or commentary that Davies did not go nearly far enough.

Inside/Outside – The “Guardian Man”

Before taking a look at Davies’s media critique, it’s worth considering the premises that underlie his work. In one refreshing passage in the book, he dismisses the media’s groundless claim to objectivity: “The great blockbuster myth of modern journalism is objectivity, the idea that a good newspaper or broadcaster simply collects and reproduces the objective truth. It is a classic Flat Earth tale, widely believed and devoid of reality. It has never happened and never will happen because it cannot happen. Reality exists objectively, but any attempt to record the truth about it always and everywhere necessarily involves selection...” (p.111)

As Davies says, judgements are not optional; they are inevitable: to use “this headline, this intro, this language, while rejecting others” reflects a judgement.

And yet *Flat Earth News* is based on its own “blockbuster myth”: namely, that honest media criticism is best restricted to arguments and testimony provided by media “insiders”.

Davies is himself an “insider”, of course, as he proudly tells us in the prologue: “I’m a Guardian man. I’ve read the paper since I was fourteen. I’ve worked for it for years and, when I came up with this project, the editor, Alan Rusbridger, agreed to support me while I pursued it.” (p.4)

Imagine the author of an expose on the arms industry declaring: “I’m a BAE Systems man. I’ve worked for it for years and, when I came up with the idea for this project, the chief executive, Mike Turner, agreed to support me while I pursued it.”

Davies makes the obvious point: “It needs to be said that never at any stage has anybody from the Guardian tried to impose any kind of restriction or requirement on what I have written...” (p.4)

But even Davies’s own editor exposed the extreme naivety of that assurance back in 2000: “If you ask anybody who works in newspapers, they will quite rightly say, ‘Rupert Murdoch,’ or whoever, ‘never tells me what to write,’ which is beside the point: they don’t have to be told what to write.” (Alan Rusbridger, interview with David Edwards, December 22, 2000; www.medialens.org/articles/the_articles/articles_2001/de_Rusbridger_interview.html)

The focus on overt interference is a liberal red herring. The real issue is the extent

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

to which corporate values are simply internalised by executives selected to work for major corporations. What kind of internalisation of values do we have in mind? The kind that would lead someone to feel comfortable declaring themselves a “Guardian man” in the prologue of a book intended as a “no-holds-barred assault on the British media”.

Noam who? The “Outsiders”

If “outsiders” have reservations about the merit of reliance on corporate “insiders”, Davies has none. After all, he tells us, “a lot of media critics are outsiders who recycle evidence from other outsiders and often develop theories which simply don’t catch the reality of what goes on inside newsrooms”. (p.13)

Davies makes the claim repeatedly but is unwilling to put a single name to a single one of these recycled theories. I asked Davies why he failed to mention two notable media critics: “Why didn't you mention Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model? I would think this is the key argument you'd want to accept or challenge in discussing media propaganda. It's an awesome piece of work, surely the starting point for any serious analysis of the kind you've presented. Have you read *Manufacturing Consent*?” (Email to Davies, February 16, 2008)

Davies replied: “If there's any strength in the book, it's because it's written by an insider with the off-the-record assistance of a mass of other insiders, all using our own first-hand experience of what really goes on inside newsrooms to try to explain how it is that we produce so much falsehood, distortion and propaganda. I used outside/academic sources for some factual material (the research which I commissioned from Cardiff being the biggest example) but I didn't look to outsiders for analytical material, because I felt the insider's analysis was what was valuable here. I've read some Chomsky and been to see him speak live, and I think he's the bravest intellectual on the planet, but, for the reasons I've explained, I wouldn't look to him on a project of this kind. I hope that makes sense.” (February 16)

And so Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s deeply insightful analysis – produced over decades in books like *Manufacturing Consent*, *Necessary Illusions*, *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, and so on – is just blanked. By the same logic, a historian could presume to analyse the Vietnam War *only* if he or she had fought in the war and/or served in the upper echelons of the US and Vietnamese governments. We must assume, for example, that it would not be possible for a historian to gain meaningful insights from other involved sources.

But in reality, Davies does not just ignore “outsiders”; he also ignores “insiders”.

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

John Pilger, for example, who praised the book highly, is mentioned only in passing in a couple of sentences. Despite being one of the most astute and experienced journalists and film-makers, the only reference to Pilger's media criticism is his praise for the book itself! Likewise Robert Fisk, mentioned once. So, too, any number of radical US media "insiders". Pilger has declared Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* nothing less than the "Greatest book of the twentieth century". But this "insider" support for "outsider" analysis is not allowed to count.

The far less well-known award-winning US journalist Gary Webb is mentioned. As I have described elsewhere, Webb exposed serious CIA and US government corruption. By way of a reward, his reputation and career were terminated by elite media and government smears (Webb subsequently committed suicide). Davies is happy to quote Webb, an "insider", but not on his media analysis. And yet in the same chapter from the book cited by Davies, *Into The Buzzsaw*, Webb wrote: "In seventeen years of doing this, nothing bad had happened to me. I was never fired or threatened with dismissal if I kept looking under rocks. I didn't get any death threats that worried me. I was winning awards, getting raises, lecturing college classes, appearing on TV shows, and judging journalism contests. So how could I possibly agree with people like Noam Chomsky and Ben Bagdikian, who were claiming the system didn't work, that it was steered by powerful special interests and corporations, and existed to protect the power elite? Hell, the system worked just fine, as I could tell. It *encouraged* enterprise. It *rewarded* muckracking."

And then: "... I wrote some stories that made me realise how sadly misplaced my bliss had been. The reason I'd enjoyed such smooth sailing for so long hadn't been, as I'd assumed, because I was careful and diligent and good at my job. It turned out to have nothing to do with it. The truth was that, in all those years, I hadn't written anything important enough to suppress." (Webb, 'The Mighty Wurlitzer Plays On,' in Kristina Borjesson, ed., *Into The Buzzsaw – Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press*, Prometheus, 2002, pp.296-7)

Why is the support of "insiders" like Pilger, Fisk and Webb for the views of "outsiders" like Chomsky ignored by Davies? Davies's explanation for his approach, after all, is that he preferred to depend on the "insider" view. But it seems he simply chose to exclude some of the most powerful media criticism from the discussion.

Davies does refer to "outsider" media analysis, which he describes as "conspiracy theories which are attractive but heavily overstated". (p.14) He explains: "So, for example, there is a popular theory that mass-media coverage is orchestrated or at least fundamentally restricted in order to win the favour of corporate advertisers. To an outsider's eye, this is very tempting: these advertisers have money, the media outlets need the money, so they must be vulnerable to some kind of pressure from the

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

advertisers to describe the world in a way which suits their interests. It's a fine theory, particularly favoured by left-wing radicals, but its truth is very limited". (p.14)

But it is not a "fine theory"; it is a straw man of Davies's invention. Moreover, we cannot think of a single serious media analyst who would subscribe to it. What rational person, after all, would accept that media performance – which must include consistent media support for the US-UK governments' lies on Iraq, Kosovo, Iran and so on – is explained by a conspiracy to satisfy advertisers? Are we to believe this nonsensical notion is "tempting" to "an outsider's eye" because they lack experience of a newsroom? We asked Davies to clarify: "Which 'popular theory' do you have in mind? Who are the authors, please?"

Davies replied: "It's 'a popular theory', ie one that is believed by many people. I would think it is one that must have been investigated or promoted by quite a few authors, but I'm not trying to make a link to that kind of written origin, so I can't really help you on that. Good luck, Nick" (February 16)

The clarification on 'popular' was helpful. But *why* is Davies "not trying to make a link to that kind of written origin"? If the "outsiders", as well as the "insiders" agreeing with them, are excluded from the analysis, why would Davies not at least identify the "popular theory" proposed by "left-wing radicals"?

In reality, of course, the world is not awash with popular theories on media control – we can think of only one that is widely discussed (outside the mainstream, at least), and that is not exactly common currency. Are we to believe that Davies does not in fact have in mind "the propaganda model of media control" co-authored by the man he views as "the bravest intellectual on the planet"?

Could it be that Davies is really so ignorant of Herman and Chomsky's work? Whatever the explanation, this remarkable omission is a classic example of exactly the kind of Flat Earth coverage Davies is supposed to be exposing: the leading radical media analysis is declared 'flat' (conspiracy-based) when in fact it is 'round' (based on a rational analysis of market forces). Perhaps this should be called a Cheese Moon Omission.

For clarification, we turned to former New Statesman editor Peter Wilby, who had written in Media Guardian: "As an explanation of why most news outlets reflect the worldview of the rich and powerful, fewer journalists producing more copy, plus more PRs offering more instant 'stories', sounds banal. But it is more significant than the conspiratorial pressures from owners and advertisers that most outsiders claim to detect. PR, far more than journalism, shapes the news agenda." (Wilby, 'Campbell's media critique is only half the story,' The Guardian, February 4, 2008)

It certainly sounds banal but this really is Davies's focus. Davies even invented a

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

buzzword, “churnalism”, to help the churnalists churn out his message. We wrote to Wilby (February 5): “Can you identify the ‘outsiders’ who are suggesting that conspiratorial pressures from owners and advertisers account for media servility to powerful interests? Specifically, can you point to examples where have they proposed a conspiracy?”

Wilby replied: “Herman and Chomsky get pretty close to conspiratorial pressures.” (February 5)

We responded: “They truly and honestly don't; it's much more sophisticated than that. This is a key quote: ‘We do not use any kind of 'conspiracy' hypothesis to explain mass media performance. Our treatment is much closer to a 'free market' analysis, with the results largely an outcome of the workings of market forces.’”

Wilby replied: “OK, I take your strictures on Herman/Chomsky, though they do refer to ‘withdrawal of advertising’.”

We have a lot of respect for Wilby – he is a rare glimmer of light in the otherwise all-consuming darkness that is Media Guardian – so it is all the more surprising that he should be so ill-informed about such an important media critique.

Playing Fair – The Two Rules

With “outsiders” excluded, their powerful theories misrepresented to the point of absurdity, Davies states the “rules” by which he intends to proceed. In doing so, he unwittingly reveals the fundamental problem with “insider” media analysis. The first rule: “I know a fair bit about sex and drugs and hypocrisy in Fleet Street: executives whose papers support the war against drugs while shoving cocaine up their nostrils in the office toilets.” (p.3)

Most of Fleet Street knows of one very senior executive in particular that Davies doubtless has in mind (so do I, and so do the editors of Private Eye who published a cryptic reference), but the public isn't allowed to know. Why? “I think we shouldn't be writing about anybody's private life at all unless there is some really powerful public need to known about it; and second, because I don't want to be beaten up by former colleagues who might reasonably complain that I were betraying their confidence.” (p.3)

There is a “powerful public need to know” that a senior executive was caught shoving cocaine up his nostrils by office cleaners, obviously, but the people in a position to expose him have somehow managed to perceive no such need. Why?

The fact is that professionals are trusted to serve the interests of the organisation,

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

and indeed the industry, employing them. When a journalist indicates that he or she is willing to cause serious harm and embarrassment, the unspoken bond of ‘professional’ trust is broken and he or she is no longer welcome. It is the same in every industry – one does not need to be an “insider” to understand how it works.

An even more serious admission is made in Davies’s second “rule”: “It wouldn’t have been fair to target the media outlets for whom I’ve worked just because I had an inside track on the way they behave. Equally, it certainly wouldn’t have been right to ignore them or favour them. So, I set out to research the media in exactly the same way that I would research any subject. That applies, in particular, to the Guardian.” (pp.3-4)

In the very next line, as noted above, Davies comments, “I am a Guardian man,” noting that Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger “agreed to support” him while he wrote the book.

Imagine if Davies had been writing for Pravda during the 1979-1989 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – an assault which may have cost the lives of a million Afghan civilians. As we know, Pravda was deeply complicit in facilitating the criminality of that invasion. Imagine if, with the Soviet occupation ongoing, Davies had commented that it “wouldn’t have been fair to target the media outlets for whom I’ve worked just because I had an inside track on the way they behave”. How much moral weight would Davies’s principle of employee “fairness” carry alongside the moral obligation to expose complicity in crimes that have cost hundreds of thousands of lives?

Ahead of the Iraq invasion, the British liberal media, the Guardian very much included, really did play a role comparable to that performed by Pravda. (See our Media Alert co-authored with Nikolai Lanine: *‘Invasion – A Comparison of Soviet and Western Media Performance,’*; www.medialens.org/alerts/07/071120_invasion_a_comparison.php – also republished in the December 2007 ColdType.net)

But in our society it is deemed almost unthinkable that a journalist would sacrifice that most sacred idol – The Career – to some higher ethical cause. As physicist and science journal editor Jeff Schmidt has pointed out, this ethical alienation is built into the very idea of ‘professionalism’: “Professionalism – in particular the notion that experts should confine themselves to their ‘legitimate professional concerns’ and not ‘politicise’ their work – helps keep individual professionals in line by encouraging them to view their narrow technical orientation as a virtue, a sign of objectivity rather than of subordination. This doesn’t mean that experts are forbidden to let independent political thoughts cross their minds. They can do so as citizens, of course, and they can even do so as experts, but then only in the ‘proper’ places and in the ‘proper’ way.” (Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p.204)

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

UN diplomats like Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck may choose the path of career oblivion for the sake of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed by sanctions. But journalists persuade themselves that the “Gentleman’s agreements” of Fleet Street are sacrosanct. Davies, after all, opens his book with the words: “Dog doesn’t eat dog. That’s always been the rule in Fleet Street.” (p.1)

That indeed is the rule. Davies, of course, insists that he does eat media meat in his book, but as his own “rules” suggest, there is much for which he does not have the stomach – he is, after all, an “insider” and is proud to be a “Guardian man”.

And this is why it is so wrong to try to persuade us that “insiders” working as part of deeply immoral economic systems are best placed to offer honest criticism of those systems. When those “insiders” then publish their criticism *within* the system – while clearly intending to maintain their high status – then scepticism is demanded of the reader. Which is not to say the scepticism is necessarily justified – the proof of the pudding remains in the eating.

Churnalism And The Propaganda Model

To be clear, there is much of merit in *Flat Earth News* – the book is well worth reading. Davies describes, for example, how all was not well in the Observer newsroom in the autumn of 2002. The newspaper’s correspondent, Ed Vulliamy, had been talking with Mel Goodman, a former senior CIA analyst. Despite leaving the agency, Goodman retained his high security clearance and remained in communication with senior former colleagues. Goodman told Vulliamy that, in contradiction to everything the British and American governments were claiming, the CIA were reporting that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, Goodman was willing to go on the record as a named source. It was an incredibly important scoop but the Observer refused to publish it. (This chapter is reproduced in *The ColdType Reader Extra*, January 2008)

Over the next four months, Vulliamy submitted seven versions of the story for publication – his editors rejected every one of them. (pp.329-331) In January 2003, the Observer’s then editor, Roger Alton, told his staff: “We’ve got to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans.” (p.350)

In support of this stance, the Observer’s David Rose echoed government propaganda on Iraq’s alleged connections with al-Qaeda – a performance that ended with a humbling apology from Rose in 2004. He described how his trust in official sources had been “misplaced and naïve... I look back with shame and disbelief”. (p.334)

Other people paid the price. Eleven days after Vulliamy’s story was rejected for the

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

seventh time in March 2003, the first bombs fell on Baghdad.

In September 2006, the Evening Standard reported that Alton had been on “something of a lads’ holiday” in the Alps. Alton’s companions included Jonathan Powell, “Tony Blair’s most trusted aide”, and staunch Blairite MP and propagandist Denis MacShane. (Gideon Spanier, ‘In the air,’ Evening Standard, September 6, 2006)

Most recently, we learned that Alton “is understood to be in talks to replace Simon Kelner as editor of the Independent”. (Stephen Brook, ‘Alton in talks about Independent role,’ The Guardian, March 4, 2008; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/mar/04/theindependent.independentnewsmedia>)

It should come as no surprise: “Kelner and Alton are known to be friends; in December Kelner gave a speech at Alton’s birthday party, attended by many Fleet Street editors, a few weeks before he left the Observer.”

One wonders how even the compliant souls of the liberal press can bear it. I know, indeed, that some of them cannot. But occasional nuggets should be set apart from Davies’s analysis of the media system as a whole. What, then, is his “no-holds-barred” critique of the press?

In the Guardian, he described how he commissioned research which surveyed more than 2,000 UK news stories from the four quality dailies (Times, Telegraph, Guardian, Independent) and the Daily Mail. They found that only 12% of the stories were wholly composed of material researched by reporters. 80% of the stories were wholly, mainly or partially constructed from second-hand material provided by news agencies and by the public relations industry. They also found that facts had been thoroughly checked in only 12% of the stories. Davies commented: “The implication of those two findings is truly alarming. Where once journalists were active gatherers of news, now they have generally become mere passive processors of unchecked, second-hand material, much of it contrived by PR to serve some political or commercial interest. Not journalists, but churnalists. An industry whose primary task is to filter out falsehood has become so vulnerable to manipulation that it is now involved in the mass production of falsehood, distortion and propaganda.” (Davies, ‘Our media have become mass producers of distortion,’ The Guardian, February 4, 2008)

The researchers found that the average Fleet Street journalist is now filling three times as much space as he or she was in 1985: “Generally, they don’t find their own stories, or check their content, because they simply don’t have the time.”

In his book, Davies emphasises that journalists “are no longer out gathering news but... are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false”. (p.59)

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

This is what Davies calls “churnalism” – this is his central focus. Writing in the Guardian, Peter Wilby indicated the basic sound bite used to summarise the Flat Earth News thesis: “The main reason why you read so little decent journalism, he argues, is simple: hacks don't have time to do it.” (Wilby, op., cit)

Tim Luckhurst wrote in the Independent: “At the root of the problem lies commercial pressure, but not the ideological pressure blamed by Marxist academics anxious to portray the press as an establishment conspiracy. Davies blames the more insidious influence of media conglomerates that prefer profit to political influence and pare editorial staff to the bone to achieve it.” (Luckhurst, ‘Hard truths for the trade in “Flat Earth News”,’ The Independent, February 10, 2008)

By contrast, Edward Herman – an “outsider” and surely one of Luckhurst’s “Marxist academics” – here reflects on the origins of the propaganda model, which is primarily his work: “We had long been impressed with the regularity with which the media operate within restricted assumptions, depend heavily and uncritically on elite information sources, and participate in propaganda campaigns helpful to elite interests. In trying to explain why they do this we looked for structural factors as the only possible root of systematic behaviour and performance patterns.” (Herman, ‘The propaganda model revisited,’ Monthly Review, July 1996)

It is in this analysis of “structural factors” that Herman and Chomsky depart from Davies’s analysis. Herman explains: “The crucial structural factors derive from the fact that the dominant media are firmly imbedded in the market system. They are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people (or other companies); they are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment. The media are also dependent on government and major business firms as information sources, and both efficiency and political considerations, and frequently overlapping interests, cause a certain degree of solidarity to prevail among the government, major media, and other corporate businesses.

“Government and large non-media business firms are also best positioned (and sufficiently wealthy) to be able to pressure the media with threats of withdrawal of advertising or TV licenses, libel suits, and other direct and indirect modes of attack. The media are also constrained by the dominant ideology, which heavily featured anticommunism before and during the Cold War era, and was mobilized often to prevent the media from criticizing attacks on small states labelled communist.

“These factors are linked together, reflecting the multi-levelled capability of powerful business and government entities and collectives (e.g., the Business Roundtable; U.S. Chamber of Commerce; industry lobbies and front groups) to exert power over the flow of information.” (Herman, Ibid)

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

There is much more in Herman and Chomsky's book, as there is in Davies's, but we are here in a different world of insight and rationality. And yet, unlike *Flat Earth News*, Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* does not exist for the mainstream media. Lexis-Nexis records a single review of the book over the last 20 years – a two-paragraph review totalling 147 words that appeared in the Guardian in December 1989, a year after publication.

The Rules Of Production – 1-5

In Chapter 4, *The Rules of Production*, Davies provides a list of ten “rules” that superficially appear to resemble the list of five filters offered by Herman and Chomsky. Davies's rules are divided under two sections: 1-5 “Cutting the costs” and 6-10 “Increasing the Revenue”.

The emphasis is on the selection of low cost, “safe” facts and ideas that avoid “electric fences”, and yet literally no mention is made of the advertisers who provide 75% of a ‘quality’ newspaper's revenue. As we have seen, earlier in the book Davies discusses the influence of advertising in the context of an implausible conspiracy theory. Davies also comments on interference from owners and advertisers: “Journalists with whom I have discussed this agree that if you could quantify it, you could attribute only 5% or 10% of the problem to the total impact of these two forms of interference.” (p.22)

Advertiser responsibility for *Flat Earth News*, he claims, is “not only negligible but a distraction from what is really going wrong”. (p.15)

Davies explains the basis for his low figure, apparently plucked from the air: “there certainly are examples of corporations pulling their advertising in order to try to have an impact on the political or general editorial line of a media outlet – but there is a real shortage of examples of their succeeding”. (p.14)

Again, this is a red herring. It is clear that newspapers are not primarily in the business of selling a product to readers – they are in the business of selling wealthy audiences to advertisers. It is not just “that stories should increase readership or audience” – they should sell the right readership to the right advertisers. This is not an apolitical stance. This marketplace naturally favours facts, ideas, values and aspirations that are popular with elite audiences, elite advertisers and elite journalists. What Davies describes as “safe” stories are stories which interest wealthy audiences without alienating advertisers.

The problem is not just that advertisers might directly pressure a newspaper – for example, by pulling its advertising – but that newspapers have no choice but to pro-

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

vide a supportive environment in order to attract these sponsors. In 2004, Media Lens wrote to Nick Taylor, editor of the Guardian's Spark magazine, asking: "was not Spark itself originally conceived as a vehicle for major advertising? Surely the needs and preferences of advertisers were central considerations in deciding the format and focus of the magazine". Taylor replied: "Your point is valid. But certainly not unique to my product. Ever worked on a magazine launch? The first and only real questions are: who will advertise with in product / Will it be read by people whom advertisers want to reach? Readers/viewers/listeners are the most important thing to any publisher or broadcaster. But, from an economic point of view, primarily because high numbers of readers means high ad revenue. And media survive only through ads." (Taylor, email to Media Lens, April 6, 2004)

These pressures have shaped, not just the layout and structure of individual titles, but the whole structure of the British press. Media analysts James Curran and Jean Seaton describe how the industrialisation of the press brought "a progressive transfer of power from the working class to wealthy businessmen, while dependence on advertising encouraged the absorption or elimination of the early radical press and stunted its subsequent development before the First World War". (Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility – The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, Routledge, 1991, p.47)

The effect on national radical papers that "failed to meet the requirements of advertisers" was dramatic: "They either closed down; accommodated to advertising pressure by moving up-market; stayed in a small audience ghetto with manageable losses; or accepted an alternative source of institutional patronage." (Ibid, p.43)

Davies also downplays the significance of owner interference, which he describes, curiously, as "the other widespread conspiracy theory" (p.15): "Almost all of the old patriarchs who personally owned and abused newspapers have sold out to corporations, whose primary purpose is not propaganda. Their primary purpose simply and uncontroversially is to make money." (p.16)

This last comment is breathtaking. Anyone who knows anything about the political history of the last century in Britain and the United States knows that the primary purpose of much propaganda is precisely "to make money". Davies does discuss the cynical relationship between the public relations industry and the media, but this is only one small component of state-corporate manipulation of society.

Historian Elizabeth Fones-Wolf notes that the growth in workers' power during the 1940s and 1950s was a major factor in shaping elite US policy, leading to a fierce business backlash intended to contain US public opinion. The campaign was immense in scale, involving all the leading business organisations, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Committee for Economic Development, the National

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

Association of Manufacturers and many industry-specific bodies. Fones-Wolf commented: “Manufacturers orchestrated multimillion dollar public relations campaigns that relied on newspapers, magazines, radio, and later television, to re-educate the public in the principles and benefits of the American economic system... employers sought to undermine unionism and address shop-floor conflict by building a separate company identity or company consciousness among their employees. This involved convincing workers to identify their social, economic, and political well-being with that of their specific employer and more broadly with the free enterprise system.” (Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise – The Business Assault on Labour and Liberalism, 1945-60*, University of Illinois Press, 1994, p.6)

The press has never been an ideologically neutral, solely profit-oriented system in this “everlasting battle for the minds of men” – it has always been a key propaganda weapon for corporate power. And we should not imagine that this struggle is at an end. Elite interests remain determined to shape public opinion, to limit the perceived range of conceivable options in their interests, and the media system is still a prime means for achieving these goals.

In other words, the result of hundreds of years of political struggle for corporate control against popular interference has resulted in a situation where it is simply understood that certain facts, ideas, values and aspirations are acceptable while others are not. Wealthy individual owners and parent corporations have selected senior managers and editors who understand this, and who select journalists – company men like Davies – who perceive the architecture of the media as ideologically neutral rather than the product of political struggle.

Davies’s analysis is so flawed, such a symptom of the problem he has failed to perceive, because he is able to ask in all seriousness: “Why would a profession lose touch with its primary function? Why would truth-telling disintegrate into the mass production of ignorance?” (p.45)

Truth-telling has *never* been the primary function of Davies’s profession. Even the idea of “professional journalism” is a fraud. As media analyst Robert McChesney notes it is no coincidence that the notion of professionalism appeared just as corporations achieved an unprecedented stranglehold at the beginning of the 20th century: “Savvy publishers understood that they needed to have their journalism appear neutral and unbiased, notions entirely foreign to the journalism of the era of the Founding Fathers, or their businesses would be far less profitable.” (McChesney, in Kristina Borjesson, ed., *Into The Buzzsaw – Leading Journalists Expose The Myth Of A Free Press*, Prometheus Books, 2002, p.367)

Wealthy owners could thereby claim that editors and reporters were freed from external influence by trained, professional judgement. This allowed the corporate

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

media monopoly to be presented as a “neutral” service to democracy. The claim, McChesney notes, was “entirely bogus”.

By contrast, Davies endlessly reiterates his faith in the essential neutrality of his profession: “If the primary purpose of journalism is to tell the truth, then it follows that the primary function of journalists must be to check and to reject whatever is not true.” (p.51)

We can perhaps imagine a critical military officer observing: “If the primary purpose of an army is national defence, then...” This is the view of a professional divorced from the political reality out of which he and his army has emerged. Imagine, after all, if the military officer were speaking of the German Wehrmacht in 1939, or of the Soviet Red Army. Imagine if Davies were a Soviet journalist.

Davies reassures us that there is more than just “churnalism”: “it is possible that as much as 20% of Fleet Street’s work is still being produced entirely by independent journalists”. (p.95)

But how is a corporate employee in any sense “independent”?

Davies writes: “the evidence I found in researching my new book, *Flat Earth News*, suggests our tendency to recycle ignorance is far worse than it was”. (Guardian, op., cit)

This naïve idea that the corporate media merely “recycle ignorance” goes to the heart of Davies’s analysis. We sent Noam Chomsky a link to Davies’s Guardian article. Chomsky responded: “Judging by the article, which is all I’ve seen, his inquiry into the media is complementary to ours. He’s writing about how local stories about children’s squabbles are insufficiently sourced. We are investigating systematic bias in selecting and framing news and opinion, and tracing it to its institutional source. For the story about the children, insiders’ reports are appropriate. For inquiry into any of the topics that Ed [Herman] and I discussed in MC [*Manufacturing Consent*], or elsewhere jointly or separately, it’s at most worth some footnotes. On the WMD, there’s no disagreement about what happened, and essentially nothing to unearth. The media uncritically accepted government propaganda, with some scattered exceptions. Furthermore, as we’ve shown, that’s routine. It’s not a matter of a ‘tendency to recycle ignorance,’ transparently. If that were so, we’d expect reliance on the state to be randomly interspersed among cases of reliance on its enemies and independent sources. I don’t think anyone with a gray cell functioning would claim that. And if they did, it would be very quickly refuted.

“So I don’t really see any conflict. Just different topics. And it is not in the least surprising that this is the kind of critique that the media and intellectuals would be happy to discuss, praise, or denounce, because it leaves untouched their systematic

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

behavior and the institutional reasons for it. I'd have expected the same in the old Soviet Union. – Noam” (Email to Media Lens, February 17, 2008)

Give Them What They Want? 6-10

Davies's focus on the relative innocence of corporate profit-making leads him to even greater extremes in his second five “Rules of production”. We are asked to believe that newspapers are motivated to maximise profits by succeeding in a competition to give readers what they want. Again, there is no mention here of the direct and indirect influence of advertising. Davies's summary of how his rules “fit neatly into the new structure of corporate news organisations” again presents the media as an ideologically neutral bystander just trying to make a buck: “Journalists who are denied the time to work effectively 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.” (p.147)

Nevertheless, there is hope: “There are still reporters who have the time to do their work effectively, and it is still possible to break the rules of production.” (p.149)

But it is almost impossible to break the rules of production because the entire system is the result of an ongoing struggle to organise society in a way that favours powerful interests. It is not enough for reporters to have the time. These are reporters like Davies who have succeeded precisely *because* they do not fundamentally challenge the system.

And this is why Davies's book has been so eagerly embraced by the corporate media it claims to expose. He is willing to expose failings in the media system – including the rotten apples at the Observer – but he is not willing to expose the fundamental corruption of a corporate media system operating within corporate capitalist society.

As an answer to the question of “What is to be done?” Davies has nothing serious to offer: an “imaginary world” in which a parallel news organisation would monitor global press honesty; Annual Flat Earth News awards; and an initiative to “force media owners to provide decent levels of staffing; resurrect the network of front-line reporters which once covered the country and indeed the globe...”. (p.393)

Davies notes that, according to a recently retired officer, MI6 runs an intelligence section which has particularly close links to the Daily Telegraph, the Sunday Telegraph and the Financial Times. (p.231) The former UN arms inspector, Scott Ritter, reports MI6 propaganda specialists declaring that they could spread their

FLAT EARTH NEWS: THE INSIDE VIEW | DAVID EDWARDS

material through “editors and writers who work with us from time to time”. (p.231)

If the media, and Davies, were serious about putting an end to Flat Earth News, they would surely begin with suggestions for identifying and stamping out this kind of crude corruption.

Conclusion

Davies’s underlying message is an old one and it all but guarantees a sense of hopelessness. It is, to borrow the words of PR guru Walter Lippmann, that the important work of media analysis and reform is the domain of the “responsible men,” who must “live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd”. This is the general public, the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” whose “function” is to be “spectators,” not “participants”. (www.zcommunications.org/znet/viewArticle/16522)

Flat Earth News invites us to focus on staffing levels, on a lack of journalistic time and resources. It invites us to tinker at the edges of a system which in fact is rotten to the core. Or rather it invites “insiders” to address these issues. But authentic reform of hierarchical, exploitative social systems – of which the corporate mass media is a classic example – has only ever been achieved by democratic pressure from outside.

Perhaps in years to come, *Flat Earth News* will be seen as part of the corporate media’s response to the growing clamour from internet-based “meddlesome outsiders”. With increasing effectiveness, these are demanding that anyone with compassion for suffering, anyone required to witness the appalling impact of corporate media bias, *is*, in fact, an “insider”.



READ MORE ESSAYS BY DAVID EDWARDS AT COLDTYPE.NET

Download political essays by many of the best and brightest commentators from around the world, plus books, booklets, essays, newspapers and magazines – all in pdf format – all free of charge, at

www.coldtype.net

(Click on this link to enter web site)



ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD