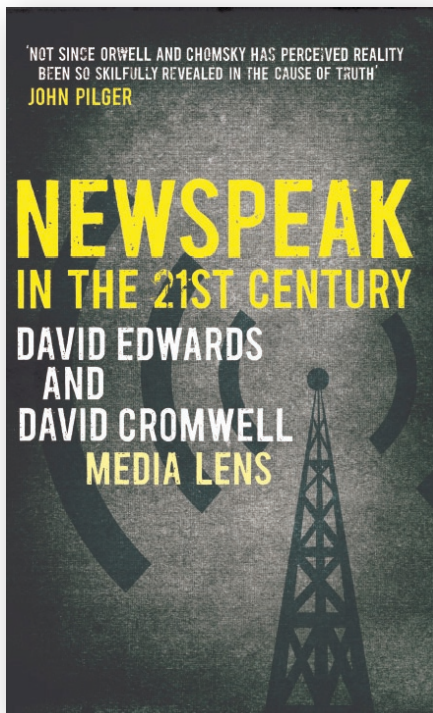


HIRED HANDS

THE CORPORATE
CONTROL OF MAINSTREAM
JOURNALISM

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THE CORPORATE CONTROL OF MAINSTREAM JOURNALISM

Part 1: Iran, Obama, Gaza and MPs' expenses

The modern corporation is an inherently predatory, even psychopathic, entity. Business managers are legally obliged to subordinate human and environmental welfare to profit.

Inevitably, then, corporations do not restrict themselves merely to the arena of economics. Rather, as John Dewey observed, “politics is the shadow cast on society by big business”. Over decades, corporations have worked together to ensure that the choices offered by ‘representative democracy’ all represent their greed for maximised profits.

This is a sensitive task. We do not live in a totalitarian society – the public potentially has enormous power to interfere. The goal, then, is to persuade the public that corporate-sponsored political choice is meaningful, that it makes a difference. The task of politicians at all points of the supposed ‘spectrum’ is to appear passionately principled while participating in what is essentially a charade. Thus, in a

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moving piece, *Daily Telegraph* journalist Con Coughlin lamented of Iran’s recent elections: “... the democratic hopes of all those brave Iranians who have taken to the streets will ultimately be in vain. Even if Mr Khatami were to sacrifice Mr Ahmadinejad in the interests of preserving the regime, the president would simply be replaced by another Iranian leader whose first priority would be to protect the ideological foundations of Khomeini’s Islamic revolution.” (Con Coughlin, ‘Iran’s brave revolutionaries can change nothing but the faces,’ *Daily Telegraph*, June 17, 2009)

A *Guardian* leader shared the *Telegraph*’s pain: “Iranians do not want another revolution. They wanted the Islamic republic to respond and evolve. But there is a limit to the number of times you can go to a well which always turns out to be dry.” (Leader, ‘Iran: Regime against change,’ *The Guardian*, June 20, 2009)

Unmentioned by the *Guardian*, the “well” is also bone “dry” in Britain and America. Consider our political system:

1. Meaningful political choice for people opposed to US-UK militarism and wars of aggression: None.

2. Choice for people opposed to socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor: None.

3. Choice for people serious about subordinating maximised corporate profits for genuine action to halt catastrophic climate change: None.

4. Choice for people seeking mainstream media supporting genuine change: None.

5. Choice for people eager to elect politicians with 'ring of confidence' smiles and charisma: Substantial.

It is because of point 4 that points 1-5 are swamped in confusion and mendacity. Some readers may even now be wagging a corrective finger at us insisting that action is most certainly being taken on climate change. How dare we misrepresent the facts so starkly? Why so negative? Obama, for example, has surely made a serious commitment to greening the US car industry. In a forthcoming alert we hope to report the responses of climate scientists to some elementary questions. We asked how far governments have thus far really gone towards tackling climate change: were they 5%, 10%, 50% of the way there? One of the world's leading climate scientists responded starkly: "0%".

The role of the media is to pretend that something *is* being done; that elections, for example, are meaningful, even "historic". As one scrupulously neutral *Guardian* news reporter wrote of Obama's victory: "Just being alive at a time when it's so evident that history is being made was elating and exhausting." (Oliver Burkeman, 'Momentous, spine-tingling, absurd: an election like never before,' *The Guardian*, November 5, 2008)

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tion of that other great liberal hero, Tony Blair: "Few now sang England Arise, but England had risen all the same." (Leader, 'A political earthquake,' *The Guardian*, May 2, 1997)

More recently, the *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland swooned at the quality of Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo, declaring "there will be few more masterful speeches than this one". Freedland's mind was attuned, not to the goals and logic of US realpolitik, but to the poetic: "In an ancient city, America's still-new president aimed to heal a rift that has endured for decades, if not centuries. Barack Obama stood before a crowd of 3,000 in the great hall of Cairo University yesterday to deliver a speech that demonstrated not only his trademark eloquence but also the sheer ambition of his purpose - nothing less than bridging the divide between Islam and the west." (Freedland, 'The US and Islam: The speech no other president could make,' *The Guardian*, June 5, 2009)

The aim really is to "heal a rift", not to *appear* to aim to do so, as virtually every US president (Bush II included) has done. And the problem is best described as a "rift" - perhaps a misunderstanding between equals - rather than as, say, a Western jackboot stamping on a Third World human face - forever. Public relations guru Walter Lippmann wrote in his book, *Public Opinion*, that social control in the modern age would depend on an "intensification of feeling and a degradation of significance".

The key message in Freedland's article (and thousands like it) is transparent: "All of this was a world away from George W Bush, who was unable to address Muslims in a tone that was not bellicose or patronising. If Bush had said the same words, they would have sounded phoney."

That awful Bush! Thank goodness he

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has gone so the American political brand can be made over: “Obama’s aim was to break through the suspicion and cynicism that have accreted over decades and show that America is under truly new management.”

That is indeed the aim - the role of journalists like Freedland is to suggest it is something more than propaganda.

Back in the real world, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported last month on the aftermath of the US-equipped and US-backed Israeli Operation Cast Lead attack on Gaza from December 27, 2008 - January 18, 2009: “Gaza neighbourhoods particularly hard hit by the Israeli strikes will continue to look like the epicentre of a massive earthquake unless vast quantities of cement, steel and other building materials are allowed into the territory for reconstruction.”

An ICRC household survey conducted in May 2008 showed that, even before the latest assault, over 70 per cent of Gazans were living in poverty, with monthly incomes of less than 1 US dollar per household member per day (excluding the value of humanitarian assistance which they may receive). Up to 40 per cent of Gaza families are very poor; with an income of 0.5 dollar per household member per day. For tens of thousands of children, this has resulted in deficiencies in iron, vitamin A and vitamin D. Likely consequences include “stunted growth of bones and teeth, difficulty in fighting off infections, fatigue and a reduced capacity to learn”. ICRC comment further: “Most of the very poor have exhausted their coping mechanisms. Many have no savings left. They have sold private belongings such as jewellery and furniture and started to sell productive assets including farm animals, land, fishing boats or cars used as taxis. They are



It is sadly standard for Western leaders to consider human disasters, first, in terms of their potential threat to the “security” of the West and its allies

unable to reduce spending on food any further. The declining living standards will affect the health and well-being of the population in the long term. Those worst affected are likely to be children, who make up more than half of Gaza’s population.”

What has the West, including Obama, done to relieve this suffering in the aftermath of Israel’s ferocious assault and ongoing siege? Nothing. In May 2009, 2,662 truckloads of goods entered Gaza from Israel, a decrease of almost 80 per cent compared to the 11,392 truckloads allowed in during April 2007. About Israel’s December-January massacre of 1400 Palestinians, Obama said not one word in his June 4 speech. About the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe, he said merely: “Israel must also live up to its obligations to ensure that Palestinians can live, and work, and develop their society. And just as it devastates Palestinian families, the continuing humanitarian crisis in Gaza does not serve Israel’s security...”

It is sadly standard for Western leaders to consider human disasters, first, in terms of their potential threat to the “security” of the West and its allies.

I asked Noam Chomsky (July 2, 2009) about the ongoing strangulation of Gaza:

“Is this one of those situations where a client state would relent instantly after a couple of phone calls from Washington? Is the truth that Obama could have lifted the siege, if he’d really wanted to?”

Chomsky replied the same day: “Unquestionably. He hasn’t even been willing to go as far as the mild tap on the wrist by Bush I. Same with Honduras.”

Amnesty International last week gave an idea of what Obama could, and should, have said. Noting that 1,400 Palestinians, including 300 children, were killed in Operation Cast Lead, Amnesty commented:

“Most were killed with high-precision weapons, relying on surveillance drones which have exceptionally good optics, allowing those observing to see their targets in detail. Others were killed with imprecise weapons, including artillery shells carrying white phosphorus - not previously used in Gaza - which should never be used in densely populated areas.

“Amnesty International found that the victims of the attacks it investigated were not caught in the crossfire during battles between Palestinian militants and Israeli forces, nor were they shielding militants or other military objects. Many were killed when their homes were bombed while they slept. Others were sitting in their yard or hanging the laundry on the roof. Children were struck while playing in their bedrooms or on the roof, or near their homes. Paramedics and ambulances were repeatedly attacked while attempting to rescue the wounded or recover the dead.

“The deaths of so many children and other civilians cannot be dismissed simply as “collateral damage”, as argued by Israel,’ said Donatella Rovera. ‘Many questions remain to be answered about these attacks and about the fact that the strikes continued unabated despite the rising civilian death toll.’” (Amnesty, ‘Impunity for war crimes in Gaza and southern Israel a recipe for further civilian suffering,’ July 2, 2009)

And yet in response to Obama’s silence, Freedland invites us to soar in poetic reverie, to connect with our highest hopes for a better world. From this perspective, critical thought is cynical, ‘old-left’ carping, with facts an irrelevance beside the “new” and “historic” optimism that will carry us to a better place (hand in hand with the unchanged corporate psychopath at our side).



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We are invited to wallow this way in response to no other world leader. The subliminal lesson being taught is that we should allow ourselves to melt in the womb-like psychological warmth that is submission to power. It is the antithesis of the message delivered by all the great masters of culture, the true friends of humanity. Without exception, they have urged us: submit to no-one, hand over responsibility to no-one. Take responsibility for solving your own problems through your own capacity for reason and determined effort.

As ever, to escape this saccharine conflating of rhetoric and reality - Freedland was equally impressed by the “sheer ambition” of Blair’s noble “purpose” - we are forced to leave the mainstream far behind. A recent Bill Blum blog comment: “America, and the world, have to grow up. Forget color. Forget ethnicity. Forget gender. Forget sexual orientation. Forget even the class the person comes from. Look at the class they *serve*. And understand that the person wouldn’t be in the position they are, or be nominated for the position, if there was any serious question about their loyalty to the capitalist ethic or American world domination.”

Poetry aside, the facts are clear: “His policies and his appointments have all fallen in that area that runs from ever so slightly to the left of center to clear conservative and imperialist on the right. He’s more loath to being identified as, or collaborating with, progressives than with right-wingers. Team Obama sees the left as an eccentric old aunt who keeps showing up at family functions, making everyone uncomfortable and wishing she’d just go away.” (Ibid)

This is the reality and it is rooted in the psychopathic system designed over decades and centuries to serve entrenched

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interests that have certainly not gone away.

An Organised Criminal Conspiracy

But if politics is the shadow cast on society by psychopathic power, what manner of men and women are politicians? Peter Osborne explained in the *Daily Mail*: “Nobody can say any longer that our politicians are motivated by honesty, duty or patriotism. Almost to a man and woman they have been exposed as cheats and crooks whose primary motivation is lining their own pockets rather than serving Britain.

“As a result, Parliament itself no longer looks like our greatest national institution. Instead, it has been exposed as an organised criminal conspiracy whose primary purpose is to defraud the taxpayer and serve the vested interest of a venal political class.”

Subsequent revelations exposed, among others, “former housing minister Nick Raynsford, who reportedly receives £148,000 from six private sector posts - most of them connected to housing. Ex-health secretary Alan Milburn, who announced on Saturday he is stepping down as an MP at the next General Election, earns at least £115,000 a year from five firms including Lloyds Pharmacy and PepsiCo.”

The expenses scandal had of course long been known to politicians and journalists - barely a word was spoken of it. In April, for example, the *Guardian* coyly noted “the very big hole threatening to swallow up MPs when their past expenses are published in full in July. All sorts of horrors will be revealed then.” (Leading article: ‘Parliamentary expenses: Clocking in,’ *The Guardian*, April 22, 2009)

The press never saw fit to blow the whistle until the truth was leaked in the



The key revelation of the expenses scandal is not that MPs ripped off the taxpayer, but that they are indeed part of “an organised criminal conspiracy”, an elite state-corporate club. Why is this important? Because these are the same people who forever claim to be driven by moral principle in domestic and foreign policy

form of a DVD to the *Daily Telegraph*. Why should they when they are also on the take? Some 27 BBC executives earn more than prime minister Gordon Brown’s £195,000. The BBC’s director-general, Mark Thompson, “trousers a basic wedge of £647k”.

Happily, this does not cause Thompson’s organisation to be in any way biased when reporting corporate elites and their impoverished victims in the Third World.

The key revelation of the expenses scandal is not that MPs ripped off the taxpayer, but that they are indeed part of “an organised criminal conspiracy”, an elite state-corporate club. Why is this important? Because these are the same people who forever claim to be driven by moral principle in domestic and foreign policy. Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq *had* to be bombed, they told us, in defence of human rights.

These deceptions were protected by an appearance of sincerity, by the assumption that our politicians are fundamentally well-intentioned. The reality, as MP George Galloway has observed, is that the House of Commons is a place where one can witness the curious spectacle of “a shiver looking for a spine to run up.”

The corporate journalists ostensibly working to protect society from this corruption are part of the same system, the same elite club. In a booklet from 2001 entitled, ‘An Activist’s Guide to Exploiting the Media,’ George Monbiot wrote of ‘Our Advantages’ under the title ‘Integrity’: “We’re genuine people, not hired hands defending a corporate or institutional position. This shows when we allow it to: an open and straightforward appeal to common sense can cut through the clamour of self interest and spin doctoring with a powerful resonance. When we keep our message uncluttered and get straight

to the point we can be devastatingly effective.” (George Monbiot, *An Activist’s Guide to Exploiting the Media*, Bookmarks Publications, 2001)

By obvious implication, mainstream journalists - including Monbiot 2009, now at the *Guardian* - are “hired hands defending a corporate or institutional position”.

We have written of the “political anthropomorphism” that obstructs perception of this reality. Yes, individuals +do+ freely write their thoughts and beliefs in a multitude of newspapers. And yes, these individuals *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. Thus Simon Jenkins can write of the Vietnam War:

“Vietnam began with Kennedy’s noble 1963 intervention, to keep the communist menace at bay and thus make the world safe for democracy.”

In fact, the Vietnam war began with the US rejection of Vietnamese appeals for post-war independence and with US support for a standard client terror state serving US needs. The enemy was not Communism - Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh appealed repeatedly to the US to support its struggle for independence. The real threat was independent nationalism challenging US corporate control in the country and in the region. As historian Howard Zinn has noted: “When I read the hundreds of pages of the Pentagon Papers entrusted to me by [military analyst] Daniel Ellsberg, what jumped out at me were the secret memos from the National Security Council. Explaining the U.S. interest in Southeast Asia, they spoke bluntly of the country’s motives as a quest



These views are not the product of mere ignorance - no matter how many times activists expose their distortions, journalists return to the same default mode of ‘respectable’ writing

for ‘tin, rubber, oil.’”

In similar vein, as US forces are removed from Iraqi cities, the BBC’s Nicholas Witchell described them as “the soldiers who came to liberate” Iraq.

The BBC wrote on Iran: “At least 10 people were killed when police clashed with ‘terrorists’ in Tehran on Saturday, state TV says. The official reports, which cannot be confirmed accuse ‘rioters’ of setting two petrol stations and a mosque ablaze in protest at a disputed poll result.”

The use of inverted commas was striking. By contrast, the BBC subsequently wrote of Afghanistan: “At least 10 militants have died after missiles were fired by a suspected US drone aircraft at a Taliban target in Pakistan, intelligence officials say.

“Unnamed officials said it was an attack on a militant training facility in the South Waziristan area.”

The aircraft was a “suspected” drone - there was no doubt about the militant status of the dead.

The point is that the Jenkins, Witchell and general BBC version of events is corporate media-approved. You come to think and write this way when you become one of the “hired hands”. Alternatively, you are hired because your mind is right. These views are not the product of mere ignorance - no matter how many times activists expose their distortions, journalists return to the same default mode of ‘respectable’ writing. Monbiot 2001 would surely have rolled his eyes at these words from Monbiot 2009:

“Were it not for an [advertising] industry I detest... The *Guardian* would not be an independent newspaper.” (<http://>We wrote to Monbiot asking for an explanation, but have received no reply.

Part 2: Reporting elections in Iran and Iraq

As discussed in Part 1, media across the UK ‘spectrum’ have expressed outrage at even circumstantial evidence of Iranian political corruption. A *Guardian* leader observed: “That the Iranian elections were fixed is impossible to prove, but that Iranians voted as the official figures indicate seems impossible to believe. Who could believe, for example, that Mir Hossein Mousavi, the reform candidate in the presidential elections, has lost by a huge margin in his own home town?... Electoral fixes can come in sophisticated versions, or they can come in crude and contrived forms. This one falls into the latter category.” (Leader, ‘The Iranian vote: Reform denied,’ *The Guardian*, June 19, 2009)

The *Daily Telegraph* agreed: “The election results, announced over the weekend, lack all credibility.” (Leader, ‘Democracy the loser in Iran’s “free” election,’ *Daily Telegraph*, June 15, 2009)

The *Times* lamented the lack of protest from the West: “But surely, at least, the West could give louder voice to its outrage, its contempt for this farce. Or will it, like the pusillanimous leaders of China,



The call for a “louder voice” of outrage from the West could hardly be more ironic. Consider the media response to the January 2005 elections in Iraq that took place under superpower military occupation in conditions of extreme violence

Russia and its Central Asian allies welcoming President Ahmadinejad in Yekaterinburg, sacrifice a moral stance to political expediency? Mir Hossein Mousavi is neither a liberal nor an opponent of the Islamist state. Swiftly, however, he is becoming a symbol of resistance to repression.” (Leader, ‘A Hollow Democracy,’ *The Times*, June 17, 2009)

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The Iraqi interim government had forced the independent al-Jazeera TV station and critical newspapers to shut down. Former US proconsul Paul Bremer had banned all reporting on the rebirth of the Baath Party and all protests calling for an end to the occupation. In the month prior to voting, Baghdad-based journalist Borzou Daragahi reported that Iraqi reporters were under threat from US troops, Iraqi police and insurgents:

“We’re unable to get access to anybody,” one journalist told him. “We’re frightened.” (Daragahi, *Arab Reform Bulletin* Vol. 2, December 11, 2004)

James Forsyth, online editor for the *Business* and the *Spectator* later put the violence in perspective: “Iraq is the most difficult conflict in any of our lifetimes to report... Much normal reporting is simply impossible.”

The risks were such that electoral candidates were unable to canvas voters and even reveal their names. Voters were therefore not in a position to make any kind of informed choice. While US-subsidised media broadcast freely, officials working for interim prime minister and former CIA asset, Ayad Allawi, were found to have been handing journalists envelopes stuffed with \$100 notes for turning up at press conferences.

Washington-funded organisations famous for manipulating foreign democracies in favour of US interests were deeply involved in the election. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) were part of a consortium to which the US government had provided over \$80 million for political and electoral activities in Iraq. NDI was headed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, while IRI was chaired by Republican Senator John McCain. Professor William I. Robinson of the Global and International Studies Programme at the University of California called NDI and IRI “extensions” of the US State Department:

“I suspect that [NDI and IRI] are trying to select individual leaders and organisations that are going to be very amenable to the US transnational project for Iraq.”

Robinson argued that selected leaders had to be willing to engage in “pacifying the country militarily and legitimating the occupation and the formal electoral system”. The goal being to guarantee that Iraq was controlled by “economic, politi-



According to military officials, the US task force had bought one Iraqi newspaper outright and taken control of a radio station, using them to disseminate pro-US propaganda to the Iraqi people. Neither of these news outlets was identified to the Iraqi public as being under US control

cal and civic groups that are going to be favourable to Iraq’s integration into the global capitalist economy”.

In 2005, it emerged that, since 2004, the US military had been secretly paying Iraqi newspapers to publish pro-American propaganda. Articles written by US troops under the direction of the military’s Information Operations Task Force had been translated into Arabic and planted in Baghdad newspapers with the assistance of the Washington-based Lincoln Group and its subcontractor BKSH & Associates. The *New York Times* reported: “The Pentagon’s first public relations contract with Lincoln was awarded in 2004 for about \$5 million with the stated purpose of accurately informing the Iraqi people of American goals and gaining their support. But while meant to provide reliable information, the effort was also intended to use deceptive techniques, like payments to sympathetic ‘temporary spokespersons’ who would not necessarily be identified as working for the coalition, according to a contract document and a military official.

“In addition, the document called for the development of ‘alternate or diverting messages which divert media and public attention’ to ‘deal instantly with the bad news of the day.’” (Jeff Gerth and Scott Shane, ‘U.S. Is Said to Pay to Plant Articles in Iraq Papers,’ *New York Times*, December 1, 2005)

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Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies described deeper difficulties with the elections: “An election cannot be legit-

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imate when it is conducted under foreign military occupation; when the country is nominally ruled by, and the election will be officially run by, a puppet government put and kept in place by the occupying army and the election will be under the ultimate control of the occupying army; when war is raging extensively enough to prevent participation by much of the population; and when the election is designed to choose a new assembly responsible for drafting a constitution and selecting a government that will continue to function under the conditions of military occupation.”

Unleashing The Dogs Of Hell

There were other problems. In November 2004, Edward Herman noted that Iraq was “nominally ruled by Ayad Al-lawi, openly selected by US officials, but taken by the media (and Kofi Annan and the UN) as a genuine leader of Iraq. In the runup to ‘saving’ Fallujah, US military officials say that they are awaiting a go-ahead from the head-of-sovereign-Iraq, Mr. Al-lawi, for permission!” (Herman, ‘We Had To Destroy Fallujah in Order to Save It,’ ZNet Commentary, November 8, 2004)

On November 8, 2004 - two months before the elections - ITV showed footage of a speech by US Marine general John Sattler to US troops as they prepared to attack Falluja: “This town’s being held hostage by mugs, thugs, murderers and intimidators. All they need is for us to give them the opportunity to break the back of that intimidation.” (ITV News, 12:30pm, November 8, 2004)

Later that day, Channel 4 News broadcast the thoughts of a US Marine on broad issues of strategy: “We’ll unleash the dogs of hell, we’ll unleash ‘em... They don’t even know what’s coming - hell is coming! If there are civilians in there, they’re in



A senior US Army commander involved in planning the offensive subsequently visited the city. Stunned by the level of destruction, he said: “My God, what are the folks who live here going to say when they see this?”

the wrong place at the wrong time.” (Sergeant Sam Mortimer, US Marines, Channel 4 News, November 8, 2004)

In January 2005, Iraqi doctor, Ali Fadhil, described the results: “By 10am we were inside the city. It was completely devastated, destruction everywhere. It looked like a city of ghosts. Falluja used to be a modern city; now there was nothing. We spent the day going through the rubble that had been the centre of the city; I didn’t see a single building that was functioning.” (Fadhil, ‘City of ghosts,’ *The Guardian*, January 11, 2005)

A senior US Army commander involved in planning the offensive subsequently visited the city. Stunned by the level of destruction, he said: “My God, what are the folks who live here going to say when they see this?”

The answer was provided by physician Mahammad J. Haded, director of an Iraqi refugee centre, who was in Falluja during the onslaught: “The city is today totally ruined. Falluja is our Dresden in Iraq... The population is full of rage.” (

The press reaction was interesting. In March 2005, a *Guardian* editorial entitled, ‘Stealing Democracy,’ observed of elections in Zimbabwe: “Intimidation, gerrymandering and the use of famine relief as a weapon are just some of the many abuses that have been documented so far” in “what looks like being an utterly flawed election”. (Leader, ‘Stealing democracy,’ *The Guardian*, March 29, 2005)

And yet, despite having themselves reported the destruction of Falluja, the same editors declared the Iraq process “the country’s first free election in decades”, a “landmark election” that would be “in a way, a grand moment”. (Leader, ‘Vote against violence,’ *The Guardian*, January 7, 2005; Leader, ‘On the threshold,’ *The Guardian*, January 29, 2005)

The *Independent's* editors asked if Zimbabwe's elections could be considered free and fair: "The answer is emphatically no." (Leader, 'Zimbabwe has been wrecked by Mr Mugabe - and this election could make things worse,' *The Independent*, March 31, 2005)

Obviously, ongoing and previous violence were central concerns in considering the legitimacy of the process: "Much has been made of the lack of violence compared with four years ago. But Mr Mugabe has found other means of coercion... And the legacy of the government's previous campaign of violence lives on. Opposition activists are drained after years of torture and assaults."

As for the Iraqi elections: "Whether it turns out that 50, 60 or more than 70 per cent of all registered Iraqis voted, a sufficient number risked the walk to the polling station to make this first attempt at a free election for half a century a credible exercise in democracy." (Leader, 'These elections inspire hope for democracy, but cannot vindicate a misguided war,' *The Independent*, January 31, 2005)

Imagine if the Iranian government had attacked and demolished a major Iranian city, a centre of anti-government resistance, killing thousands of people a few weeks ahead of elections, sending a clear message to dissidents everywhere. Would our media perhaps have perceived this as problematic for the claim that subsequent elections were free and fair?

Our search of the LexisNexis media database showed that there had not been a single substantive analysis of the extent of press freedom in occupied Iraq anywhere in the UK press in the six months prior to the January 2005 elections. A *Guardian* report on January 4 noted: "A low turnout might undermine the legitimacy of the first free elections attempted since the



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overthrow of the monarchy in 1958." (Sam Jones, 'Car bomb in Iraq kills three Britons,' *The Guardian*, January 4, 2005)

In another news report, the *Guardian's* Ewen MacAskill described how Iraq was preparing "for the country's first democratic election next month". (MacAskill, 'Blair "feels the danger" on visit to Baghdad,' *The Guardian*, December 22, 2004)

Helen Boaden, the BBC's director of news, wrote to one Media Lens reader: "The Iraqi elections are the first democratic elections in Iraq for 50 years - acknowledged as a democratic opportunity. We know that the Americans and the British want the elections to be free and fair - but of course we don't yet know if that will be the case - especially bearing in mind security. But our aim is to provide impartial, fair and accurate coverage, reflecting significant strands of argument to enable our audiences to make up their own minds." (Boden, forwarded to Media Lens, January 21, 2005)

Roger Mosey, head of BBC Television, broke his usual silence to write:

"Dear [Name Withheld]

I may be missing something here, but can you explain why you think the British and the Americans don't want to have democratic elections in Iraq when they've set out a process and a timetable by which that's achieved? I can understand a frenzy if George W Bush had said 'no elections' - but hasn't he said the opposite?

Best wishes

Roger" (Mosey, forwarded to Media Lens, January 22, 2005)

The same complacent acceptance of the political process in Iraq poured forth from keyboards across the media. The *Sunday Times* wrote: "The terrorists will do all they can to destroy democratic elections." (Leader, 'Send more troops,' *Sunday Times*, October 10, 2004)

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The *Financial Times* observed: “Iraq’s first democratic election is unfolding under the shadow of a deadly insurgency.” (Steve Negus and John Reed, ‘Allawi runs on claim of “strong leadership”,’ *Financial Times*, December 16, 2004)

The shadow of a deadly superpower occupation unleashing “the dogs of hell” was apparently not an issue.

The editors of the *Express* explained proudly: “It is Britain and America that want to give the besieged people of Iraq their true freedom, to hold free elections and elect a democratic government.” (Leader, ‘Nothing short of insulting,’ *The*



The shadow of a deadly superpower occupation unleashing “the dogs of hell” was apparently not an issue

Express, October 6, 2004)

The *Mirror* declared that Iraq was approaching “its first democratic elections”. (‘Police chief and son assassinated,’ January 11, 2005, *The Mirror*) And so on...

This is all very curious, is it not? The same British media that declared Iraq’s January 2005 elections admirably free, fair and democratic are now appalled by the obvious flaws in Iran’s elections. How are we to make sense of the difference?

George Monbiot got it right: mainstream journalists, quite simply, are “hired hands defending a corporate or institutional position”.

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