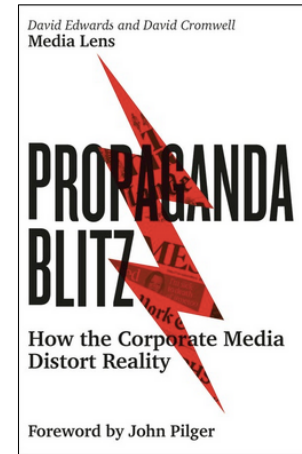


David Edwards and David Cromwell of Media Lens, **Propaganda Blitz: How the Corporate Media Distort Reality**, London: Pluto Press, 2018, 312 pp., £75.00 (hardcover), £14.99 (paperback).

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In the era of Trump, Brexit, economic collapse, and political polarization, trust in media around the world is falling (Matsa, Silver, Shearer, & Walker, 2018). Two of the most strident, long-standing and influential critics of the media are David Edwards and David Cromwell of Media Lens, whose latest book, **Propaganda Blitz: How the Corporate Media Distort Reality**, was published in September 2018. Clearly influenced by Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) propaganda model, and continuing a tradition of leftist critique and analysis of UK media (see Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Hall & Roberts, 1978; Mills, 2016; Philo & Berry, 2004), the authors reject the idea of the media as a fourth estate challenging the power of the government and elite, instead claiming that “major news media are an intrinsic component of this system run for the benefit of elites. The media are, in effect, the public relations wing of a planetary-wide network of exploitation, abuse and destruction” (pp. 207–208).

Challenging the idea that objective journalists simply report facts, the authors argue that behind any presented fact is a judgment that this fact—and not others—is the most important and relevant piece of information. Thus, the most important bias a journalist has is in their selection and curation of facts. The authors describe corporate media as resembling “giant magnifying glasses that roam the world, highlighting facts that benefit corporate-friendly parties, leaders, allied states and voices. They also magnify facts that undermine and harm corporate-unfriendly parties, leaders, groups and voices” (p. xvi).

Therefore, corporate media is not neutral but designed to share a warped perception of the world that aligns with corporate and government interests in an attempt to engineer consent for the positions and actions of the elite in society. One technique the media use, according to Edwards and Cromwell, is the “propaganda blitz.” In chapter 1, the authors set out what they mean by the phrase, something they will go on to catalog throughout the book. They describe propaganda blitzes as fast-moving media stories intended to cause maximum exposure and influence in a short amount of time. They are based on apparently dramatic new evidence and communicated with high emotional intensity and moral outrage to the viewer or reader. Crucial in the blitz’s effectiveness is to give the impression that the position enjoys consensus support among experts and is reinforced with loud and damning condemnation of anyone who questions this supposed new consensus. Finally, the authors note that propaganda blitzes are often generated with fortuitous timing and characterized by a “tragicomic moral dissonance” (p. 1).

Edwards and Cromwell identify a number of historic examples of propaganda blitzes, including the Gulf of Tonkin incident, where the false story that U.S. destroyers were attacked by Vietnam and the false story that in 1990 the Iraqi military had murdered 312 babies. The prime source for this claim was a girl

who claimed to be a nurse but, in fact, was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States. Both stories were whipped up into propaganda blitzes by the media and were used as justification for massive military onslaughts on Vietnam and Iraq, respectively (pp. 2–4).

Much of the other 11 separate but related chapters of the book are dedicated to presenting individual case studies of modern propaganda blitzes. For example, chapter 2 alleges that the British media worked in unison with politicians to attempt to undermine and overthrow the socialist leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. Chapter 3 chronicles how other threats to the established order are dealt with, how the media attack “official” enemies such as Julian Assange, who published establishment documents and revealed elite secrets to the world, Russell Brand, the charismatic actor and comedian who questioned the system and argued for revolution, and Hugo Chavez, who established an alternative political system to neoliberalism in Venezuela. They were attacked as narcissists, buffoons, misogynists, or any other label the media could come up with in order to destroy any threat to corporate power. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the propaganda blitzes (based on highly questionable stories) preceding Western military involvement in Libya and Syria, with the media insisting the West must act immediately to prevent a human rights catastrophe. Chapter 10 details the media’s “amazing litany” (p. 173) of bias during the Scottish independence referendum, where virtually the entire media came out strongly to support a “no” vote.

In contrast to Syria and Libya, where the media demanded immediate intervention, chapters 7 and 11 deal with cases where the media has steadfastly downplayed or underreported a major story, those of the Yemen famine and climate change, respectively. This was, for the authors, primarily due to Western government involvement in Yemen and the threat to corporate profits action to prevent a climate catastrophe would entail. Edwards and Cromwell argue that there was very little emotional intensity and moral outrage conveyed during these stories, and found there was 10 times as much coverage of Syria than Yemen on the BBC, with “no significant journalistic scrutiny of [UK Prime Minister Theresa] May’s support of Saudi Arabia’s bombing of Yemen” (p. 139) while there was very little framing of natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey through the lens of climate change (pp. 195–197).

Although coming from a structuralist, broadly Marxist analysis, the authors reserve their most searing critiques for the left-wing establishment media, building on their previous works, *Newspeak in the 21st Century* and *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media*. Although perhaps appropriate for the modern media landscape, this sometimes descends into a rehashing of Twitter arguments with various liberal journalists.

Unlike the media they have been critiquing for nearly two decades, the authors feign no neutrality or objectivity, but are committed media reform activists. Their stated objective is to challenge the claim that corporate media is willing or able to report honestly and to encourage the general public to question the media (Media Lens, 2010). It was, therefore, a good decision to write the book in a more casual and less academic style to ensure its readability. However, one may question whether, if the goal is to reach a broad public, the written word is the best medium, rather than video or audio, the dissemination of which the Internet has greatly helped. Nevertheless, Edwards and Cromwell have made a convincing argument for viewing mass media not as a fourth estate challenging power but both a source of and a guardian of power itself.

Propaganda Blitz takes the structure of previous Media Lens works in presenting a number of different case studies of media bias centered around one unifying theme. For those who enjoyed their previous works, this will be a welcome addition. In contrast, those disagreeing with Cromwell and Edwards' position are unlikely to be convinced by this new offering. The book deals overwhelmingly with media in the Anglo sphere (particularly British and American media) and does not attempt to analyze other European or world media. It would be of use to undergraduate students of sociology and media and members of the public that are interested in the function of the media and how the world works, which, in this era, is a rapidly expanding market.

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