

US - Bush's War on the Press (Robert McChesney, ALAI)

Monday 12 December 2005, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

08/12/2005 - [ALAI](#) - America's leadership is waging a war against the journalistic standards and practices that underpin not only a free press but our democracy. The Fourth Estate is withering under an unprecedented White House assault designed to intimidate, smear and discredit investigative journalism - and allow the president and his political cronies to lie with impunity.

Free Press has just published a new report showing the scope and intensity of the administration's assault on press freedoms. The growing list of attacks on the press is truly astonishing:

Infiltrating Public Broadcasting

White House loyalists inside the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have launched a crusade to remake PBS, NPR and other public media into official mouthpieces. Kenneth Tomlinson's tenure at the CPB was characterized by targeting journalists like Bill Moyers who dared to air dissenting voices or prepare investigative reports on the administration.

Tomlinson's goal was clearly to fire a shot across the bow of all public stations so managers would shy away from the sort of investigative journalism that might expose Bush administration malfeasance. Tomlinson resigned in disgrace but left behind a cast of cronies to carry out his partisan crusade. And we still don't know the extent to which Karl Rove and others at the White House orchestrated his efforts.

Manufacturing Fake News

Under Bush administration directives, at least 20 federal agencies have produced and distributed scores of "video news releases" out of a \$254 million slush fund set up to manufacture taxpayer-funded propaganda. These bogus and deceptive stories have been broadcast on TV stations nationwide without any acknowledgment that they were prepared by the government rather than local journalists.

The segments - which trumpeted administration "successes," promoted its controversial line on issues like overhauling Medicare, and featured Americans "thanking" Bush - have been repeatedly labeled "covert propaganda" by investigators at the Government Accountability Office.

Bribing Journalists

The administration has paid pundits to sing its praises. Earlier this year, TV commentator Armstrong Williams pocketed \$240,000 in taxpayer money to laud Bush's education policies. Three other journalists have since been discovered on the government dole; and Williams admits that he has "no doubt" that other paid Bush shills are still on the loose.

The administration has even exported these tactics. According to the Los Angeles Times, the U.S. military is now secretly paying Iraqi newspapers to publish stories written by American troops.

Lying about the Iraq War

The White House saw the battle for domestic popular opinion as one of the main fronts in the war in Iraq. With the help of a compliant media, truth became the first casualty in their campaign to whip up support. But rather than admit to their lies and misinformation, the administration continues to attack those reporting the truth.

As Frank Rich recently wrote in the New York Times, the administration's "web of half-truths and falsehoods used to sell the war did not happen by accident; it was woven by design and then foisted on the public by a P.R. operation built expressly for that purpose in the White House."

Eliminating Dissent in the Mainstream Media

Bush has all but avoided traditional press conferences, closing down a prime venue for holding the executive accountable. On those rare occasions when he deigned to meet reporters, presidential aides turned the press conferences into parodies by seating a friendly right-wing "journalist," former male escort Jeff Gannon, amid the reporters and then steering questions to him when tough issues arose.

They have effectively silenced serious questioners, like veteran journalist Helen Thomas, by refusing to have the president or his aides call on reporters who challenge them. And they have established a hierarchy for journalists seeking interviews with administration officials, which favors networks that give the White House favorable coverage.

Gutting the Freedom of Information Act

The administration has scrapped enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act and has made it harder for reporters to do their jobs by refusing to cooperate with even the most basic requests for comment and data from government agencies. This is part of a broader clampdown on access to information that has made it virtually impossible for journalists to cover vast areas of government activity.

Consolidating Media Control

The administration continues to make common cause with the most powerful broadcast corporations in an effort to rewrite ownership laws in a manner that favors monopoly control of information. The Federal Communications Commission will announce plans to rewrite the ownership rules soon - it could happen as early as February - with aims of unleashing a new wave of media consolidation. The administration's desired rules changes would strike a mortal blow to local reporting and further squeeze journalists.

In a famous 1945 opinion, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black said that "the First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society." In other words, a free press is the sine qua non of the entire American Constitution and republican experiment.

Defending Our Press

The damage already done is reflected in plummeting public faith in reporters and the unrelenting stream of lies flowing from the White House into mainstream news.

This crisis can be attributed in part to the failure of big media corporations and some journalists to meet the basic responsibilities of the press in a democratic society. But the Bush administration's wholesale assault on a free press is also to blame. This White House has gone well beyond the cynical maneuvers of past administrations and implemented a scheme to tear down journalism and erode civil liberties.

Free Press has launched a nonpartisan campaign to defend democracy from the war on diverse and independent media. The campaign will exert grassroots and lobbying pressure to implement policies that hold our leadership accountable and ensure that abuses of press freedom are not repeated by this and future administrations.

Robert McChesney: Founder, President and Board Chairman of Free Press

More information:

<http://www.freepress.net/presswar/>

<http://www.alainet.org/active/9933&lang=en>