

Blair's Big Brother tactic number two: control the media



Blair, in one of his last speeches as British Prime Minister, stated that the British media had been out to get him and is a "feral beast". Though Blair admitted that in the first few years of his premiership, his party focused too much on spin, i.e. how to make bad news look good, the Prime Minister still does not seem to realise the media treated him as such because of his lies over the Iraq War. So, instead, Blair claims the media should be controlled.

Hugo Chavez recently pulled a television station's licence, for the sole reason, it seems, that it does not follow his party line. Vice President Dick Cheney continues to argue that it is the media who paint a picture of Iraq that is all doom and gloom, and that this does not correspond with the better future Iraq now has, compared to the days of Saddam Hussein's regime. In Britain, when it was learned that the government had lied about the reason why Britain went to war, it was not the Prime Minister or one of those who had promoted this lie that was forced to step down; the head of the BBC had to resign.

Blair is unwilling to face reality, which is that he and his entourage are to be blamed, and no-one else, for first seeding distrust in the government, by creating endless spin. Even on September 11, 2001, it was learned that spin doctors were advising the government to use the disaster of 9/11 to publish some bad news, that would thus receive no or hardly any coverage in the media, focused as it would be on New York. A year later, Blair tried to use the media to rally support for his plan to invade Iraq. When it was learned soon after the invasion that the threat - and hence the reason for going to war - had been inflated if not invented, the media and the public felt outraged. Before, it was the media that warned that going to war without an exit strategy, or plans on how a foreign troop presence in Iraq would work, was dangerous. When Iraq was slowly transformed into a

nation caught up in a civil war, the Prime Minister finally had to admit that some mistakes might have been made. When he was faced with official and independent reports that as many as 650,000 people might have been killed, he and his co-promoters of an Iraq invasion claimed that figure was grossly inflated.

These are the cold, hard facts. So how does reality look like, if we see it through Blair's eyes? "Opinion and fact should be clearly divisible. The truth is, a large part of the media today not merely elides the two but does so now as a matter of course. In other words, this is not exceptional. It is routine. The metaphor for this genre of modern journalism is The Independent newspaper. Let me state at the outset it is a well-edited, lively paper and is absolutely entitled to print what it wants, how it wants, on the Middle East or anything else. But it was started as an antidote to the idea of journalism as views, not news. That was why it was called The Independent. Today it is avowedly a newspaper, not merely a newspaper. The final consequence of all this is that it is rare today to find balance in the media."



Blair singled out an independent newspaper, arguing that there should be calls for a debate about political coverage and criticism of what he views as the fusion of comment and news. He felt that the arrival of other independent sources of information, specifically the Internet, would change the situation for the better, but felt it had become worse. He singled out "conspiracy theories", as is now popular amongst politicians to do.

Simon Jeffrey of The Guardian wondered: "When he singles out The Independent, soon after comments on the coverage of the Hutton inquiry, it is hard not to think the Prime Minister was not thinking of The Independent's 'Whitewash?' front page on the day following the publication of the report." The Hutton inquiry was a unique attempt of Blair's government to alter the normal cause of justice. The Hutton inquiry substituted for a coroner's enquiry into the death of Dr. David Kelly, a leading scientist who had been involved in the "Iraq dossier". In the aftermath of the invasion, Kelly spoke out, briefing against the official government position, and was shortly afterwards found dead, in circumstances that required further study - to use wording that might agree with

Blair's view as to how journalism should work.

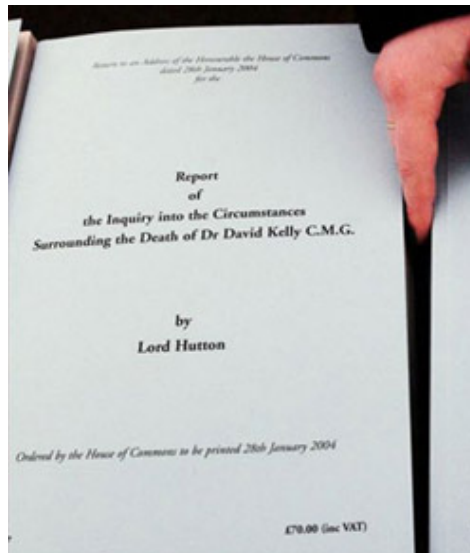
Following Blair's speech, The Independent reacted that "as the only representative of the multifarious British media mentioned by name, it's hard not to be flattered. Or, indeed, vindicated - our principled opposition to his policy on Iraq (or the Middle East as he quaintly put it: note he couldn't refer to Iraq by name) has clearly exasperated him. But that misses the point. We are unabashed about the way in which The Independent has evolved, although we would point out that this newspaper was not established as an antidote to the idea of journalism as views, but as an antidote to proprietorial influence and narrow political allegiance."

Indeed, The Independent was created as a newspaper that wanted to be independent from political alliances. It does not have subscribe to specific parties, though it can be used by creating bogus news items - which the Blair government has done on numerous occasions, specifically using "terror raids" on trumped-up charges that soon dematerialise as soon as any serious testing of the evidence begins. The paper has a policy of independence, and calls it as it sees it. And that, of course, is a nightmare for any government. If one party controls a certain number of newspapers and the other party another group, then the government can claim some newspapers disagree, as they are likely to be, because they represent the opposition's point of view. Such editorialising cannot occur with an independent newspaper, and hence the reason why he singled it out - together with the anonymous body of Internet reporters and bloggers, who equally are independent and hence not easily to dismiss - and hence why he and his ilk call these "conspiracy theorists". Yet, in his efforts to maintain that he is right and everyone else is wrong, he obviously gave the speech he gave.

To once again quote The Independent: "We don't trawl through people's dustbins. We respect the privacy of those in public life. We strive to abide by the PCC code. But, after 10 years of the Blair administration, a decade of spin and counter-spin, of dodgy dossiers, of 45-minute warnings, of burying bad news, of manipulation and misinformation, we feel that the need to interpret and comment upon the official version of events is more important than ever. [...] What clearly rankles with Mr Blair is not that we campaign vociferously on certain issues, but that he doesn't agree with our stance. What if we had backed the invasion of Iraq (like, for example, we supported the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone)? Would he then be attacking our style of journalism? Of course not. We are unapologetic about our opposition to Iraq, the biggest foreign policy folly of our age, and we shall continue to hold him and his government to account. [...] The days when a newspaper could be simply a notice-board of the previous day's events are as outdated as black-and-white television. Of course, news is still the backbone of our offering, but we feel our readers today want more: a diverse range of commentary, colourful debate, provocative front pages and, yes, the views behind the news. It is difficult to imagine what kind of newspaper Mr Blair envisages in his platonic heaven, but it's probably safe to say that this isn't it."

Bob Satchwell, the director of the Society of Editors, agreed: "All newspapers have always commented as well as reported and he seems to be pointing to some golden age that never really existed. The reason why the UK media is so rich and vibrant and that The Independent is so powerful within it is that it takes a slightly unusual approach."

Peter Hill, the editor of the Daily Express, said: "It's just sour grapes. He's criticising journalists because they found him out. I'm afraid all that spin is Blair's undoing."



But the lesson is larger than a man who either cannot face himself in the mirror, or sees a reflection staring back at him that is totally different from the man the nation sees on their mirror to the world - their television. The larger framework is that this is a man who once again is resorting to Big Brother tactics, to "right the wrong" that he perceives: continue with his agenda to make Orwell's 1984 society real.

Answering questions, the Prime Minister made clear that he was not calling for statutory controls, but wanted the media to put its own house in order through tougher self-regulation. "If politicians lead this debate, we will lose it," he said. The fact of the matter, however, is that he has planted a seed. And if ever there was another stand-off between the media and a politician, such as over the 45 minute warning, it will more than likely be that Prime Minister who does take "statutory action" to control the media.

Statutory control, however, is already in place. Ironically, during question time, Downing Street banned broadcasters from screening the questions that he answered at the end of the speech after ITV News asked him whether he regretted the way intelligence was used in the run-up to the Iraq war. Evidence of media control.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that Blair didn't criticise any of Mr Murdoch's press. In America, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News is notorious for its almost unconditional support of the Bush Administration. In Britain, Murdoch complained that with each visit to London, it was a plethora of politicians that wanted to speak him, in apparent efforts to make sure Murdoch would remain on their side.

What the media have been unable to report on, under the Blair regime, is the increasing number of D notices that the government has issued on a range of news items. For example, during the

enquiry that targeted users of a paedophilic website, from which paedophilic photographs could be downloaded, the list of subscribers was tracked down to a few thousand people in various countries. Several arrests were made. Several sources have stated that one member of the British government was on this list. Rather than see arrests and prosecutions, the media was given a D notice - whereby the press is not allowed to publish this story. There should be a solid reason why D notices are given, normally in the bailiwick of national security. But a government employee downloading paedophilic porn and a government apparently intent on not letting justice take its course, is obviously not amongst the list of genuine reasons for a D notice.

And it are such tactics that are the real reason why the media are so upset with Blair and his rule; it is furthermore evidence - and not just a view - that the government is already using statutory instruments to control the media. And if it was up to Blair, it seems he would have wanted to control them even more. That is his view.