

Bush administration defends use of covert propaganda in US

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17 March 2005

The Bush administration last week instructed US government agencies to ignore a ruling by the comptroller general of the United States barring the dissemination of “covert propaganda.”

The phrase—generally associated with police-state dictatorships—was used by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of the US Congress, in describing the proliferation of video news releases produced by the Pentagon, State Department and at least 18 other US agencies. The GAO ordered a halt to the dissemination of such videos on the grounds that they “conceal or do not clearly identify for the television viewing audience that the agency was the source of those materials.”

In a front-page article published Sunday, the *New York Times* detailed the government’s increasing use of the videos, which simulate genuine television news segments. They include the use of public relations employees posing as on-the-spot reporters and “interviews” with government officials that have been scripted and rehearsed.

The *Times* cited a report issued by Congressional Democrats estimating that during its first term the Bush administration spent \$254 million on public relations contracts that pay for the production of these videos, nearly doubling the amount spent by the Clinton administration in its last four years.

It described a system in which thousands of such video news releases, or VNRs, are produced annually. They are sent out to television networks as well as local stations, which in turn broadcast them to tens of millions of viewers as if they were the independent product of the stations’ news departments.

In some cases, television producers edit out brief lines identifying the segments as having been produced by a government agency. In others, they have had their own reporters do new audio voice-overs, reading directly from scripts provided by the government.

Included in this massive propaganda operation is the production by the State Department and the Pentagon of video news segments aimed at selling the US war in Iraq to the American people. Various agencies have done television spots that attempt to cast controversial programs pushed by the Bush administration in the best possible light.

The US Defense Department has set up its own “Pentagon Channel,” providing fake news reports, interviews and video clips to US television stations. The State Department runs a vastly expanded Office of Broadcasting Services with the same purpose.

US Comptroller General David Walker drafted a February 17 memo denouncing the practice as a violation of appropriations laws that bar the use of government money to pay for covert propaganda directed against the American people.

In response, the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel issued its own ruling last Friday. It stated that the administration “does not agree with the GAO that the covert propaganda prohibition applies simply because an agency’s role in producing and disseminating information is undisclosed or ‘covert,’ regardless of whether the content of the message is ‘propaganda.’”

Deputy Assistant Attorney General Steven Bradbury wrote on behalf of the administration: “Our view is that the prohibition does not apply where there is no advocacy of a particular viewpoint, and therefore it does not apply to the legitimate provision of information concerning the programs administered by an agency.”

At a Monday press conference, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher echoed this official line in defending the department’s own videos. “One, these are basic facts and material on what’s going on in Afghanistan or Iraq or often in the United States related to important issues,” he said. “And it’s not — I wouldn’t describe it as propaganda. It’s, you know, video clips that are put together and people can use to report on things.”

At his Wednesday press conference, President Bush mocked a reporter’s question of why the government did not include clear attribution in its “pre-packaged reports.” Imitating the closing line of his own campaign commercials, Bush replied, “You mean a disclosure, ‘I’m George W. Bush and I...[authorized this message].’”

The *Times* report points to a symbiotic relationship between the government and the media that underlies the use of the video news releases, while attributing the media’s complicity largely to the economics of public relations and television news.

The report states: “Local affiliates are spared the expense of digging up original material. Public relations firms secure government contracts worth millions of dollars. The major networks, which help distribute the releases, collect fees from the government agencies that produce segments and the affiliates that show them. The administration, meanwhile, gets out an unfiltered message, delivered in the guise of traditional reporting.”

In an editorial published Wednesday, the *Washington Post* condemned the government’s practice as “illegal and unwise,” while lamenting, “It’s humiliating that local news stations,

however short-staffed and desperate for footage, would allow themselves to be used this way.”

What is strikingly absent from these assessments is any analysis of the political and ideological tendencies within the media itself that has made the broadcast of covert government propaganda not only acceptable, but largely indistinguishable from the material prepared by the television networks themselves.

In a protracted process that has reached a qualitatively new level with the coming to power of the current Bush administration and the launching of the illegal war in Iraq, the media has largely embraced the mission of propagandizing for the government and corporate interests. Now, the government along with private corporations is systematically developing its own covert propaganda, mimicking the forms of television news. The end result is something akin to the funhouse hall of mirrors in which the images presented to the American people are a gross distortion of reality.

The controversy over the government’s dissemination of propaganda masquerading as news comes in the wake of a series of scandals that are noteworthy both for what they reveal about the Bush administration’s manipulation of the media and for the relative indifference of the media itself.

Earlier this year it was revealed that Education Department had paid \$240,000 to right-wing commentator Armstrong Williams as part of “minority outreach” on behalf of the Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind” Act. Williams used his syndicated column and radio and television appearances to tout the act, without publicly disclosing that he was a paid shill for the government.

Similar, though less expensive, contracts with right-wing columnists to promote the administration’s sexual abstinence and marriage agenda were subsequently exposed.

Then there is the strange case of James Guckert—AKA Jeff Gannon—the right-wing political operative who was allowed to masquerade as a member of the White House press corps for two years—receiving daily passes under his assumed name. There is ample reason to believe that Guckert/Gannon was planted in the pressroom to serve up softball questions designed to deflect attempts at more serious probing by White House correspondents.

He came under scrutiny after a January 26 press conference where he was called upon by Bush—something that is almost always prearranged. He delivered an ideological non-question, asking the president how he could work with Senate Democrats “who seem to have divorced themselves from reality.”

Investigations by Internet bloggers and web sites disclosed that Gannon was in fact Guckert, and that he was both a proprietor and featured attraction on several Internet sites promoting male prostitution with a gay military theme—hotmilitarystud.com, militaryescort.com, etc. The so-called news web site that he represented was the property of a leading Texas Republican and Bush confidante, Bobby Eberle.

It was also revealed that Guckert/Gannon appeared to have been given access to an internal CIA memo that exposed the wife of Ambassador Joe Wilson as a covert CIA agent. The administration organized a leak of the memo in retaliation for Wilson’s debunking of claims that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein had attempted to buy uranium in the African nation of Niger for its non-

existent nuclear program. Guckert/Gannon admitted to being questioned by FBI agents in connection with the affair.

One can only imagine the uproar that would have ensued had it been discovered that the Clinton administration had provided similarly favorable treatment—and possibly state secrets—to an individual moonlighting as a prostitute—regardless of his or her gender or sexual orientation.

Yet the Gannon affair—like the revelations concerning the administration’s dissemination of covert propaganda and payola to commentators—has for the most part been treated as a minor embarrassment by the corporate media. None of these revelations of blatant government manipulation of the press has received a fraction of the attention given two years ago to the journalistic peccadilloes of Jayson Blair, a junior reporter at the *New York Times* found to have fabricated some quotes and plagiarized some details on relatively inconsequential stories.

This reaction amounts to a guilty silence. These incidents are not aberrations, but rather symptomatic of both a corporate-controlled media that routinely agrees to serve as a conduit for government propaganda and the advanced state of decay pervading democratic processes in the United States.

The administration’s defiant insistence on its “right” to peddle propaganda to an unsuspecting public is matched by the acquiescence of the mass media in promoting stories and broadcasting images aimed at deceiving rather than informing or exposing. This insidious partnership found its consummate expression two years ago in the preparation of the war of aggression against Iraq based upon lies that the media parroted.

Giant corporations control all the television networks, while a few major conglomerates have systematically consolidated their grip over virtually all the country’s newspapers. Corporate interests predominate from top to bottom, while the media has spawned a caste of multi-millionaire “personalities,” whose fortunes are directly tied to their connections with the leading figures in the government and big business.

This is the objective environment that facilitates the Bush administration’s employment of the type of “covert propaganda” techniques against the American people that in an earlier epoch were reserved for the use of the CIA in destabilizing foreign governments.

The Bush administration has always devoted enormous resources to the manipulation of visual images and the propagation of political slogans designed to advance and mask its predatory policies. The increasing turn toward the blatant methods of phony news reports, paid-off commentators and operatives posing as reporters, however, is characteristic of a regime in crisis, one which desperately fears that if the extent of its crimes becomes known, it will face uncontrollable political upheavals.



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