

Guardian newspaper forced to retract Noam Chomsky interview

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On November 17, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper ran a statement in its Corrections and Clarifications column announcing the removal from its website of an interview with Noam Chomsky.

The interview, conducted by Emma Brockes, was published in the *Guardian's* October 31 edition after Chomsky, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was voted the world's top intellectual in a poll conducted by Britain's *Prospect* magazine. Of 20,000 participants in the *Prospect* poll, 4,800 voted for Chomsky.

In the published interview, Brockes attacked Chomsky, claiming he had implied that a massacre of Muslims had not been carried out by Serbian forces at Srebrenica in July 1995, during the Bosnian war. Her diatribe marked a new low in the ever more pronounced rightward shift of a newspaper that still advertises itself as the mouthpiece of Britain's liberal intelligentsia.

The *Guardian* dropped the interview only following an open letter to the newspaper from Chomsky, a complaint from the media organisation Media Lens, and numerous letters of protest from readers.

The *Guardian* had initially defended its interview. On November 1, it published two letters supporting criticisms of Chomsky, supposedly to balance the "debate". As Chomsky later pointed out in an email copied to the Media Lens organisation, "Both writers assume that there is a 'debate', as the editors falsely claimed, in which I question the massacre (or as they pretend, 'massacre') in Srebrenica. That is all fabrication, as the editors know well. They labored mightily to create the impression of a debate in which I take the position they assigned to me, and have succeeded. Now I'm stuck with that, even though it is a deceitful invention of theirs."

The newspaper also failed to publish Chomsky's entire open letter of complaint, dated November 13. Instead, they ran a truncated version in which they insisted, before agreeing to publish, that Chomsky remove the word "fabrication" from his condemnation of the Brockes article.

Chomsky agreed to do this and later stated that he was mistaken in doing so. Even then, Chomsky's letter was published alongside one from a victim of the war in the Balkans under the spurious heading "Fallout Over Srebrenica". In reality, this "fallout" had been entirely concocted by the *Guardian*, which had attributed to Chomsky a statement he never made.

The newspaper's November 14 retraction admitted as much. It was issued in the form of an acknowledgement by the "readers'

editor" that found in favour of Chomsky on three significant complaints.

"Principal among these was a statement by Ms. Brockes that in referring to atrocities committed at Srebrenica during the Bosnian war he had placed the word 'massacre' in quotation marks. This suggested, particularly when taken with other comments by Ms. Brockes, that Prof. Chomsky considered the word inappropriate or that he had denied that there had been a massacre. Prof. Chomsky has been obliged to point out that he has never said or believed any such thing. The *Guardian* has no evidence whatsoever to the contrary and retracts the statement with an unreserved apology to Prof. Chomsky."

Brockes' piece was clearly a hatchet job in which she demonstrated a complete disdain for basic journalistic standards. But why was she given the task and what was the brief given to her by the *Guardian's* editorial staff?

There is no doubt that Chomsky's nomination by the readers of *Prospect* will have angered and appalled the *Guardian*. Both publications function as liberal apologists for the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair and both he and his leading adviser, Peter Mandelson, have written for *Prospect*. Last year the *Guardian* published an article by the editor of *Prospect*, David Goodhart, in which he questioned whether an ethnically diverse society and a welfare state are any longer compatible.

The vote for Chomsky by *Prospect's* readers on the basis of his left politics and generally anti-imperialist stance was clearly seen as a slap in the face. There remains a section of readers who have not got the message being doled out by both organs.

Why were Brockes and, presumably, the *Guardian's* editors so determined to raise the issue of Srebrenica? Because the civil war in Bosnia represented a political watershed. It was the occasion for a slew of liberals and radicals to ditch their oppositional stance and make their peace with imperialism—a phenomenon that was analysed by the International Committee of the Fourth International in its December 14, 1995 statement, "Imperialist War in the Balkans and the Decay of the Petty-Bourgeois Left".

The ICFI noted how representatives of this tendency, in which the *Guardian* and many of its leading columnists were to be found, cited revulsion over Serbian atrocities as the justification for their swing into the imperialist camp—ignoring similar atrocities by Croat and Muslim forces. The moral hand-wringing over Bosnia served a definite political purpose—to legitimise support for Western military intervention aimed at the break-up of Yugoslavia

and the installation of various pro-Western regimes that would ensure imperialist control of this strategic region. The Bosnian war provided an opportunity for these layers of ex-radicals to realign their politics with those of imperialism.

This analysis has been amply borne out in the past decade. The *Guardian's* role in justifying Britain's military intervention in Bosnia by citing atrocities such as Srebrenica was only a practice run for its subsequent abandonment of opposition to the Iraq war and shift to support for regime-change in Iraq, once again citing the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein.

An essential function of the pro-war propaganda of the *Guardian* has been to intimidate and silence all those who refuse to accept the lie that the imperialist powers are undertaking a great civilising mission by organising regime change in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East: Hence Brockes' choice of ideological weapon against Chomsky.

The interview was published under the headline "The Greatest Intellectual?" Its subhead was designed to be read as an excerpt from the interview. It stated, "Q: Do you regret supporting those who say the Srebrenica massacre was exaggerated? A: My only regret is that I didn't do it strongly enough."

Below, Brockes writes of Chomsky's career as an intellectual: "This is, of course, what Chomsky has been doing for the last 35 years, and his conclusions remain controversial: that practically every US president since the Second World War has been guilty of war crimes; that in the overall context of Cambodian history, the Khmer Rouge weren't as bad as everyone makes out; that during the Bosnian war the 'massacre' at Srebrenica was probably overstated."

Chomsky has never put quotation marks around "massacre" in relation to Srebrenica as Brockes implies. Indeed, he has referred to the massacre at Srebrenica several times in his writing. More important still, the question and answer that was used by the *Guardian* as a subhead was made up either by Brockes or whoever edited her article for publication.

The *Guardian* acknowledged in its retraction:

"No question in that form was put to Prof. Chomsky. This part of the interview related to his support for Diana Johnstone (not Diane as it appeared in the published interview) over the withdrawal of a book in which she discussed the reporting of casualty figures in the war in former Yugoslavia. Both Prof. Chomsky and Ms. Johnstone, who has also written to the *Guardian*, have made it clear that Prof. Chomsky's support for Ms. Johnstone, made in the form of an open letter with other signatories, related entirely to her right to freedom of speech. The *Guardian* also accepts that and acknowledges that the headline was wrong and unjustified by the text."

The book by Diana Johnstone is entitled *Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions*, and was published in 2002. It is a critique of the Western coverage of the war and seeks to shed light on what lay behind the propaganda campaign of the imperialist governments, which sought to demonize Serbia and lay sole responsibility for the war at its door.

In 2003, Chomsky was one of a number of prominent signatories to an open letter opposing the withdrawal of the book by its Swedish publisher. That decision followed a press campaign in

which both Johnstone and her book were vilified, led by the daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*.

Chomsky was simply defending the author's right to free speech and, while describing Johnstone's book as a "serious" work, has never said that he fully agrees or disagrees with her analysis.

In his open letter to the *Guardian*, Chomsky states, "The reporter obviously had a definite agenda: to focus the defamation exercise on my denial of the Srebrenica massacre. From the character of what appeared, it is not easy to doubt that she was assigned this task. When I wouldn't go along, she simply invented the denial, repeatedly, along with others."

An indication of just how important—personally as well as politically—it was for the *Guardian* to discredit Chomsky is Brockes' description of "my colleague, Ed Vulliamy" as a "serious, trustworthy" person. This is written in the context of an attack on Chomsky for daring to question Vulliamy's reporting of the war.

Vulliamy wrote regularly on the war in the Balkans. His essential theme was that the Serbian regime was responsible for the war, that the Bosnian people were being systematically wiped out, and that failure to support Western intervention was tantamount to supporting Serbian atrocities.

As Diana Johnstone points out in her November 14 article on the Brockes-Chomsky episode, entitled "Kulturkrieg in Journalism: Using Emotion to Silence Analysis," it is entirely conceivable that Brockes based her conversation with Chomsky on a few culled paragraphs from Vulliamy, even down to his spelling mistakes. Vulliamy had previously spelled Johnstone's first name incorrectly in print—a mistake repeated by Brockes in her article.



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