

Pentagon paid British PR firm \$500 million to create fake al-Qaeda recruiting videos

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8 October 2016

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) has revealed that the Pentagon paid British public relations firm, Bell Pottinger half a billion dollars to make fake terrorist videos as part of a secret propaganda programme in Iraq.

Top US military personnel in Iraq and, on occasions, the White House signed off on the false flag videos.

The Pentagon's hijacking of the media and Internet exposes the fraud of Washington's claims to be the defender of democracy and a free press, and serves to undermine the credibility of the press coverage of Washington and its allies' wars of aggression in the Middle East and elsewhere. Such is the collusion between the corporate and state-controlled media and the military-intelligence establishment in support of Washington's quest for world domination that neither the US or European news channels have reported, let alone commented on, the Pentagon's activities, their constitutionality or legality.

Under the operation, crews would be sent out to film bombings with low quality video that were then edited to make it look like news items in the style of Arabic news channels. As well as short TV segments, they created anti- al-Qaeda television ads. Crucially, they produced fake al-Qaeda propaganda videos that could be streamed on the Internet and then, via a code embedded into the CDs that linked to a Google Analytics account, produce a list of the IP addresses where the CDs had been viewed.

While al-Qaeda was the target of these fabrications, the CIA had earlier nurtured the group and similar right-wing Islamist outfits in the 1980s in Afghanistan as a means of promoting its own interests against the Soviet Union. Washington is now relying on such forces to unseat the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

More than \$100 million a year was spent on these

fabrications and false flag operations, which ran from May 2007 until December 2011 when the US withdrew from Iraq, with a similar contract worth \$120 million operating in 2006.

The BIJ report was part of a broader study into the use of private military contractors. The BIJ found that more than 40 companies were being paid for services such as TV and radio placement, video production, billboards, advertising and opinion polls in Iraq between 2006 and 2008 alone, but the main beneficiary was Bell Pottinger.

To discover the full extent of the programme, the BIJ tracked US Army contracts, records of federal procurement transactions, reports for the Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, specialist publications on military propaganda, corporate records from Bell Pottinger and interviews with former Bell Pottinger staff.

Bell Pottinger's previous clients have included Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, the Saudi government, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's foundation, as well as other repressive regimes.

Martin Wells, a video editor who used to work for Bell Pottinger, told the BIJ that his two year stint in Camp Victory, a US military base in Baghdad, between 2006 and 2008 was "shocking, eye-opening, life-changing." He worked in a "classified area" impossible to enter without security clearance. Bell Pottinger staff worked alongside the US military in the same rooms, but in their own "zones."

There were three types of media operations in Iraq at the time: white, whose source was attributed; grey, which was unattributed; and black, which was falsely attributed. Black operations formed the backbone of the programme and were used to track who watched the

CDs.

Wells said he was given very precise instructions. He was told, “We need to make this style of video and we’ve got to use al Qaeda’s footage,” and “We need it to be 10 minutes long, and it needs to be in this file format, and we need to encode it in this manner.”

According to Wells, Bell Pottinger’s output was signed off on by the commander of coalition forces in Iraq. “We’d get the two colonels in to look at the things we’d done that day, they’d be fine with it, it would then go to [US] General Petraeus,” he said.

Some of the projects went even higher up the chain of command. “If [Petraeus] couldn’t sign off on it, it would go on up the line to the White House, and it was signed off up there, and the answer would come back down the line.”

Wells said that the tracking account had a very restricted circulation list, with the data sent to him, a senior member of the Bell Pottinger management team, and one of the US military commanders. The more interesting and relevant “hits,” online viewings of the videos, were those that showed up in other parts of the world. Wells recalled that they turned up in Iran, Syria, and even America. “I would do a print-out for the day and, if anything interesting popped up, hand it over to the bosses and then it would be dealt with from there,” he said.

The faked CDs, according to Wells, were used by US marines who would take them and drop them at the locations of targets they were raiding. Wells said, “If they’re raiding a house and they’re going to make a mess of it looking for stuff anyway, they’d just drop an odd CD there.”

The Pentagon confirmed that Bell Pottinger did work for them as a contractor in Iraq under the Information Operations Task Force (IOTF). They said it produced some material that was openly sourced to coalition forces, and some that was not, although it insisted that all IOTF’s material was “truthful.” Bell Pottinger also carried out work under the Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (JPOTF), which a US defence official confirmed without further comment.

Lord Bell, who stood down as chairman of Bell Pottinger earlier this year, confirmed that his firm had worked on a “covert” military operation “covered by various secrecy agreements,” and reported to the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council

on its work in Iraq. He told the *Sunday Times* that although the use of tracking devices as described by Wells was “perfectly possible,” he personally was unaware of it. The key people who worked in Baghdad at the time likewise all deny any involvement in the tracking software.

The Pentagon has used contractors to do its dirty work because fabricating the news in this way was a legal “grey area,” as US law prevented the government from using propaganda on the domestic population of the US. Since its Iraq operations could be seen back home on the Internet, they may be illegal.

This was not the first time that the Pentagon has fed news channels unsourced items or fabricated the news. In 2009, the Pentagon hired the Rendon Group, a PR firm, to monitor the reporting of journalists embedded with the US military in Afghanistan, to assess whether they were giving “positive” coverage to its missions.

In 2005, revelations that the Lincoln Group, a Washington-based PR contractor, had helped the Pentagon place articles secretly written by the US military in Iraqi newspapers, led to a Department of Defense investigation that cleared the company of any wrongdoing.

Such operations recall Operation Mockingbird, a secret campaign by the CIA to influence the media. Begun in the 1950s, the CIA recruited leading American journalists into a propaganda network to help present the Agency’s views, funding student and cultural organizations and magazines as fronts. Its scope later extended to “influencing” foreign media and political campaigns.

The BIJ has also established that the Pentagon has hired private contractors to produce propaganda to counter Islamic State on social media. A Pentagon spokesperson refused to elaborate what kind of material they were producing, saying only that the “robust online program” operated using “truthful information directed toward regional audiences to combat ISIL’s (Islamic State’s) lies and deception.”



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