

War, propaganda and smears: An interview with Professor Piers Robinson

Part one

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24 May 2018

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Professor Piers Robinson is the chair in politics, society and political journalism at the University of Sheffield. Much of his research focusses on the interface between propaganda and war.

His 2002 book, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News Media, Foreign Policy and Intervention*, examined news reporting in a series of “humanitarian” interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda.

He was the lead author of *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq* (2010), an ambitious and meticulous analysis of television and press coverage during the invasion.

The Routledge Handbook of Media, Conflict and Security (2016), which Robinson authored with Philip Seib and Romy Frohlich, links the growing body of media and conflict research with the field of security studies.

As a member of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM), founded in 2017, Robinson and fellow academics such as Professor Tim Hayward (environmental political theory, University of Edinburgh) have questioned the official narrative in relation to the Skripal poisoning and the role of the White Helmets in Syria that is being promoted by the media and the US and British governments.

For this, they have been the subject of a witch hunt initiated by the *Guardian* and taken up last month by the *Times*, smearing them as “Assad’s Apologists.” Earlier this month, Labour-run Leeds City Council announced it was cancelling a Media on Trial event at which Robinson and Hayward were due to speak. The event has been relocated.

Professor Robinson spoke to Julie Hyland for the *World Socialist Web Site* in a wide-ranging interview on war, lies and censorship, beginning with the *Times* smear.

Piers Robinson: My personal experience over the last two years, and especially the last eight or nine months, is that the attack is not spontaneous. It didn’t start with the *Times*. I

was attacked by Pdraig Reidy of Little Atoms two years ago after I wrote an article for the *Guardian* on Russian and Western propaganda and how people need to think for themselves.

I was attacked by Oliver Kamm [a *Times* lead columnist] over Twitter a long time before the *Times* articles. Tim Hayward had a lot of run-ins with [*Guardian* journalist] George Monbiot over Twitter.

[Investigative journalists] Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett have been attacked and derided as “conspiracy theorists” and pro-Assad “apologists” for a long time.

We were aware as we started doing the Media on Trial events, which were very successful, that more attention was coming to us. In December 2017, the *Guardian* ran a hit piece on Vanessa and Eva. Two days later, George Monbiot tweeted that myself and Tim Hayward had “disgraced” ourselves over Syria.

We wrote an open letter which the *Guardian* wouldn’t publish. We spoke to journalists, but they refused to publish it. Once we put that out we got more attacks over Twitter.

We set up the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media and that’s when Brian Whitaker (formerly of the *Guardian*) started attacking us. Then the *Times* focussed in on the Working Group.

There was a lot of chatter going on, and it wasn’t low-grade chatter. You are suddenly aware of more and more attacks, and it was getting more intense. The more organised we were, the more intense the attacks became.

I think it’s naive to think all this is happening spontaneously. It feels as if it is being driven. That’s the only way I can logically explain the scale of the attack. Four articles in the *Times* all on one day. Why does that happen?

Throughout all this time I always tried to return to “What questions are we asking?” We are asking questions about propaganda and the war on Syria. For me as an academic, the obvious explanation is that we are hitting an area that some people don’t want us to touch. That’s the bottom line.

Some people don't want us to talk about or research the [Syrian] White Helmets. They certainly don't want us to research or talk about what has been happening in Syria with respect to chemical weapons attacks.

Julie Hyland: You said Britain is far more involved in Syria than many would realise. Can you expand on this?

PR: The last set of air strikes after the Douma chemical weapon event, Tony Blair said something along the lines that "Doing nothing is not an option."

We know that is not true. We have not been doing nothing! That's such a profound misunderstanding of the reality of where we are now in Syria. We've been intervening for a long time. It's public record. It's not disputed.

As Professor Jeffrey Sachs (Columbia University) told MSNBC on April 12, "We need to understand how we got to where we are today. We are the cause of half a million dead."

He said, and I'm paraphrasing, that this was the result of a covert operation called Timber Sycamore between the CIA and Saudi Arabia to overthrow the Syrian government. He said it has been covert, not approved by Congress, against international law and it has led to the destruction of that country.

The public perception is that Syria is an almost incomprehensible Middle East conflict and that we're sitting on the sidelines. If it is possible for Tony Blair to say "non-intervention is not an option" that shows straight away that people have a deeply flawed understanding of what is going on, because we have been intervening and for a long time.

The Stop the War Coalition seem to have even been doing that as well, demanding that "We shouldn't intervene." I was a member and I gave a talk in Sheffield. I think that Stop the War should not talk about "non-intervention" in the way they sometimes do because there *is* an intervention already underway. I thought there was a problem in the way they are presenting this, because my impression was that they were not really getting to the root of what was going on.

Millions have been poured into supporting militant groups, some of whom are extremists and linked to Al Qaeda. These are the groups that have been major factors in propelling the war.

That's the major gap in public awareness and political awareness. I think that gap is reducing now. When I say on TV that we have been supporting militant groups and pouring money in, I don't seem to have anyone disagreeing with me. We now know more about information operations and the White Helmets, and there is increasing public awareness of the latter. Overall, I think there is a large propaganda operation in relation to Syria and there's a lot of money going into that. It's very organised.

In 2016 there was a *Guardian* scoop in which Ian Cobain

identified the company, InCoStrat in Turkey, set up to do PR for militant groups. You have a lot of British involvement, whether it's the so-called White Helmets or InCoStrat. That is all now in the public domain.

In terms of what I am involved in with a PhD researcher, Jake Mason, and also with Professor David Miller (Bath), Britain seems to be quite involved in so-called "information operations" regarding Syria. So, we are looking into how Britain has been involved in shaping understanding of the conflict, including the issue of who has been carrying out chemical attacks and whether there has been an attempt to exaggerate Syrian government crimes and downplay those of militant groups.

People have been talking for a number of years about the Ghouta chemical attack [2013]. Is it the Syrian government or militant groups? This is one of the questions that some of us are looking at.

With Douma more recently, there have been a lot of questions. Russian Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov said it was Jaysh al-Islam [a coalition of Islamic extremists] that was responsible and even intimated that the order came from the British: Maybe Lavrov is lying, maybe he is not. Major-General Jonathan Shaw, [formerly senior commander in the British Army] was on Sky News and he appeared to be raising questions as to why the Assad government would do it just at the point when it was negotiating the last transfer of Jaysh al-Islam to Idlib.

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is a source for journalists. He is ex-British military [and former commander of NATO's Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion] and set up a company, SecureBio, in 2011 [now dissolved]. He is regularly talking to the media and he seems to be never very far from the government line on this issue.

If Britain is involved in the presentation regarding these attacks, it means we are very involved. We are very important in helping to shape the perceptions of the war and the question is how much might those perceptions have been distorted or manipulated? How accurate are they?

To be continued



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