

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

Part two

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The following is the second part of a three-part interview with Professor Piers Robinson, an academic at the University of Sheffield and a member of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media. Part one was posted on May 24.

Julie Hyland: You have been studying media propaganda in connection to Middle East wars for years. Can you explain how this has developed?

Piers Robinson: I was very interested in international politics and the media. My PhD was on looking at US foreign policy and intervention decisions in Somalia and looking at the CNN effect. That was a big debate in the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, there was what appeared to be for some people a development in “norms,” so that we would breach sovereignty and intervene to protect human rights.

It really got underway following the first Gulf War [August 2, 1990, to February 28, 1991] when you had the Kurdish crisis in the mountains and on the border with Turkey. A decision was made to create “safe areas.” That really got the ball rolling. Then there was the intervention in Somalia a couple of years later—Restore Hope—and it fed through to the war in Bosnia, and then culminated with Operation Allied Force in Kosovo.

These events really elevated the idea of humanitarian intervention, with the media understood to be an important part of pushing these interventions. It seemed to suggest that the media was more independent following the end of the Cold War, more powerful in setting the agenda. So the story went. The idea was that this was a positive development. That you would intervene to help people was seen to be a good thing, at least to some extent.

The PhD work was started in 1996, and it was turned into the book about intervention during humanitarian crises which was published in 2002. By the time that book was going out, the Iraq war of 2003 was really upon us.

We did a very standard thing then. I was with people in Liverpool University who had done large-scale content analysis of media coverage of elections. And they said, why don’t we take this methodology and look at media coverage of the Iraq invasion? We can look at it in terms of media bias, autonomy

from the government.

That was two to three years, and it was 2010 before it was published, which is quite normal because it takes a long time to do detailed research of media coverage.

I was very aware throughout that with 9/11 we were now into the “War on Terror,” as it was presented at that time. I argued then that [humanitarian intervention] was off the agenda and we were back to more traditional kinds of war. But I soon became very aware that the humanitarian discourse carried on. We were supposedly taking out Saddam Hussein because of his “Weapons of Mass Destruction,” but also because he had committed human rights abuses. So the humanitarian narrative never really went away.

I was very focussed on the Iraq study. There was a key moment at that point because I was fully aware of what happened after the Iraq war with the Gilligan BBC report, Dr. David Kelly and that extraordinary battle between the British government and the BBC ending in Kelly’s death.

[Then-BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan reported on the *Today* programme May 29, 2003, that the government had ordered that an intelligence dossier on Iraq’s WMD be “sexed up.” Dr. David Kelly was later outed as Gilligan’s source. He was found dead—recorded as suicide—on July 17, 2004—ed.]

PR: That’s when I really became interested in the notion of propaganda. How much of the information is being shaped even before it gets to the media? How deep-rooted are the propaganda operations?

A lot of information had come into the public domain through the Hutton Inquiry, also the Butler Inquiry, and then, at that point, the ongoing Chilcot Inquiry [three separate public inquiries into aspects of the Iraq War]. You were able to start building up a very clear picture of what was going on and how they shaped the claims about Iraqi WMD. This ended up with me spending a few years working on a paper with Professor Eric Herring (University of Bristol) which became *Report X Marks the Spot: The British Government’s Deceptive Dossier on Iraq and WMD*.

The claims of the British government, or Tony Blair, were always that “I just passed on the intelligence they gave us.”

And there were other people saying they'd lied, and others saying it was a question of deception through manipulation and distortion. We spent a long time unpacking and detailing what happened with the dossier—establishing and confirming that it was a case of intentional deception.

It was slightly intimidating doing that because you are in the territory where you are making the case that your government has been involved in a deception.

We finally got that study published, and it carefully detailed the deception that had occurred in the case of Iraq. But what I learnt from that was how organised it was. I learnt, for example, that the first idea for the dossier was at least a year before the actual invasion. There were months of preparation, working with John Scarlett, head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, with [Blair's former adviser] Alastair Campbell, in order to build as strong a picture as they could of Iraqi WMD.

At that point I realised that unless we start to understand propaganda, also known as “strategic communications,” we don't really have a good idea of why the media does what it does and why the public thinks the way it does.

We need to look at these mechanisms of information manipulation. And my research interest in propaganda has carried on since then, to this point with Mark Crispin Miller, David Miller, Chris Simpson and myself setting up the Organisation for Propaganda Studies. Its primary aim is to encourage research and writing into questions of propaganda and manipulation and how that can undermine democracy. But we also want to encourage film makers and artists to talk about these things and to engage the public.

The Syria work has just emerged because I have people around me researching it. I had my head down looking at the September dossier for four years, and I popped my head up when I had finished and it was, “Oh, Syria has undergone a terrible war for many years. What's been going on there?”

I think it was a Seamus Milne article in the *Guardian* in 2015 where he said very clearly that the West is backing militant groups in Syria. That got my mind ticking over. How much of this war is connected to other regime-change operations such as Iraq?

It's really getting a sense that what we're looking at here is a semi-coherent strategy that has been pursued especially since 9/11. General Wesley Clark in 2007 said they were talking about knocking out seven countries in a matter of years [“starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran.”]

Our inability to look at these things is partly because of propaganda. People who did quote Wesley Clark or said there is a connection here—there is Afghanistan, Iraq and then Libya—straight away they were called “conspiracy theorists.” People are scared. They don't want to be called that.

Academics are subject to the same pressures as journalists, and it shapes what you do and what you talk about. The mountain you have to climb intellectually to get yourself out of

that situation where “I don't want to ask those questions, I think it's stupid to ask those questions” is tremendous.

But when you get out of that, you're able to think for yourself and also have the confidence to ask the really important questions. That's another interesting thing if you think about terms such as “conspiracy theorist” or “apologist” or “denialist.” These are ways of bracketing you as an irrational or immoral person, even a lunatic.

They are very effective at doing that and of dissuading you from asking tough questions. You have to get a really good knowledge of what is going on to get to the point where you have the confidence to challenge power.

Becoming aware of my own ideological blindness and blinkers and to the extent I had been propagandised, that awareness comes very quickly when you start to understand propaganda. You start to see the mechanisms and how they work. I was at that point after the September dossier. I thought there is obviously deception going on here.

JH: Your 2017 study, “Learning from the Chilcot report: Propaganda, deception and the ‘War on Terror’,” details the “close-knit propaganda campaign” that laid the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq. How did this influence your subsequent research?

PR: The Chilcot report [into the Iraq war] had an important influence on my current work. Chilcot's report looked at the establishing phase of the “war on terror,” and there you had Tony Blair and George Bush talking about hitting Iraq, Iran and Syria, which one to do first, and I thought, well, Wesley Clark was very likely telling the truth!

Since then, I've been very committed to understanding better how we are propagandised in the West, especially in relation to the “war on terror,” and there is a lot of evidence available now.

In tandem we were looking at Syria carefully. Not just in terms of PR campaigns, but also with respect to the facilitation of grassroots movements.

When you start piecing evidence together, you realise that we are mired in a very belligerent phase of Western foreign policy. The problem really does lie very much at home and with the issue of how propaganda is being used to systematically shape how people are thinking, and to enable the wars we have seen since 9/11.

To be continued



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