

# UK: SEP assistant national secretary Julie Hyland addresses social sciences conference on fake news, censorship and war

Our reporters  
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An important conference, held in Lincoln November 4 as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Festival of Social Science, heard detailed reports on the relationship between media censorship and war.

Organised by Dr. David Hughes, Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Lincoln, it was titled "Scrutinising the Media: Fake News, Censorship, and War." An audience comprising students and concerned members of the public listened attentively and posed questions.

Hughes delivered three half-hour sessions, each followed by a 15-minute Q&A. "War and the media" provided examples of the ways in which the media has historically been used to condition public opinion in favour of war. Beginning with the Committee on Public Information in the United States (1917-1919, also known as the Creel Commission) and World War I, it worked forward to today and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) coverage, or non-coverage, of the Saudi-led intervention into Yemen.

Media suppression of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and US carpet bombing of Cambodia was cited, as was the use of a PR firm to train the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US to fake an emotional testimony about Iraqi soldiers removing babies from their incubators to legitimise the 1991 Gulf War.

The *New York Times* "Butcher of the Balkans" rhetoric in 1992—directed against Slobodan Milosevic—was juxtaposed to the 2016 decision by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia to exonerate the former president of Serbia of war crimes.

Questions about the BBC were raised, such as why did it overwhelmingly reflect the government line on Iraq when the pretext for war was later shown to be based on lies? Why did it crop out Iranian President Ahmadinejad and depict a 2009 photo of Iranians taking to the streets as followers of Mir Hossein Mousavi (the opponent of Ahmadinejad)? Why did BBC Breakfast News in 2011 claim to show live "scenes

of jubilation and celebration" from Tripoli when the broadcast featured archive footage from India?

The second session covered "Syria, the Media, and Propaganda". Footage of alleged victims of a chemical weapons attack was shown from the 2013 *BBC Panorama* documentary, "Saving Syria's Children." It is widely alleged to have been faked, whereas real examples of chemical warfare by the US abound. The mainstream media's willingness to cite unreliable sources was highlighted, including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (supposedly a clothes shop owner in Coventry), Bellingcat (set up by a lone blogger in Leicester), Bana al-Abed (an 8-year-old girl with a suspect Twitter account and barely able to speak English on an infamous CNN interview), and the White Helmets (with demonstrable links to Islamist terrorist organisations).

The academic Working Group on Syria, Media, and Propaganda was discussed, including its conclusions that the UK government's Novichok claims could not be substantiated and that Prime Minister Theresa May had "misled the House of Commons" over the alleged chlorine attack in Douma in August 2018, with a "managed massacre" being the more likely explanation. Media smear campaigns against dissenters were documented, including those by the *Guardian* against investigative journalists Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett, as well as those by the *Times*, *Huffington Post*, and *Intercept* against the Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda.

The implications of "fake terror" was also considered. Footage clearly demonstrating a false flag terrorist attack in Mosul in 2016 was shown, posing the question that if that particular attack can be shown to have been demonstrably staged what other attacks could this apply to?

Socialist Equality Party assistant national secretary Julie Hyland was invited to present the third session on "Censorship of the World Socialist Web Site and the Julian Assange Case."

Hyland began by explaining that the conference could not have come at a more appropriate and urgent time. Only one week before, the fascist ex-army captain Jair Bolsonaro won Brazil's presidential election and has begun assembling the most right-wing government since the end of the 20-year military dictatorship that came to power in a US-backed coup in 1964. In virtually every country, especially in Europe, there is the deliberate encouragement of right-wing reaction and the turn to authoritarianism.

This is behind the efforts to censor socialist, left-wing, progressive and anti-war websites in a joint offensive by governments and the giant social media monopolies, Hyland said. Under conditions of massive social inequality and popular hostility to war, they are trying to silence opposition on the spurious basis of "fake news" and "inauthentic behavior."

Hyland detailed that the WSWS was a main target for this offensive and reviewed how it had uncovered and exposed the censorship measures deployed by Google that have now been taken up by Facebook, Twitter and others. The WSWS was taking the lead in opposing this assault on free speech and basic democratic rights with its call for an international coalition to fight Internet censorship, she said.

Central to this campaign was the defence of Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder has been held captive in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London for more than six years because he exposed the war crimes and machinations of the US and its allies.

Hyland explained how, in Australia, the Socialist Equality Party was demanding the Australian government instruct the British authorities to release Assange and guarantee him safe passage, which won support from principled journalists such as John Pilger and broad sections of workers and youth. It is vital that the defence of Assange is stepped up, under conditions in which his health and safety were now in grave danger—with Hyland citing the latest moves by Ecuador's President Lenin Moreno towards his eviction.

In the final session, "Fake News, Censorship, and War," Hughes began by citing Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, which enshrines the right to free speech. This was contrasted to the "Countering Disinformation and Propaganda Act," passed in the US in December 2016, which laid the pretext for curbing freedom of speech in the name of combating "foreign state and non-state propaganda."

The artificially manufactured anti-Russia hysteria in the US and the UK was noted, as was the way in which this has been used to legitimise censorship of anti-war viewpoints. The "social media purge of 2018" was detailed, with extensive evidence presented of online censorship by Facebook, Google, Twitter and Wikipedia.

Those who spoke from the floor or asked questions indicated their opposition to the clampdown on free speech and censorship. Several noted how the mainstream media had become even more untrustworthy, responding to the open exchange possibilities of social media by doubling down on its own fake news and support for censorship. One audience member cited the laborious efforts he had gone to in order to lodge an official complaint about BBC bias, only to receive a pro-forma acknowledgement but no reply to the concerns raised.

Others noted that academia had generally failed to respond seriously to the attack on free speech. Those who were educated to apparently "know better" were going along with pro-war propaganda.

Joe, a student, commenting afterwards described the presentations as "eye opening. To anyone who doesn't know much I think it was shocking. It's a take on everyday life that affects everyone... It's wrong in all levels that what you say or think can be controlled in such a way. I guess online can be controlled more."

Describing Assange as a "brave man," he said the WikiLeaks founder "should be seen more as an inspiration than a demonised traitor which the establishment, media and public have pegged him as. I think it's disgraceful and criminal that he's been cornered in the Ecuadorian embassy all these years, and that he was forced to run there in the first place. He is living proof that at least some element of our so called liberal democratic society of rights and freedoms is in some way broken or flawed, and that the intelligence agencies/government/establishment/media/'the system' do not care about rights and freedoms."



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