

Radio New Zealand “editorial audit” expands censorship net

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On 9 June, the state-owned broadcaster Radio New Zealand (RNZ) advised of supposed “inappropriate editing” of several wire service stories relating to the war in Ukraine which had been published on its website.

A detailed “audit” of stories with breaches of “editorial standards” was immediately launched. Two days later RNZ announced that it had “corrected” 16 of its online articles with alleged “pro-Russian” content published over the past year. Far from being “pro-Russian,” the edits had merely inserted inconvenient truths in the otherwise wall-to-wall barrage of pro-war propaganda that dominates the country’s jingoistic media.

The furore began with a Reuters article posted on the RNZ website on June 9 which had removed wording that glorified the 2014 coup in Ukraine as a “revolution” and inserted wording that correctly read: “The conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian elected government was toppled during Ukraine’s violent Maidan colour revolution.”

RNZ CEO Paul Thompson dismissed the report and several others as “pro-Kremlin garbage.” He “apologised” to RNZ’s audience, the public and the “Ukrainian community,” labelling the act “inexcusable.” Thompson promised that thousands of historic reports would be checked “with a fine-tooth comb.”

Amid a gathering witch-hunt, RNZ board chair Jim Mather, far from defending the broadcaster’s editorial independence, announced an external review of RNZ’s processes for editing online stories. The staffer responsible for the edits, Michael Hall, was suspended from the station’s digital department and subsequently resigned. Hall has been vilified and smeared as a “rogue reporter,” a “Russian sympathiser” and even an “agent.”

The furore, however, originated not within New Zealand but in the United States. The first complaint came via Luppe B. Luppen, a New York-based lawyer and well-connected Democratic Party supporter. Luppen tweeted a link to the June 9 RNZ/Reuters story and accused Reuters of publishing “utterly false, Russian propaganda history of 2014.” He later claimed that a Reuters representative had “reached out” to him to explain that the changes had been made by RNZ.

The purge of articles now under way has been vastly expanded to cover topics well beyond the Ukraine war. As of July 9, nearly 1,000 stories had been examined. Of these, 49

have been changed, according to an RNZ statement, “to bring them up to our standards.”

In Orwellian fashion, truthful and accurate points made by Hall are now being removed. RNZ, with the full support of the Labour Party-Greens government, is carrying out this operation to condition the population for a vast escalation of imperialist wars abroad and class war at home.

Of the articles that have so far been “corrected,” 21 are about Russia or Ukraine. Four relate to the supposed “threat” from China, including its handling of the coronavirus. Another focuses on the case of persecuted journalist and publisher Julian Assange. Several deal with Israel’s criminal actions against Palestinians and 10 address South American politics, mainly Venezuela. Several others cover Syria, Britain’s anti-strike law and a BBC report on the 2022 French elections.

References to the 2014 US-backed coup in Kiev have been expunged, in order to falsify the history of the war, in line with Washington’s propaganda that Russia’s 2022 invasion was an “unprovoked” attack on a “democratic” country. NATO general secretary Jens Stoltenberg has openly admitted that the events of 2014 marked the real start of the war in Ukraine, a fact consistently suppressed by RNZ.

One article, posted on May 6, 2020, now brazenly promotes fascist elements in the Ukrainian military. Under the headline, “UN again trying to evacuate civilians from Ukraine’s Mariupol” it includes an interview with Sviatoslav Palamar, deputy commander of the “Azov Regiment” on the heavy fighting in the strategic city of Mariupol.

Hall’s version correctly identified the Azov Battalion as a “neo-Nazi military unit fighting for Ukraine.” Azov glorifies both Nazism and far-right Ukrainian nationalist organisations which were responsible for the massacres of tens of thousands of Jews, Poles as well as Ukrainians, during World War II. Despite the clear justification, in fact journalistic necessity for Hall’s edit, RNZ has deleted it.

In another article dated October 21, 2021, Hall’s headline “Russia says NATO increasing tensions with new war plan preparations” has been turned on its head to make Russia the aggressor and now reads, “NATO agrees master plan to deter growing Russian threat.”

RNZ is also advancing the propaganda offensive against China as part of the US-led buildup to war. A March 7 article, “Taiwan warns of China’s ‘repeated provocations’” had four paragraphs of Hall’s edit changed to emphasise China’s purportedly aggressive designs over Taiwan. RNZ’s “corrected” version prominently accuses China of “repeated provocations” and declares that Beijing ramped up diplomatic and military pressure “to get Taipei to accept Chinese sovereignty,” as opposed to the correct term, “Chinese reunification,” used by Hall.

There are no details of Washington’s vast military escalation in the region. Hall’s reference to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei in August being regarded by Beijing as “a major provocation” has been removed.

In a March 16 article about a North Korean missile test, RNZ has deleted a note that the US was also “stocking up” Taiwan with weapons.

The “corrected” articles include several on Israel’s killing of Palestinians, and one on the Netanyahu government’s expansion of settlements on the West Bank. In a December 2022 article, RNZ has removed a description of the settlements as being “according to international law, illegal.” This correct formulation has been replaced with one less damning of Israel, reading: “Most world powers deem settlements built on land captured in war illegal.”

All the “corrections” are framed to suit the pro-imperialist narrative of the political establishments. An article from November 30, 2022, titled “Australia urging US to bring Assange matter to close—Albanese” favourably reports on the Australian Prime Minister’s purported “support” for the imprisoned WikiLeaks founder, while stressing Albanese’s “disagreements” with Assange on “a whole range of matters.”

Unmentioned is the fact that award-winning reporter and film maker John Pilger, among many prominent media figures, has accused the Australian government of betraying Assange. Meanwhile RNZ has deleted a sentence included by Hall, which stated: “Supporters say [Assange] is a heroic journalist victimised for exposing US war crimes in [the] Afghanistan and Iraq.” Assange is currently a hair’s breadth away from being extradited to the US, where he faces the remainder of his life in prison.

Articles on South America have been amended to downplay Washington’s imperialist interference in the region. In a February 2019 article, RNZ legitimised the attempt by US-backed opposition leader Juan Guaido to seize power from Venezuela’s president Nicolas Maduro.

While the report noted that Maduro denounced the move as an attempted coup, it contained a claim—removed by Hall—that

50 nations “recognised Guaido as president.” The claim has now been reinstated.

Another article from the same month declared that the US military was ready to “protect” its diplomats in Venezuela. Hall had noted that “Venezuela’s collapse under US sanctions and the rule of socialist President Nicolas Maduro... has led to further US intervention in backing opposition leader Juan Guaido after he declared himself president last month.” The sentence has now been changed to read “Venezuela’s collapse under President Nicolas Maduro... has forced nations worldwide to take a stance.”

In a January 2020 report titled “Venezuela’s opposition calls for pressure on Russia over Maduro support,” RNZ removed a note by Hall that Maduro had stayed in power “after the military stayed loyal to him despite calls for a coup,” and inserted the words “backed by the military” instead. RNZ also changed “US allies” to “the US and other countries” recognising Guaido.

Signalling the role RNZ will play in the eruption of working class struggles at home, a January 10 article, dealing with the British Tories’ vicious anti-strike law, has had a headline reading “*British law stifling right to strike to be introduced to parliament*” changed to the more innocuous; “UK laws to blunt strikes begin journey through parliament.”

RNZ’s so-called “audit” of Hall’s articles dispenses entirely with the concept of journalistic accuracy and objective truth. The “corrections” amount to cynical, politically-motivated censorship and lies, which sets a precedent, not only for RNZ but the media as a whole. Accompanied by a hysterical witch-hunt that has already claimed one journalist’s job, it sends a chilling warning to anyone who dares to challenge the official pro-imperialist propaganda.



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