SUBVERTING THE MEDIA

In discussing the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Dan Rather, the well-loved anchorman for CBS Television, described the now famous Zapruder film that captured footage of the shot which killed President John F. Kennedy. The movie, taken by amateur cameraman, Abraham Zapruder, was quickly snapped-up by Life magazine for $250,000.00. Although Life published still frames of the movie, the 18 second film was kept under lock and key – not to be seen by Americans until 1975.

But Rather's remarks were misleading. He told his viewers that the film showed JFK falling forward – confirming the official view that Kennedy had been shot from behind. However, the film clearly showed Kennedy lurching violently backwards, evidence of a frontal shot. To add to the confusion, the Warren Commission report printed two frames of the film in reverse – again implying a rear shot - an accident the FBI typified as a "printing error."

Meanwhile, still pictures lifted from the Zapruder film were also published by Life magazine. Remarkably, they too were published in reverse order, thereby creating the impression that the President had been shot from behind by lone gunman Lee Harvey Oswald. Until the film was shown to Americans in its entirety, no one was the wiser. Following the broadcast in 1975, a massive controversy followed giving rise to ongoing allegations of conspiracy.

The Zapruder film clearly showed President Kennedy had also been shot from the front. The result immeasurably strengthened the charge - that had been bubbling in the background - that the President had been assassinated as a result of a well orchestrated conspiracy, and that this was covered-up to protect the guilty, who many now believe involved senior figures in the CIA and US military. Not least it was pointed out that Henry Luce, the founder of Life magazine was a close personal friend of Allen Dulles, the Director of the CIA. Moreover, the individual who purchased the Zapruder film for Life magazine was C.J. Jackson, formerly a “psychological warfare” consultant to the President.

Inevitably, these events were to lead to accusations that the media were culpable of the worst form of toadying and propaganda. This, in turn raised serious questions about the role and integrity of the mass media. Some years later, Washington Post reporter, Carl Bernstein – who came to fame with his colleague Bob Woodward, for their expose of the Nixon administration’s illegal re-election campaign activities, known as “Watergate” – dropped a media bombshell on an unsuspecting America.

In an October 1977, article published by Rolling Stone magazine, Bernstein reported that more than 400 American journalists worked for the CIA. Bernstein went on to reveal that this cozy arrangement had covered the preceding 25 years. Sources told Bernstein that the New York Times, America’s most respected newspaper at the time, was one of the CIA’s closest media collaborators. Seeking to spread the blame, the New York Times published an article in December 1977, revealing that “more than eight hundred news and public information organisations and individuals,” had participated in the CIA’s covert subversion of the media.

“One journalist is worth twenty agents,” a high-level source told Bernstein. Spies were trained as...
journalists and then later infiltrated – often with the publishers consent - into the most prestigious media outlets in America, including the New York Times and Time Magazine. Likewise, numerous reputable journalists underwent training in various aspects of “spook-craft” by the CIA. This included techniques as varied as secret writing, surveillance and other spy crafts.

The subversion operation was orchestrated by Frank Wisner, an old CIA hand who’s clandestine activities dated back to WW11. Wisner’s media manipulation programme became known as the “Wisner Wurlitzer,” and proved an effective technique for sending journalists overseas to spy for the CIA. Of the fifty plus overseas news proprietary’s owned by the CIA were The Rome Daily American, The Manilla Times and the Bangkok Post.

Yet, according to some experts, there was another profound reason for the CIA’s close relations with the media. In his book, “Virtual Government,” author Alex Constantine goes to some lengths to explore the birth and spread of Operation Mockingbird. This, Constantine explains, was a CIA project designed to influence the major media for domestic propaganda purposes. One of the most important “assets” used by the CIA’s Frank Wisner was Philip Graham, publisher of the Washington Post. A decade later both Wisner and Graham committed suicide – leading some to question the exact nature of their deaths. More recently doubts have been cast on Wisner’s suicide verdict by some observers who believed him to have been a Soviet agent.

Meanwhile, however, Wisner had “implemented his plan and owned respected members of the New York Times, Newsweek, CBS and other communication vehicles, plus stringers...” according to Deborah Davis in her biography of Katharine Graham – wife of Philip Graham - and current publisher of the Washington Post. The operation was overseen by Allen Dulles, Director of Central Intelligence. Operation Mockingbird continued to flourish with CIA agents boasting at having “important assets” inside every major news outlet in the country.” The list included such luminaries of the US media as Henry Luce, publisher of Time Magazine, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, of the New York Times and C.D. Jackson of Fortune Magazine, according to Constantine.

But there was another aspect to Mockingbird, Constantine reveals in an Internet essay. Citing historian C. Vann Woodward’s New York Times article of 1987, Ronald Reagan, later to become President of the US, was a FBI snitch earlier in his life. This dated back to the time when Reagan was President of the Actor’s Guild. Woodward says that Reagan “fed the names of suspect people in his organisation to the FBI secretly and regularly enough to be assigned an informer’s code number, T.10.” The purpose was to purge the film industry of “subversives.”

As these stories hit the news, Senate investigators began to probe the CIA sponsored manipulation of the media – the “Fourth Estate” that supposedly was dedicated to acting as a check and balance on the excesses of the executive. This investigation was, however, curtailed at the insistence of Central Intelligence Agency Directors, William Colby and George Bush – who would later be elected US President. The information gathered by the Senate Select Intelligence Committee chaired by Senator Frank Church, was “deliberately buried” Bernstein reported.

Despite this suppression of evidence, information leaked out that revealed the willing role of media executives to subvert their own industry. “Let’s not pick on some reporters,” CIA Director William Colby stated during an interview. “Let’s go to the managements. They were witting.” Bernstein concluded that “America’s leading publishers allowed themselves and their news services to become handmaidens to the intelligence services.” Of the household names that went along with this arrangement were: Columbia Broadcasting System, Copley News Service – which gave the CIA confidential information on antiwar and black protestors – ABC TV, NBC, Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, Newsweek, Time, Scripps-Howard, Hearst Newspapers and the Miami Herald. Bernstein additionally stated that the
two most bullish media outlets to co-operate were the new York Times and CBS Television. The New York Times even went so far as to submit stories to Allen Dulles and his replacement, John McCone, to vet and approve before publication.

Slowly, the role of Mockingbird in muzzling and manipulating the press began to be revealed. In 1974, two former CIA agents, Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, published a sensational book entitled “The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence.” The book caused uproar for the many revelations it contained. Included amongst them was the fact that the, until then, widely respected *Encounter* magazine was indirectly funded by the CIA. The vehicle used to covertly transfer funds to *Encounter* and many other publications, was the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) – a CIA front. A decade earlier, in 1965, the CCF was renamed Forum World Features (FWF) and purchased by Kern House Enterprises, under the direction of John Hay Whitney, publisher of the International Herald Tribune and former US Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

The Chairman of Forum World Features was Brian Crozier, who resigned his position shortly before the explosive book went on sale. Crozier, a former “Economist” journalist, was a “contact” of Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). His employment to head up the CIA financed Forum World Features in 1965, caused a row with MI6 who felt the CIA had breached the secret agreement between the UK and USA by recruiting one of their own assets.

Crozier’s media style was more discrete than Mockingbird. He preferred, when possible, to insert his pre-spun propaganda stories to unwitting members of the media, who would reprint them unaware of the bias they contained. In time, Crozier would go on to head up a shadowy anti subversive and dirty tricks group called the “61,” that sought to counter communist propaganda. Another group of which he was a member was the Pinay Cercle – a right wing Atlanticist group funded by the CIA - that claimed credit for getting Margaret Thatcher elected as British Prime Minister.

Another propaganda operation, run from Lisburn barracks in Northern Ireland, and under nominal British Army control, participated in extensive media manipulation around the same time. Known as “Clockwork Orange” this involved the construction of propaganda material designed to discredit prominent members of the then Labour government as well as some in the Conservative shadow cabinet. Especially targeted was then Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Clockwork Orange relied heavily on forged documents that would be given to selected journalists for publication. Many of these forgeries sought to demonstrate secret communist ties – or east bloc intelligence affiliations – amongst high profile politicians.

The aim was to destabilise Wilson and the Labour government by falsely showing them to be soft on communism or even pro communist. This operation clearly favoured a right wing Conservative administration under the leadership of Mrs. Thatcher. In the event, Wilson resigned, said to have been sickened by the numerous personal snipe attacks against him. During the time he was under siege, Wilson experienced numerous break ins at his office, as well as having his phone lines tapped -courtesy of unnamed officials in the security service, it is believed. By 1979 the Conservative party was returned to power.

Yet, with the demise of the cold war the motive for media propaganda has collapsed. Or has it? James Lilly, former Director of Operations at the CIA later became Director of Asian studies at the American Enterprise Institute – a think tank heavily staffed by former intelligence types. Lilly, in giving testimony to a Senate committee during 1996 observed: “Journalists, I think, you don’t recruit them. We can’t do that. They’ve told us not to do that. But you certainly sit down with your journalists, and I’ve done this and the Station Chief has done it, others have done it...”

But even as the cold war rationale for subverting the media recedes into the distance, press manipulation
continues anon. A classified CIA report surfaced in 1992, that revealed the Agency’s public affairs office “... has relationships with reporters from every major wire service, newspaper, news weekly, and television network in the nation.” The report added that the benefits of these continued contacts had been fruitful to the CIA by turning “Intelligence failure stories into intelligence success stories...” Basking in a glow of self satisfaction, the report continued “In many cases, we have persuaded reporters to postpone, change, hold or even scrap stories that could have adversely affected national security interests.”

But the last word goes to Noam Chomsky. A Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Chomsky has extensively investigated the role of today’s media. His analysis is un-nerving. The democratic postulate, Chomsky says, “is that the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth...” Despite this axiom, Chomsky finds that the media supports “established power” and is “responsive to the needs of government and major power groups.” He additionally argues that the media is a mechanism for pervasive “thought control” of elite interests and that ordinary citizens need to “undertake a course of intellectual self-defence to protect themselves from manipulation and control...” The covert role of the media has now apparently shifted its focus. One time expeditor of the “cold war,” it now clamours for the extension of “corporate power.”

Was the CIA behind Thatcher’s election?

Brian Crozier’s protege was Robert Moss – a speech writer for Margaret Thatcher. It was Moss who wrote Thatcher’s now famous speech “The Sovietization of Britain” that resulted in her being nick-named the “Iron Lady.” It was Thatcher’s strident anti-communism and laissez faire free market economic policies that made her so attractive to powerful right wingers in the Conservative party, and ensured her election as Conservative leader. Moss, received much of his inspiration from Cord Meyer, Jr., the London CIA Station Chief -and long time expert in covert operations. Additional input to Moss came from the CIA’s Miles Copeland, formerly the head of the CIA’s “Gaming Room” in Langley, Virginia. The Gaming Room was used to simulate covert actions prior to them being acted out for real.

Profile of Professor Noam Chomsky

Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Noam Chomsky is an internationally acclaimed, scholar, writer and political activist who has extensively scrutinised the thorny subject of media manipulation by elite and corporate interests. His books “Necessary Illusions – Thought Control in Democratic Societies,” and “Manufacturing Consent,” co-authored with Edward Herman, are considered classics on the subject. Chomsky argues that the role of money and elite interests continue to undermine a meaningful society. Professor Chomsky’s views will be expounded more fully in an exclusive interview to be published in a forthcoming issue of The X Factor.

The CIA use of the media to undermine Chile

In his expose of the CIA’s subversion of the media, reporter Carl Bernstein outlined how Chile’s socialist Prime Minister, Salvador Allende, was brought to ruin by a CIA sponsored media campaign. According to Bernstein, one of the Agency’s most valuable media “assets” was Hal Hendrix, the Miami News Latin American correspondent during the 1960’s. Hendrix, who was known as “The Spook” by his colleagues, was at the forefront of a CIA sponsoered anti Allende media campaign. Other reporters sympathetic to the CIA’s strategy, funnelled Agency funds to Allende’s political foes, as well as writing anti Allende propaganda for CIA controlled newspapers. The entire “get Allende” campaign was orchestrated by the Nixon White House which was under pressure from major US corporations like Coca Cola and IT&T to “keep Allende from taking power.”

Journalists and corporate suppression of the news
Professor Noam Chomsky, and his co-author Edward Herman, in their book “Manufacturing Consent,” have gone to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate how media censorship operates. Self censorship, the authors maintain, largely results from a set of “filters” inculcated into the very heart of journalism, that Chomsky and Herman call the “Propaganda model.” The first of these “filters” the authors maintain, arises from corporate ownership primarily resulting in the mass media being beholden to “profit orientation.” The argument is that the largest media enterprises are now owned not just by one or two corporate entities, but by dozens of them – via cross-ownership. Consequently, a given media outlet is less likely to bite the hand that owns it.

The authors go on to cite a number of additional filters that operate behind the scenes. These range from the power of advertisers through to the role played by powerful pressure groups – for example the military – who work hard to “shape” information in a favourable light. This is a clear example and one that defence correspondents are all too aware of. The Pentagon can be a great aid to a defence journalist providing inside information and other access. But this sort of co-operation and access is dependent on the angle or “spin” that will appear in the resulting story. In other words the article must meet with their approval. If, on the other hand, the story attacks the military, co-operation is quickly pulled. Other powerful pressure groups operate in a similar fashion. These include, for example, the arms, oil, pharmaceutical, farmers and brewing industries.

Today, barely any story reaches the media that hasn’t been artfully packaged by Public Relations guru’s - retained for their ability to slant stories in favour of their clients interests. Television news regularly air news items that use pre-shot footage supplied by corporate film wizards. In the past, the fag-smoking, booze-guzzling archetypal reporter trudged the streets tracking down a front-page story. Today, however, the media hound merely cuts and pastes the contents of a freebie, pre-spun “Press Pack” – directly to his computer Desk Top Publishing programme. In short, investigative journalism has been replaced by a clubby merry go round of money spinning splutter that regales the reader with carefully wrought stories fronting as news items.

Rarely do the media cover seriously controversial subjects. During the heady days of the Scott enquiry, few stories appeared that looked at the financing of weapons to Iraq and Iran. A few journalists knew this was a major aspect of the arms to Iraq affair, but how many newspapers revealed which British banks had been up to their neck in weapons financing? Corporate money has massive clout and if you want to stay in business, as a journalist, you don’t rock the boat. By any measure this is self censorship.

Ask most journalists and they will chuckle and say it is not. Sure, some stories are “spiked” – that is the nature of journalism. Spiked stories generally result from legal reasons and constraints, media professionals will tell you, but rarely result from direct action to suppress stories that the public should learn about. Occasionally, a newspaper proprietor may step in a kill a story for their own reasons. These just as often end-up in the pages of Private Eye, so little advantage ultimately accrues. At least that is the rationale.