



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 29, Number 1

Winter 2020

Media War Profiteers

Judith Connor, CDP

Judith Connor, CDP, uses the case of the recent *Washington Post* series, “The Afghanistan Papers” to raise important questions about corporate influence on the media. She reminds readers of the critical role that media plays in a healthy democracy and of the need for a healthy skepticism about the content it creates.

EXPERIENCE

On December 9, 2019, *The Washington Post* published a six-part article entitled “The Afghanistan Papers,” by reporter Craig Whitlock. It is based on previously confidential government documents from a federal investigation into the “root failures” of the Afghanistan war. These records provide more than 2,000 pages of information including interviews with people directly involved in the war. [1] At first glance, The Afghanistan Papers seem to be an example of unbiased journalism, as officials across the political spectrum are criticized more or less equally. Upon

closer inspection, however, biases begin to emerge.

Through words and photography, *The Post* portrays US soldiers in images that are moving and heroic and Afghan civilians are seen benefitting from schooling, employment, and universal suffrage, all courtesy of the US invasion. US military and civilian leadership are depicted as naïve, confused, dysfunctional, and even idiotic, but ever well-meaning in their attempts to bring economic and political stability to Afghanistan. Conversely, Afghanistan is portrayed as a brutal kleptocracy, rife with corruption and criminality. Despite the so-called “blistering criticisms” of US officials, The Afghanistan Papers still somehow manage to portray the United States as more the victim than the aggressor and Afghans as largely unworthy recipients of sincere but misguided efforts to bring them peace and prosperity.

Not addressed by Whitlock is the role of private US and transnational corporations making huge profits from Pentagon contracts.

Not addressed by Whitlock is the role of private US and transnational corporations making huge profits from Pentagon contracts. While shedding light on tremendous amounts of US money squandered on failed projects and a near total lack of US coordination and oversight, use of the word “corruption” is reserved for Afghans alone. In fact, while the series makes no fewer than 66 references to Afghan corruption, providing names and detailed descriptions of appalling acts of fraud and duplicity, references to corruption in Washington are few, passing, and non-specific.

Online readers *are* able to click through to source documents, and if one makes the effort, references to US corruption can be found. There, diplomat Richard

Resolutions to Action is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Susan Dunning, CSJ; Christine Garcia, SSND; Donna Marie Gribshaw, CDP; Eileen Haynes, SCL; Patricia Siemen, OP; Lucy Slinger, FSPA; and Ann Scholz, SSND, staff. Please address correspondence to:

LCWR
8737 Colesville Rd. Suite 610
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-588-4955
www.lcwr.org
fax: 301-587-4575
ascholz@lcwr.org

Boucher offers insight into corporate corruption in Washington describing Donald Rumsfeld doling out lucrative contracts to “cronies,” with taxpayer money being spent lavishly on luxury travel and highly paid personal security while no more than 10-20% of US aid actually ever makes it to Afghans. [2] These comments by Boucher, however, are not included in Whitlock’s article. Also omitted is information on the interviewees themselves. Twenty of the 25 quoted in the article have been or are now employed by firms, corporations, or think tanks with military connections, many with active DoD contracts. At least 10 and possibly up to 16 interviewees were in these positions at the time of their interviews. In an effort to get to “the truth” about the war in Afghanistan, information such as this seems at least potentially relevant.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

So, why vilify Afghans while soft-peddling US corruption? One possibility may have to do with shaping public opinion. The war in Afghanistan is but one theater in the overall War on Terror, and while readers are exposed to US mishandling of the Afghanistan war, using words and phrases such as “extortion,” “warlord,” and “double-dealing” in discussing the actions of Afghans, makes it easy for readers to see even Afghan civilians as potential enemies.

Yet, what reason would *The Washington Post* have for doing this? A clue may be found in looking at its owner, Jeff Bezos, who is also the founder and CEO of Amazon, Inc. While Whitlock was busy obtaining confidential documents exposing government and military officials lying to the public about the reality of the war in Afghanistan, Bezos and Amazon were competing for a 10-year \$10 billion contract with that same

military [3] [4]. One may reasonably ask if there is some conflict of interest here.

The Washington Post, however, is not the only mainstream media outlet owned by a large corporation with military and other financial interests. Currently, 90% of US media is controlled by just five conglomerates, and “the top executive at many news outfits is likely the CEO of a multinational corporation.” [5] As demonstrated by The Afghanistan Papers, the likelihood that corporate interests influence the tone and content of mainstream media news exists. According to Alison Rose Levy in her Common Dreams article, “When citizens blind themselves to a news organizations’ corporate entanglements, and trust the outlet to be truthful anyway, it is, to put it mildly, extraordinarily naïve.” [6]

REFLECTION

One lesson in ethical journalism may be found in John’s Gospel. Here we find Jesus telling his followers, “From now on I do not call you slaves, for the slave does not know what the Lord does; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” (15:15) The message here? Misrepresenting or withholding needed information from others is to relegate them to a kind of slavery. When citizens are kept in the dark about corruption among the rich and powerful, it limits their ability to act in their own interest. Jesus, instead, provides his followers with all they need to know to be counted among his friends. Christ promises that “...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

When it comes to the news,
skepticism is not
cynicism.

His words are a call to journalists and all those in the news media to provide citizens what they need to be a free and self-governing people. [7] A well-informed electorate is a prerequisite for democracy [8] and to mislead the public is to participate in their enslavement.

ACTION

When it comes to the news, skepticism is not cynicism. News plays a very significant role in what we, as a society, believe, how we view ourselves and others, and ultimately how we act in our world. Finding a wholly unbiased news source, however, is not possible. We are dependent on others to keep us informed about important events that affect our lives and, truthfully, biases are inherent to the human condition.

Still, there are a few things we can do. When watching or reading the news, consider the words and images being used to convey the story. Be aware of tone, emphasis, and placement in the broadcast. Beware of “he said, she said” reporting [9] or “horserace” journalism [10] that offers little on how issues or events affect everyday people. Consider alternative, subscription-driven, or non-profit outlets as supplementary sources of news and foreign news outlets. These may offer perspectives absent from mainstream reporting. News outlets that are owned by corporate conglomerates and funded by advertising dollars, are unlikely to have your interests, or the interests of those we serve, as their priority.

News outlets that are owned by
corporate conglomerates and
funded by advertising dollars,
are unlikely to have your interests,
or the interests of those we serve,
as their priority.