

Limits Of Dissent - Glenn Greenwald And The Guardian

When we think of prisons, we tend to think of Alcatraz, Bang Kwang and Belmarsh with their guard towers, iron bars and concrete. But in his forthcoming [book](#), '33 Myths of the System', Darren Allen invites us to imagine a prison with walls made entirely of vacuous guff:

'Censorship is unnecessary in a system in which everyone can speak, but only those guaranteed not to say anything worth listening to can be heard.'

Is this true? For example, how easy is it to encounter genuinely uncompromised analysis locating the Guardian within a propaganda system designed to filter news, views and voices to serve powerful interests?

It is a key issue because the Guardian is the best 'centre-left' newspaper we have. If The Times and Telegraph define the limits of thinkable thought on the 'mainstream' right, then the Guardian does the same at the other end of the 'spectrum'. In other words, the Guardian defines corporate media limits in accepting left views and voices. If it's not in the Guardian, it's not going to be anywhere else in the 'mainstream'.

Are the Guardian's famous in-house dissidents willing and able to address this crucial issue? How about leftist firebrand Owen Jones? In November 2017, Jones [lamented](#) on Twitter:

'I'm barred from criticising colleagues in my column. Weirdly this doesn't seem to work the other way round.'

Jones can tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the corporate media, as long as he doesn't dish the dirt on his employer. Ironies inevitably abound. Last April, Jones [commented](#):

'The main thing I've learned from working in the British media is that much of it is a cult. Afflicted by a suffocating groupthink, intolerant of critics, hounds internal dissenters, full of people who made it because of connections and/or personal background rather than merit.'

Even as Jones was speaking out on this 'suffocating groupthink', his comment was being suffocated by his obligation to spare his colleagues' blushes.

In December 2014, former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook [challenged](#) George Monbiot:

'@GeorgeMonbiot Guardian, your employer, is precisely part of media problem. Why this argument [on the need for structural reform] is far from waste of energy. It's vital.'

Monbiot brazenly [stonewalled](#):

'@Jonathan_K_Cook that's your view. I don't share it. Most of my work exposing corporate power has been through or with the Guardian.'

The Guardian - 'Solid And Reliable'

The first rule of Guardian club, then: you do not criticise the Guardian. The second rule of Guardian club... etc.

Far greater hope for the kind of serious criticism we have in mind seems to lie with renowned dissident Glenn Greenwald who worked for the Guardian for more than a year and who helped secure a Pulitzer prize for the paper's reporting on the NSA story. After all, unlike Jones and Monbiot, Greenwald certainly is willing to criticise the Guardian.

The latest example is his response to the paper's recent, front-page [claim](#) that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange met former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort at least three times in the Ecuadorian Embassy. The Guardian article, which appears to be a stellar example of 'fake news', was apparently intended to bolster claims that Assange had conspired with Trump, and with Trump's supposed Russian allies, to fatally damage Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign to become US president. Greenwald [commented](#):

'The reason it will be so devastating to the Guardian if this story turns out false is because the Guardian has an institutional hatred for Assange. They've proven they'll dispense with journalistic standards for it. And factions within Ecuador's government know they can use them.'

Speaking to The Canary, Fidel Narv?z a former consul and first secretary at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, [insisted](#) that the Guardian's claims are entirely false:

'It is impossible for any visitor to enter the embassy without going through very strict protocols and leaving a clear record: obtaining written approval from the ambassador, registering with security personnel, and leaving a copy of ID. The embassy is the most surveilled on Earth; not only are there cameras positioned on neighbouring buildings recording every visitor, but inside the building every movement is recorded with CCTV cameras, 24/7. In fact, security personnel have always spied on Julian and his visitors. It is simply not possible that Manafort visited the embassy.'

The Washington Post [reported](#) this week:

'one week after publication, the Guardian's bombshell looks as though it could be a dud. 'No other news organization has been able to corroborate the Guardian's reporting to substantiate its central claim of a meeting. News organizations typically do such independent reporting to confirm important stories.'

WaPo noted that the Guardian 'has stood by the story, albeit somewhat halfheartedly. It has said little to defend itself amid mounting criticism'.

Indeed, the Guardian has so far merely [commented](#):

'This story relied on a number of sources. We put these allegations to both Paul Manafort and Julian Assange's representatives prior to publication. Neither responded to deny the visits taking place. We have since updated the story to reflect their denials.'

But in fact WikiLeaks [did](#) deny that the visits took place in a tweeted response to one of the Guardian authors of the article.

In an attempt to encourage a more serious response, Greenwald [sent](#) a series of excellent, challenging questions to Guardian editor Kath Viner [and](#) journalist Luke Harding. Greenwald has [pointed](#) to huge holes in the story and condemned the paper's hatred of

Assange. However, Greenwald has also commented that, apart from the issue of Assange, 'the Guardian' is 'an otherwise solid and reliable paper'. He has repeatedly [affirmed](#) this view:

'Like I said, I think the Guardian is a solid paper that has good journalists and does good work, and I wouldn't derive any pleasure from seeing its reputation obliterated by a debacle of this magnitude, though I do think it'd be deserved if the story proves to be false.'

He even [said](#):

'I think the Guardian is an important paper with great journalists. I hope the story turns out true. But the skepticism over this story is very widespread, including among Assange's most devoted haters, because it's so sketchy. If Manafort went there, there's video. Let's see it.'

Former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook [responded](#):

'And finally, in a bizarre tweet, Greenwald opined, "I hope the story [maligning Assange] turns out true" ☹ apparently because maintenance of the Guardian's reputation is more important than Assange's fate and the right of journalists to dig up embarrassing secrets without fear of being imprisoned.'

Cook indicated the clear limits of Greenwald's dissent by providing the kind of rare, honest analysis that explains the Guardian's role within the propaganda system:

'What this misses is that the Guardian's attacks on Assange are not exceptional or motivated solely by personal animosity. They are entirely predictable and systematic. Rather than being the reason for the Guardian violating basic journalistic standards and ethics, the paper's hatred of Assange is a symptom of a deeper malaise in the Guardian and the wider corporate media.

'Even aside from its decade-long campaign against Assange, the Guardian is far from "solid and reliable", as Greenwald claims. It has been at the forefront of the relentless, and unhinged, attacks on Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for prioritising the rights of Palestinians over Israel's right to continue its belligerent occupation. Over the past three years, the Guardian has injected credibility into the Israel lobby's desperate efforts to tar Corbyn as an anti-semitic. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

'Similarly, the Guardian worked tirelessly to promote Clinton and undermine Sanders in the 2016 Democratic nomination process ☹ another reason the paper has been so assiduous in promoting the idea that Assange, aided by Russia, was determined to promote Trump over Clinton for the presidency.

'The Guardian's coverage of Latin America, especially of populist leftwing governments that have rebelled against traditional and oppressive US hegemony in the region, has long grated with analysts and experts. Its especial venom has been reserved for leftwing figures like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, democratically elected but official enemies of the US, rather than the region's rightwing authoritarians beloved of Washington.

'The Guardian has been vocal in the so-called "fake news" hysteria, decrying the influence of social media, the only place where leftwing dissidents have managed to find a small foothold to promote their politics and counter the corporate media narrative.

'The Guardian has painted social media chiefly as a platform overrun by Russian trolls, arguing that this should justify ever-tighter restrictions that have so far curbed critical voices of the dissident left more than the right.'

On November 29, we [tweeted](#) Greenwald:

'Hi @ggreenwald, you have consistently soft-pedalled your criticism of your former

colleagues at the Guardian, most recently describing the paper as "solid and reliable"
Will you respond to @Jonathan_K_Cook's astute and rational criticism of your position?'

At time of writing the tweet has received 57 retweets and 82 likes. Greenwald has been tweeting and must have seen some of these responses and yet has chosen not to reply. We would guess that he finds himself in a pickle: if he attempts to defend his false claim that the Guardian is 'solid and reliable', he will be shot down in flames for the reasons described above by Cook. And if he agrees with Cook's analysis, he risks alienating former colleagues and important allies on the paper.

The conclusion, then, is that Greenwald is following so many Guardian and other 'mainstream' journalists before him in simply blanking reasonable, rational questions.

Greenwald And The Progressive Left

Despite [defending](#) us against critics in the past, and despite the fact that we are writing from a similar political viewpoint inspired by Noam Chomsky, for whom he has expressed immense admiration, Greenwald has almost completely ignored our work. We cannot remember that he has ever retweeted our media alerts or retweeted any of our tweets (there may have been one or two exceptions). Our Twitter search 'from:ggreenwald "medialens"' suggests very little interest or interaction from his side. We saw no point in sending him a review copy of our [new book](#), 'Propaganda Blitz', about which Chomsky has said: 'Great book. I have been recommending it.' (Email to Media Lens, November 22, 2018) We, on the other hand, have cited, praised and tweeted Greenwald's work many times.

One might certainly ask why Greenwald would bother with a two-man, tinpot operation? Who are we? But it does seem extraordinary to us that Greenwald comments so much on the UK press whilst apparently ignoring writers who are indisputably the most honest, important and popular critics of the UK press, and of the Guardian in particular.

John Pilger is arguably the finest political journalist of our time and certainly the most high-profile critic of UK corporate media, especially the Guardian. No-one else who has appeared regularly in 'mainstream' newspapers and on national TV comes close to matching the honesty and accuracy of Pilger's criticism. As far as we are aware, Greenwald ignores Pilger's work. Using the Twitter search engine, we checked for mentions of Pilger, 'from:ggreenwald "pilger"', and found zero mentions in any of Greenwald's 50,000 tweets. This is exactly like a UK dissident critically analysing US media without mentioning Chomsky or Edward Herman.

In 2011, Jonathan Cook won the prestigious Martha Gellhorn special award for journalism. We have cited above his powerful criticism of the Guardian, lent even more weight by the fact that he worked as a staff journalist at the paper for five years. Cook tells us he has never seen Greenwald mention or retweet anything he has written. In 2014, Greenwald did make a positive [comment](#) in response to criticism from Cook:

'I've long been a fan of your work as well...'

Curiously, this 'fan' does not even follow Cook on Twitter.

The British historian Mark Curtis is another rare, honest critic of corporate media. Chomsky

commented on his book, 'Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam' (Serpent's Tail, 2010):

'Unearthing this largely hidden history is a contribution of the highest significance, and could hardly be more timely.'

Curtis is also highly critical of the Guardian. Last month, he [tweeted](#):

'All decent writers must now reflect: do you really want to contribute to an outlet producing utter fabrications in service of the state? Even retweeting G [Guardian] articles should stop, IMO.'

Curtis told us he has never seen Greenwald mention or tweet his work.

By contrast, Greenwald can often be found applauding and retweeting Guardian journalists and commentators like Owen Jones and George Monbiot, and of course former New Statesman political editor and Guardian contributor, Mehdi Hasan, who now publishes in The Intercept alongside Greenwald. Is Greenwald so reluctant to alienate the Guardian that he is steering clear of UK media analysts who are strongly critical of the paper?

None of this is intended as condemnation of Greenwald, perhaps he is right to maintain friendly relations with powerful allies when facing so many heavyweight political enemies in the US. But it is a rare form of cognitive dissonance that praises both the Guardian and Chomsky.

The key point, for us, which has nothing to do with lefter-than-thou sniping, is that this indicates the extraordinary extent to which the best, supposedly 'centre-left' media are protected from rational criticism. Even a comparatively honest, Chomskyite journalist like Greenwald is either not willing or not able to tell the whole truth about a paper that has done enormous harm in [supporting](#) Blair (still now), [attacking](#) Corbyn, and in promoting Perpetual War with endless [nonsense](#) about 'our' supposed 'responsibility to protect' civilians in oil-rich countries like Iraq and Libya. The Guardian has, at last, begun responding to the climate extinction crisis with some urgency, but it has long [downplayed](#) the gravity of the crisis and the truth of corporate denialism, while simultaneously promoting high status consumerism and fossil fuel advertising.

And this is why the Guardian and other liberal media are held in such absurdly high regard & very few journalists indeed are willing to subject them to the serious criticism they deserve.

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