

# MEDIALENS

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## BOGUS PARALLELS — THE INDEPENDENT'S DONALD MACINTYRE RESPONDS

Aug 9, 2010 12:00AM

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Last month, Media Lens examined an Independent interview with Tony Blair, "the international community's Middle East envoy". The interview was by Donald Macintyre, the paper's Jerusalem correspondent. ('Tony Blair: Former PM urges Israel to ease Gaza blockade', Independent, 4 June 2010; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/tony-blair-former-pm-urges-israel-to-ease-gaza-blockade-1991105.html>)

We wrote in our alert:

"The whole tone of the Independent interview was uncritical and respectful; a bland and meek summation of the sincere and well-intentioned thoughts of a man with the blood of untold numbers of victims on his hands: men, women and children in Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia and, indeed, in Palestine itself."

We noted that the piece gave no hint that the West and, in particular, the United States, has been full tilt behind the Israelis in crushing the lives and aspirations of the Palestinians. We suggested to Macintyre that, in echoing Blair's rhetoric without challenge, he had "ignored the consistent and massive military, financial and diplomatic support given to Israel during its increasing strangulation of Gaza — the US, the UK and its allies are deeply complicit in this terrible crime."

Macintyre dismissed our response as being "full of misleading assumptions about journalism in general and mine in particular." We invited him to enlighten us further, but received no reply. Three weeks later he had still not responded again, despite a gentle emailed nudge. It was only once our alert went out on 20 July, and many readers challenged him, that Macintyre felt moved to write directly to us:

"Since I have in the last 24 hours had a lengthy series of emails from your supporters urging me to reply to the prominent attack on me on the Media Lens website, I assume that you will now publish the attached response in full." (Email from Donald Macintyre, 21 July, 2010).

Like other mainstream journalists, Macintyre prefers not to notice the fact that many of the emails sent to him (and also copied to us) were not from "supporters" — they were from people interested to see how his arguments stacked up against ours so that they could make their minds up for themselves.

We will discuss Macintyre's email below — we have also published it in our forum: [www.medialens.org/forum/](http://www.medialens.org/forum/)

[viewtopic.php?p=10739#10739](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iranian-ships-could-join-wave-of-flotillas-to-gaza-says-hamas-chief-2012259.html)

### Challenging Power = "Polemical Argument"

In his response, Macintyre emphasised that the Blair interview was given "similar prominence" to an interview in Gaza with the Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar. (Donald Macintyre, 'Iranian ships could join wave of flotillas to Gaza, says Hamas chief', Independent, 28 June, 2010; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iranian-ships-could-join-wave-of-flotillas-to-gaza-says-hamas-chief-2012259.html>)

The Hamas interview was offered by Macintyre as an example indicating his balanced approach in interviews:

"In both cases I extracted what news I could on a story which was dynamic on several fronts, including the diplomatic... A parallel is actually afforded by the news interview with Dr Zahar. I also did not seek to engage him in print in a forensic debate on various remarks he made, including his assertion which I reported in some detail, that Israel and not Hamas had obstructed a prisoner exchange for Sgt Shalit. The reason was that I considered my job, as in the case of Blair, was to report his views, in the context of a fast moving story, without them being swallowed up, in a relatively short interview, by polemical argument with the reporter."

The "parallel" is utterly bogus. Blair had been the British prime minister and bears responsibility for some of the greatest crimes in recent history. He is now a leading representative of an "international community" that is facilitating the destruction of the Palestinian people. In an interview with New Left Project, Norman Finkelstein, a leading commentator on the Israel-Palestine conflict, compared the assault on the Palestinians to the European genocide of Native Americans:

"I've found from my own work that actually the comparison with the dispossession of the Native Americans in North America works pretty well. Some years ago I sat down and started to read about what happened to the Cherokee Indians in the United States, and if you follow the steps in their dispossession, and then overlay the Israel-Palestine conflict, the correspondence and correlation is pretty impressive." ([http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/god\\_helps\\_those\\_who\\_help\\_themselves\\_-\\_an\\_interview\\_with\\_norman\\_finkelstein/](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/god_helps_those_who_help_themselves_-_an_interview_with_norman_finkelstein/))

As British citizens, we, Macintyre included, all bear responsibility for Blair's actions — our moral accountability is a very clear and obvious factor demanding that we hold Blair to account as far as we are able. Macintyre, by contrast, is in +no+ way responsible for the actions of the leader of a Palestinian government elected by Palestinians. The moral priority could hardly be clearer, and yet mainstream journalists act as though the priorities should be reversed — official enemies are typically subjected to fierce challenge, whereas 'our' leaders and their allies are treated as

revered statespersons to be received with polite deference and easy questions.

Macintyre wrote that he “considered [it] my job” to report Blair’s “views, in the context of a fast moving story, without them being swallowed up, in a relatively short interview, by polemical argument with the reporter.”

So the fundamental journalistic task of holding power to account is reduced to “polemical argument” for which there is no space, while acting as a faithful stenographer of high-level distortions is humbly doing “my job”. The ethical implications are breathtakingly miserable. In reality, journalists just about +never+ manage to find the time or space to seriously challenge Western leaders. It seems to be seen as impolite, as almost a slur on the democratic process.

Macintyre asserted that in writing up his Blair interview:

“My office judged that a relatively strong statement by the Quartet’s senior diplomat [Blair] on the need to lift the blockade in the wake of the killing of nine Turks aboard the Mavi Marmara, was of interest to readers.”

But according to Macintyre’s own article, Blair had +not+ called for an unequivocal lifting of the blockade, only for an “easing” of the “counterproductive” blockade which might end up “alienating” young people in Gaza: a polite way to describe the daily torture of 1.5 million Palestinians.

Macintyre went on to proclaim his own bona fides in reporting Palestine honestly and fairly:

“As it happens, I do not think that any Western correspondent has done more than I have, reporting on the ground since the beginning of the Israeli imposed siege in 2007, to draw attention to the deeply adverse effects of the blockade on the civilian population of Gaza. (If you doubt this I will furnish you a list of the relevant links.)”

It is true that Macintyre has drawn attention to the adverse effects of the blockade on Gaza. But that is irrelevant to the challenge we made, which was that he had failed to fully report Western complicity in Israel’s crushing of Palestinian lives — a crucial fact. Nor are we interested in celebrating whether Macintyre might be among the least biased of Western correspondents, an inglorious rabble with few honourable exceptions.

As we pointed out in our previous alert, Blair, with Macintyre’s collusion, was at pains to depict Hamas as “the extremists” who needed to be “isolate[d]”. As we noted, the idea that the Israeli government, and their ‘militant’ supporters in Washington, London and other Western capitals, might be deemed the real extremists is unthinkable.

Macintyre’s interview with Blair had indeed, as we mentioned in our alert, “ignored the consistent and massive military, financial and diplomatic support given to Israel during its increasing strangulation of Gaza — the US, the UK and its allies are deeply complicit in this terrible crime”.

Macintyre responded:

“I would draw your attention to a 2000 word article written by me the day after the flotilla raid which focuses on

international complicity with the siege. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/its-up-to-us-to-lift-the-blockade-1988693.html>”

But throughout this piece, Macintyre portrays the Western powers as mere bystanders “wringing their hands” afflicted by “passivity” and even “paralysis”, guilty only of “woeful inaction” in the face of Israel’s steely refusal to lift its boot off the throat of the Palestinian people. Our point is that Israel is fully and massively armed to the tune of \$3 billion annually, and diplomatically protected, by the United States with the support of Britain and other allies.

The thrust of Macintyre’s long piece was to back calls for a UN “maritime relief operation” for Gaza that “would go a long way to redeeming the West’s woeful inaction”. As discussed, in reality it is the West’s +action+ not its “woeful inaction” that is so appalling. Surely a relief operation would not exhaust the West’s moral courage, Macintyre added. “After all, the three dominant values which have permeated Western thinking over the last half century have been enterprise, freedom and democracy.” People on the business end of these “dominant values” — the West’s countless victims in the bloodbaths of Central America, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world — point to other priorities.

In similar vein, Macintyre made a cryptic reference in his article to the “tragically abortive peace talks at Camp David in 2000”. This “tragic” episode is “Israel’s most important contemporary myth”, John Pilger writes. The myth states that Ehud Barak offered the Palestinians the return of “90 per cent” of the Occupied Territories and that Yasser Arafat turned him down. Arafat’s alleged rejection of this “unprecedented act of generosity”, to quote the myth once again, became the launch pad for renewed abuse of the Palestinians, including the building of an apartheid wall.

Pilger writes of the peace talks in 2000:

“There was no ‘90 per cent’ offer. At Camp David, Barak promised a token military withdrawal from no more than 12 per cent of the Occupied Territories. He also made it clear that Israel had no intention of giving back any part of Greater Jerusalem, which covers some of the best Palestinian land and is the administrative and cultural heart of Palestine. Most of the illegal settlements, which controlled 42 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza, would stay, leaving the Palestinians with fragments of their original homeland, or 15 per cent of pre-Israel Palestine.” (John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, Bantam Press, London, 2006, pp. 107-108)

“In practice,” wrote Barak’s chief negotiator at Camp David, Shlomo Ben-Ami, before taking up his negotiator’s role, “the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever.” (Quoted, Pilger, *ibid.*)

### **A Reporter “Surprised” By “Offended” Readers**

Macintyre seems aggrieved that readers wrote to him at all:

“Finally I note that a number of Media Lens supporters who have now written to me to complain about the article say they have hitherto been Independent readers. I am a little surprised, if they are so interested in Middle East affairs,

that they have found themselves offended by the article only after publication of the Media Lens report. I am unclear why they did not react at the time. Indeed I am unaware of a single complaint about the piece before your denunciation.”

This is a standard refrain we have seen over the years. We are rabble-rousers needlessly stirring up public dissatisfaction where none previously existed. In reality, a constant theme in the emails we receive from readers is a feeling of relief that our work “not only helped clarify and strengthen my own intuitions, but perhaps more importantly than this, helped me to feel less alone outside the current of much contemporary discourse”. If Macintyre’s argument ever did wash, it certainly won’t wash now. Readers may not have responded to Macintyre’s piece prior to our alert, but these days we are often beaten to the e-punch by determined, fast-acting netizens writing to journalists. This is a daily occurrence on our message board.

Does Macintyre really believe that our readers respond robotically to journalists without judging the arguments for themselves? Is it really lamentable for members of the public to take action in response to biased journalism when emboldened by the realisation that they are not alone in their concerns?

The reader can judge whether our challenge of Donald Macintyre was “full of misleading assumptions” and our analysis simply a “denunciation”. Shouldn’t media professionals welcome rational and polite challenges from the public?

#### **SUGGESTED ACTION**

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Donald Macintyre, Jerusalem correspondent, The Independent  
Email: [d.macintyre@independent.co.uk](mailto:d.macintyre@independent.co.uk)

Katherine Butler, foreign editor, The Independent  
Email: [k.butler@independent.co.uk](mailto:k.butler@independent.co.uk)

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## “PEACE ENVOY” BLAIR GETS AN EASY RIDE IN THE INDEPENDENT

Jul 20, 2010 12:00AM

JULY 20, 2010

Last month, the Independent carried an interview with Tony Blair, the former British prime minister and now “the international community’s Middle East envoy.” (Donald Macintyre, ‘Tony Blair: Former PM urges Israel to ease Gaza blockade’, Independent, June 4, 2010; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/tony-blair-former-pm-urges-israel-to-ease-e-gaza-blockade-1991105.html>)

Taken literally, the “international community” refers to the UN General Assembly, or perhaps to a majority of its members. But in media Newspeak, the term stands for the United States joined by its allies and clients. As Noam Chomsky has noted: “Accordingly, it is a logical impossibility for the United States to defy the international community.” (Chomsky, ‘The Crimes of “Intcom”’, Foreign Policy, September 2002; <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/200209-.htm>)

As for the “peace process” being facilitated by the “peace envoy”, Gideon Levy, a columnist in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, comments:

“The masked ball is at its peak: Preening each other, Obama and Netanyahu have proved that even their heavy layer of makeup can no longer hide the wrinkles. The worn-out, wizened old face of the longest ‘peace process’ in history has been awarded another surprising and incomprehensible extension. It’s on its way nowhere.” (Levy, ‘An excellent meeting’, Haaretz, July 8, 2010; <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/an-excellent-meeting-1.300686>)

This, Independent readers were told portentously, was Blair’s first newspaper interview since the Israeli navy “halted” the Gaza peace flotilla. Questions were posed by Donald Macintyre, the paper’s Jerusalem correspondent since 2004 and, previously, its chief political commentator for eight years. (Macintyre, op.cit.)

Macintyre began by channelling Blair’s call for “an easing of the ‘counterproductive’ blockade of Gaza” and a new “strategy” which “isolates the extremists and helps the people and not one that operates the other way round.”

Blair, the reporter told us, “stressed more than once that the world needed to understand Israel’s deep-seated security concerns and the fact that [Israeli soldier] Gilad Shalit, who has been held for almost four years by Gaza militants, was a ‘huge issue’ for the Israeli public. Mr Blair again called for Sgt Shalit’s release.”

Blair’s sympathy for Israel’s security concerns was clear, and dutifully reflected in Macintyre’s piece:

“Mr Blair said the captivity of Sgt Shalit and the fact that ‘ Hamas as an entity is hostile’ would be a ‘very difficult situation for any country’.”

Macintyre relayed Blair's assertion "that not enough international attention was paid to the fact that 'the events that we see across TV screens are perceived completely differently in Israel, and people have got to understand that the pressure on [Israeli prime minister Benjamin] Netanyahu in respect of Gaza from many quarters is to be tougher'."

The "once-flourishing Gaza businessmen" Blair had met at an international Bethlehem conference on the Palestinian economy were, said Blair, "victims of the Hamas takeover, not supporters of it".

The whole tone of the Independent interview was uncritical and respectful; a bland and meek summation of the sincere and well-intentioned thoughts of a man with the blood of untold numbers of victims on his hands: men, women and children in Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia and, indeed, in Palestine itself.

### **"Deep-Seated Security Concerns"**

The interview had been a wonderful opportunity for some tough questioning by an experienced journalist. But it was missed. Instead, Blair was allowed to parade his supposed credentials for peace in the Middle East. Macintyre uncritically relayed Blair's assertion that "the world needed to understand Israel's deep-seated security concerns."

It is true that Israeli politicians often speak of an "existential threat." But, as Chomsky observes, "the most immediate and severe 'existential threat' is [Israel's] unwillingness to pursue diplomatic options that are open, and its adoption of the [apartheid era] South African doctrine that the reigning superpower [the United States] can enable it [to] withstand the world." (Noam Chomsky interviewed by Netta Ahituv, Ha-ir ("City") Magazine (Tel Aviv edition), June 25, 2010; <http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2010-06-27/noam-chomsky-city-magazine-tel-aviv-interview/>)

For years, Israeli politicians have claimed — falsely, and with media complicity — that "there is no partner for peace." In fact, Israel has for decades rejected a near-unanimous international consensus for a two-state settlement, including all the security guarantees of UN Resolution 242. In rejecting almost the entire world as a "partner for peace", with the United States virtually the sole exception, Israel has consistently demonstrated a "preference for expansion over security and diplomacy" which "has had dire consequences". (Noam Chomsky, ' "Exterminate all the brutes": Gaza 2009', 20 January, 2010; <http://www.zcommunications.org/exterminate-all-the-brutes-gaza-2009-by-noam-chomsky>).

Moreover, as we noted in an earlier media alert, in its attacks on Gaza and Lebanon, and threats made against Iran, Israel has repeatedly set out to kill, maim and destroy in order to promote terror and to crush any attempt to resist Israeli expansion and strategic aims in the region. (Media Lens, 'The BBC, Impartiality and the Hidden Logic of Massacre', 4 February, 2009; [http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/090204\\_the\\_bbc\\_impartiality.php](http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/090204_the_bbc_impartiality.php))

None of this realpolitik made its way into the Independent's interview with Blair.

In short, the piece gave no hint that the West and, in particular, the United States, has been full tilt behind the Israelis in

crushing the lives and aspirations of the Palestinians. Macintyre blithely repeated Blair's call for an international solution that "isolates the extremists and helps the people and not one that operates the other way round." But who are the real, large-scale extremists here? That it might be the Israeli government, and their "militant" supporters in Washington, London and other Western capitals, is deemed unthinkable.

### **An "Extremely Busy" Journalist Warns Of "Misleading Assumptions"**

We wrote to Macintyre on June 4:

"It is not clear to what extent you performed the journalist's role of holding power to account; if at all. For example, you note:

"Gilad Shalit, who has been held for almost four years by Gaza militants, was a "huge issue" for the Israeli public. Mr Blair again called for Sgt Shalit's release.'

"The day before the capture of Shalit on the front lines of the Israeli forces attacking Gaza, Israeli soldiers entered Gaza City and kidnapped two civilians, the Muamar brothers, taking them to Israel (in violation of the Geneva Conventions), where they disappeared into Israel's prison population. Are you aware of these facts? Did you put them to Mr Blair? The kidnapping of two civilians is a far more serious crime than the capture of Shalit. But the media, including you and your paper, have given it far less attention. Why is that?"

"And what about the [thousands of] Palestinians held without charge in Israeli prisons, often for long periods? Why no mention of them in your interview with a major politician who shares some responsibility for this?"

"All of this is 'a "huge issue" for the Palestinian public'; indeed, for most of the world.

"You also ignored the consistent and massive military, financial and diplomatic support given to Israel during its increasing strangulation of Gaza — the US, the UK and its allies are deeply complicit in this terrible crime. But it elicits no comment from you here.

"Why is that?"

Five days later, having received no reply, we gently nudged Macintyre for a response. Surely he was not incapable of responding to the points put to him, we asked. This seemed to provoke him. Within a couple of hours we received the following message:

"Actually, your email is so full of misleading assumptions about journalism in general and mine in particular, that it is quite hard to know where to start. But since in common with Media Lens policy I assume you intend to publish my response and since I am extremely busy you will have to wait. Because you are right; I am not incapable of replying to your points, though no doubt not to your satisfaction." (Email, June 9, 2010)

We wrote back thanking Macintyre and saying that we looked forward to his promised response. Almost three weeks later, we were still waiting so we wrote again:

"I'm sure you're extremely busy but I would greatly appreciate a reply to the points that were originally put to you on 4 June, please. I'd also be interested to read your argument about that email being 'full of misleading assumptions'. It could be a useful public discussion for readers of Media Lens as well as the Independent's audience." (Email, June 28, 2010)

There has been silence since. More than six weeks after our initial challenge to the Independent's Donald Macintyre, we are still waiting for a response. Perhaps he really does have too much on his plate to reply. Or it may be that he would rather not have his own reporting, and his views about journalism, subjected to public scrutiny. Only he knows. But certainly the public deserves better; not least because biased, power-friendly journalism provides a cover for violent and oppressive Western policies in the Middle East.

#### **SUGGESTED ACTION**

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Katherine Butler, foreign editor, The Independent  
Email: [k.butler@independent.co.uk](mailto:k.butler@independent.co.uk)

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## **TECTONIC TILTING — Unlevel Playing Fields And The Rise Of Climate Scepticism**

Jul 14, 2010 12:00AM

JULY 14, 2010

English football's Premier League is a farce. Year in, year out, the same 'Big Four' super-teams — Chelsea, Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool — fight for the same top four spots they have dominated since the 1996-97 season. Even for casual consumers of football news, the truth is hard to miss: at the end of every season, the teams that have most of the money — supplied by tycoons, TV rights and participation in Europe's even more glamorous Champions League — simply buy off the best players from the lesser teams that have been causing them trouble. And if the super-team managers fail to deliver, then the best managers and trainers are brought in to put things right.

Quality is bolstered by quantity to further reduce the risk of failure — the super-teams are actually multi-teams. If an inspired lesser team manages to compete with one of the Big Four, the

latter can always bring on fresh-legged, world class substitutes with whom the lesser teams, with no superstars on the bench, are unable to compete. The reality is that, over the course of a season, super-teams compete against lesser squads with the equivalent of two, three or more squads of their own. The cards — the credit cards, cash, lucre — are totally stacked in favour of the Big Four.

Week after week, Big Four fans look on breathlessly to see if a ton of money will once again allow the big business machine they call 'us' to overwhelm teams with a fraction of 'our' resources. No one seems to notice, or care, that every match is begun on a playing field mechanically tilted by giant under-pitch cogs towards the goal of the lesser team.

Type the words 'Premier League', 'Big Four', and 'dominance/ domination' into the LexisNexis search engine, and you will find occasional, small gestures in the direction of truth in the national press. In 2007, Simon Cass wrote in the Daily Mail that fans "are increasingly frustrated that the fight for the Premiership has become a money-driven, foregone conclusion with each passing season and the rich simply getting richer". (Cass, 'Only the top four matter,' Daily Mail, July 26, 2007) Predictably enough, such observations are supported by analysis that is crassly superficial, and unlikely to embarrass the powers that be.

#### **The Rise Of Climate Scepticism**

In the New York Times on May 24, Elisabeth Rosenthal pondered another of the great unsporting contests of our time: the clash between people seeking and opposing action on climate change:

"Last month hundreds of environmental activists crammed into an auditorium here [Britain] to ponder an anguished question: If the scientific consensus on climate change has not changed, why have so many people turned away from the idea that human activity is warming the planet?" (Rosenthal, 'Climate Fears Turn to Doubts Among Britons,' New York Times, May 24, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/science/earth/25climate.html>)

The change in public opinion, Rosenthal noted, has been most striking in Britain, which has become "a home base for a thriving group of climate skeptics who have dominated news reports in recent months, apparently convincing many that the threat of warming is vastly exaggerated".

A BBC survey in February found that only 26 per cent of Britons believed that "climate change is happening and is now established as largely manmade," down from 41 per cent in November 2009. A poll conducted for the German magazine Der Spiegel found that 42 per cent of Germans feared global warming, down from 62 per cent four years earlier. A Gallup poll in March found that 48 per cent of Americans believed that the seriousness of global warming was "generally exaggerated," up from 41 per cent a year ago. (Ibid.)

Rosenthal made no mention of analysis challenging these figures. Professor Jon Krosnick of Stanford University has been surveying American views on climate change since 1995. Krosnick claims that Americans remain overwhelmingly convinced that man-made climate change is real and should be tackled:

"The media is sensationalizing these polls to make it sound like the public is backing off its belief in climate change, but

it's not so." (<http://www.thenation.com/article/climategate-claptrap-I>)

According to Krosnick, Americans' views have remained quite stable over the past ten years. In November 2009, 75 per cent of Americans believed that global temperatures were going up — a "huge number", Krosnick notes. The number of Americans who think all scientists agree about climate change +has+ declined to 31 per cent. But as Krosnick comments: "most Americans have thought that for the entire fifteen years I've been polling on this issue".

In the New York Times, Rosenthal cited newly sceptical members of the public:

"Before, I thought, 'Oh my God, this climate change problem is just dreadful,' said Jillian Leddra, 50, a musician who was shopping in London on a recent lunch hour. 'But now I have my doubts, and I'm wondering if it's been overhyped.'"

Up to this point, Rosenthal's analysis was reasonable enough. But this was her explanation of the change in public opinion:

"Here in Britain, the change has been driven by the news media's intensive coverage of a series of climate science controversies unearthed and highlighted by skeptics since November. These include the unauthorized release of e-mail messages from prominent British climate scientists at the University of East Anglia that skeptics cited as evidence that researchers were overstating the evidence for global warming and the discovery of errors in a United Nations climate report."

Rosenthal's account is so deceptive because it portrays climate scepticism, and media +enthusiasm+ for climate scepticism, as naturally occurring phenomena — they simply +are+. But this is a lie. Like Premier League football, the playing field hosting the public debate on climate is massively tilted by hidden forces in favour of the corporate interests that have long fought environmental responsibility tooth and nail. The pitch on which the game is played — the corporate media — is itself corporate!

Environmental journalist Andy Rowell — author of *Green Backlash* and co-founder of Spinwatch ([www.spinwatch.org](http://www.spinwatch.org)) — gave us a brief summary of the corporate stance on climate change:

"In the late 1960s, the leading PR company Hill and Knowlton, advising the tobacco industry on how to confront its critics over health, argued that doubt was the product they should use: 'The most important type of story is that which casts doubt in the cause and effect theory of disease and smoking.' Eye-grabbing headlines were needed and 'should strongly call out the point — Controversy! Contradiction! Other Factors! Unknowns!'

"Since the Sixties, the tobacco industry have continued their attempts to maintain the controversy. Their documents are peppered with statements such as 'no clinical evidence', 'no substantial evidence', 'no laboratory proof', 'and unresolved'. Nothing has been 'statistically proven', there is no 'scientific proof'.

"'Creating controversy' is precisely what the fossil fuel industry and its spin-doctors have done on climate change. The longer they can throw doubt on the issue, the more we

carry on burning fossil fuels and the more money they make. Simple. So a small number of fossil fuel-funded think tanks and scientists have managed to create doubt over the scientific consensus of climate change for nearly two decades. They have been joined by a small group of right-wing ideologues, who are opposed to climate change on political grounds.

"The mainstream media continue to give these sceptics air-time in the name of balance, but do not tell an unsuspecting public that many are fossil-fuel funded, politically opposed, or even have no scientific credentials. So no wonder the public are confused. Like the corporate media, (which take significant money off the fossil fuel industry) many people do not want to change their behaviour, so it is reassuring for everyone when a sceptic throws doubt on climate change. This is compounded by parts of the right-wing media which are running what is effectively a misinformation campaign on climate." (Rowell, email to David Edwards, May 27, 2010)

The website Campaign Against Climate Change reports:

"It has recently been revealed that Koch Industries, a little-known, privately owned US oil company, paid nearly US\$50 million to climate denial groups and individuals between 1997 and 2008. In a similar period Exxon Mobil paid out around \$17 to \$23 million." (<http://www.campaigncc.org/sceptics>)

As the website notes, the manufactured 'Climate gate' 'scandal' of autumn 2009, mentioned by Rosenthal — in which emails from the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit (CRU) were illegally hacked and published — was a nonsense. Sir Muir Russell, a senior civil servant who led a six-month inquiry into the affair, said recently:

"Ultimately this has to be about what they did, not what they said. The honesty and rigour of CRU as scientists are not in doubt... We have not found any evidence of behaviour that might undermine the conclusions of the IPCC assessments." (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jul/08/muir-russell-climategate-climate-science>)

Myles Allen, head of the climate dynamics group at the University of Oxford, commented:

"What everyone has lost sight of is the spectacular failure of mainstream journalism to keep the whole affair in perspective. Again and again, stories are sexed up with arch hints that these 'revelations' might somehow impact on the evidence for human impact on climate. Yet the only error in actual data used for climate change detection to have emerged from this whole affair amounted to a few hundredths of a degree in the estimated global temperature of a couple of years in the 1870s." (Ibid.)

Rosenthal's article was titled, 'Climate Fears Turn to Doubts Among Britons.' Even if we accept this 'turn' at face value, honest analysis of +why+ these fears have turned to doubt, demands that we consider the deepest forces empowering climate scepticism.

John Gibbons wrote about climate change in the Irish Times for two years. In February 2010, Gibbons published his last,

damning column. He wrote:

“Ireland’s most senior climate expert, Prof John Sweeney of NUI Maynooth [National University of Maynooth], acknowledged last week that climate-change deniers were ‘winning the propaganda war’. Chief among them, he added, were deniers from the ranks of journalism and lobbying.

“Hang on a minute, you might ask, aren’t journalists supposed to be the good guys, the ones who investigate, not propagate, scams? Well, yes and no. ‘A media and telecommunications industry fuelled by advertising and profit maximisation is part of the problem,’ Lewis and Boyce [of the Cardiff School of Journalism] point out.

“In Ireland, this even extends to the State broadcaster. The boom years swelled its coffers with an advertising bonanza, and much of this found its way into the pockets, not of lowly researchers, but of elite broadcasters. Millionaire ‘journalists’ have a profound yet undeclared personal vested interest in the consumption-driven economic status quo upon which their wealth is predicated. As, of course, do billionaire media proprietors. They in turn seek out affirmation of their own biases, and ridicule dissenters.” (<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2010/0204/1224263734237.html>)

By contrast, Rosenthal presents the corporate media enthusiasm for climate scepticism as uncontroversial, apolitical, perhaps a function of the journalistic appetite for scandal. In discussion with Ireland’s MediaBite website, Gibbons added:

“The media in Ireland is infested with ten-a-penny climate sceptics... You throw a stick and you will hit a journalistic climate sceptic. You will also find that most of them are over 60, they think they have seen it all and that these environmental types are extremists, apostles, believers. Ironically they try and ascribe religious overtones to people who are by and large not very religious.” ([http://www.mediabite.org/article\\_-Balancing-the-Climate-Consensus—Part-1\\_760894276.html](http://www.mediabite.org/article_-Balancing-the-Climate-Consensus—Part-1_760894276.html))

The reality of media bias is inadmissible in almost all corporate media discourse, which is not in the business of damning itself, just as the Big Four teams are not in the business of damning their highly profitable domination of English football.

### **Tectonic Tilting**

The playing field under the climate debate, then, is tilted both by the corporate nature of the media that hosts the debate, and by the proven hostility of these media and allied corporations to serious action on climate change. But these distorting factors relate only to society’s ability to discuss the scientific, economic and political issues rationally. It also matters that mainstream media simultaneously host consumer advertising that bombards us with the message that consuming is normal, natural, youthful and fun.

Whereas the media at least claim, albeit erroneously, to offer a balance in reporting and commentary, such concerns are deemed irrelevant to advertising. Adverts — arguably an even more powerful influence distorting public perceptions than factual journalism — +all+ promote mass consumerism. Why is it important for a democracy to have balance in reporting and

commentary, but not in advertising? Reporters and commentators dependent on advertisers for their jobs have no interest in asking the question.

Corporations are free to portray themselves as responsible, reasonable, friendly, funny, even passionately green. In London Underground stations, this giant poster currently asks commuters:

“Why on earth would an energy company want me to use less energy?” (<http://www.eontalkingenergy.com/>)

Good question. The company explains with some tortured logic:

“Our ideal would be to have more customers. All using less energy.”

This is propaganda, pure and simple, and it goes completely unchallenged. Kalle Lasn, director of the dissident campaigning organisation, Adbusters, told us how his adverts challenging consumerism had been rejected out of hand by TV broadcasters:

“TV Station managers said ‘Why should I run ads that hurt my business? We decide what we run or not, we’re trying to run a business. Why don’t you just go away?!’” (Lasn, interview with David Edwards, August 1998)

With all commercials promoting high-tech ‘progress’, even credible scientific warnings of environmental disaster seem to belong to the fringe. If we hear the same pro-consumer arguments repeated with the same confidence by almost everyone in ‘the room’, then anyone outside will seem to be out of touch — old-fashioned, pessimistic, ideologically driven. And corporations are not content merely with advertising; they have “education” departments that reach into schools:

“Our interactive education pack for primary and secondary schools, focuses on climate change as a whole to pupils. It explains in a fun detailed way seven different sustainable technologies, and is exclusive to Sustainable Energy Solutions customers.” (<http://www.eon-uk.com/about/education.aspx>)

Arguably, the impact of even this huge weight of corporate thought control is dwarfed by the values promoted through education driven by state-corporate priorities. Modern schooling in effect puts our children’s egos on steroids. From the earliest age, pupils are forced to compare themselves with their peers, to define ‘success’ as being ‘better’, and ‘failure’ as being ‘worse’, than others. From the moment we come ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ of the class, are declared ‘below average’ or ‘above average’, ‘bright’ or ‘not academic’, we are primed to continue proving ourselves ‘better’, more ‘successful’, than others.

In adult life, this trained ego-angst is expressed through fiercely competitive production and consumption: we seek the best grades to go to the best universities, to get the best jobs, to afford the best cars, houses, holidays, schools for our children, in the best locations. The alternative — earning less, buying less, wanting less — feels like masochism, like choosing failure.

This version of ‘success’ is at the very heart of the modern malaise, because we can never have enough — someone is always ‘above’ us, we can always go ‘higher’, and we are always haunted by the fear of falling ‘lower’. No matter how much we consume, the distance between what we have and what we would

like to have remains constant.

In other words, the mass media are pro-consumption propagandists bombarding with pro-consumption advertising a public trained to seek egotistical 'success' through high status consumption and production.

On the other side of the debate, we have the evidence offered by scientists understandably reluctant to become embroiled in discussion on political issues, and by dissidents working outside the corporate media on minimal funding. Even the most radical dissidents are wary of criticising media performance, because, as one highly-respected analyst meekly told us, they "have to maintain diplomatic relations with the media". (Email to Media Lens, June 20, 2010)

This is the reality of the playing field on which the climate debate is taking place. It is not just that the pitch is tilted — the very tectonic plates underpinning modern culture are slanted against honest discussion of, and responses to, climate change.

This is why, over the last ten years, we have been arguing that the corporate media must be viewed as a crucial part of the problem. The mainstream version of 'balanced' debate is premised on the assumption that this tectonic tilting does not exist. After all, to affirm that the world is not flat but sloping means exposing the problems inherent to a corporate media system. And this our media system is structurally incapable of doing.

#### **SUGGESTED ACTION**

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

If you are on Facebook, log in and email Elizabeth Rosenthal via her Facebook page  
<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/profile.php?id=1682678022&ref=search>

Write to the New York Times  
[letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com)

We are grateful for donations received to date. The best way to support us is to send a monthly donation via PayPal or a standing order with a UK bank. If you currently support the corporate media by paying for their newspapers, why not support Media Lens instead?

<http://www.medialens.org/donate>

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## **BBC = BIN AND BYPASS COMPLAINTS**

Jul 8, 2010 12:00AM

JULY 8, 2010

### **So Piss Off!**

Robert Fisk wrote last week in the Independent of how an unnamed friend of his, "a Very Senior Correspondent of the BBC", responded to a recent challenge. Fisk could no longer recall whether it "was about the BBC's grovelling coverage of Israel or its refusal to show a film seeking help for wounded Palestinian children after the 2008-09 Gaza slaughter (on the grounds that this would damage the BBC's 'neutrality')". But the BBC correspondent was blandly dismissive:

"I recognise this is an issue."

Fisk skilfully unpacked the meaning of this "very revealing" BBC reply:

"Of course, what he should have said was: I know this is a problem. But he couldn't. Because BBC-speak doesn't allow words like problems — because problems have to be solved. And the BBC doesn't solve problems. Because they do not exist. There are only 'issues'. And issues only have to be 'recognised'. Thus what my friend really meant was: 'I know exactly what you're talking about but I haven't the slightest intention of admitting it, so piss off.'" (Fisk, 'Newspeak: why the BBC has an "issue" with problems', The Independent, July 3, 2010; <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-newspeak-why-the-bbc-has-an-issue-with-problems-2017279.html>)

This has also been the experience of many of our readers who complain to BBC editors and journalists about endless examples of bias, distortion and omission in BBC news. All too often, Kafkaesque responses are generated by the clanking pistons, turbines and pumps of the BBC complaints machinery.

Here is a typical example, following a complaint about BBC coverage of the Israeli attack on the Gaza peace flotilla from one of our most careful and astute correspondents:

"Thank you for your e-mail.

"I understand that you believe the BBC in general is biased in it's [sic] reporting on the Middle East situation towards the Israeli perspective.

"I can assure you that we are committed to covering events in the Middle East in a scrupulously impartial, fair, accurate, balanced, independent manner. The aim of our news reports is to provide the information across our programming in order to enable viewers and listeners to make up their own minds; to show the reality of a situation and provide the forum for debate, giving full opportunity for all viewpoints to be heard. We are satisfied that this has been the case in respect of our reporting of the Middle East, Nevertheless, I recognise you may continue to hold a different opinion about the BBC's impartiality.

"Please be assured that I've registered your obvious strong

feelings about our coverage on our audience log. This is a daily report of audience feedback that's circulated to many BBC staff, including members of the BBC Executive Board, channel controllers and other senior managers.

"Thank you once again for taking the trouble to share your views with us." (Email from BBC complaints, July 3, 2010)

This is entirely standard and is the BBC's idea of a serious reply to a serious complaint. Tellingly, such responses do not include the text of the original email, making it difficult for members of the public to check how well, if at all, their complaint has been addressed. Typically, these identikit responses contain unsupported, bold assertions affirming that "scrupulously impartial" BBC news reports "show the reality of a situation" with "all viewpoints" being heard. No evidence is offered — the BBC knows best! But as the complainant asked when he wrote back:

"What criteria do you use to decide that you have been able 'to show the reality of a situation and provide the forum for debate, giving full opportunity for all viewpoints to be heard' when you judge yourselves in your own cause?" (Keith Crosby, email to the BBC, July 3, 2010)

As far as we know, the BBC has not responded to this question. Perhaps because it is incapable of doing so.

### **Helen's Chocka Diary**

Readers may also be aware that the BBC uses a cumbersome web form for complaints which does not allow a copy of the submitted text to be sent to the person making the submission. And, shamefully, there is not even a direct email address for members of the public to use. As one of our readers observes in a complaint to the BBC:

"Surely the BBC can manage to formulate a system that quotes the original complaint when issuing a response, and records when the complaint was sent in so the recipient can tell how long it took to respond?" (Keith Granger, email to the BBC, June 30, 2010)

In 2006, BBC news editor Helen Boaden described how she deflects public criticism sent to her by email. Francis Elliott explained in the Independent:

"Don't bother emailing complaints to BBC head of news Helen Boaden. She was at the launch evening for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford last Monday night. Discussion turned to protest groups and lobbying outfits which email their views to senior editors. Boaden's response: 'Oh, I just changed my email address.' So much for the Beeb being accountable." (Elliott, 'Media Diary — Helen the hidden', The Independent, November 26, 2006; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/the-tossers-who-could-win-for-the-tories-425799.html>)

In January 2010, we invited Boaden to participate in an interview about BBC News to be made publicly available via our website at [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org). We proposed sending a few brief questions via email. "Would you be willing to participate?", we asked her. We received a response from Boaden's assistant asking:

"Could you give me an idea of the sort of questions you are thinking of and when you might want to do it?"

We replied saying that the questions would deal largely with BBC news reporting from the Middle East and Afghanistan; for example, coverage of the death toll in Iraq. We then sent a number of questions (archived in our forum here: <http://www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=10687#10687>). A few days later, the assistant wrote again:

"I've now had a chance to talk to Helen and I don't think this is going to be one we can help with. Helen doesn't do interviews that often — mostly because her diary is always chocka." (Email, January 11, 2010)

A simultaneous approach made to Sir Michael Lyons, chair of the BBC Trust, which supposedly ensures that the BBC acts in the public interest, was again answered by his personal assistant:

"Having given your request careful consideration, Sir Michael has decided to decline your offer. The Trust's on-going work programme includes a number of strands focussing on BBC news output, and as Sir Michael has previously said, there will be an opportunity for you to contribute to this in the future should you wish. Additionally, given the fact that some of this work is already on-going, he does not feel it would be appropriate to engage in any correspondence at this time which would cut across or be seen to pre-judge the outcome of this work. I am sorry to disappoint you." (January 13, 2010)

Lyons had previously declined to debate with us after he had been sent a copy of our latest book, 'Newspeak', and asked for his response to our arguments about BBC News. He told us:

"I do not think that I can fruitfully enter into a dialogue about my reactions [to the book]" (Media Lens media alert, 'The Silence of the BBC 100', December 4, 2009; [http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/091204\\_the\\_silence\\_of.php](http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/091204_the_silence_of.php))

In the absence of overwhelming grassroots pressure, the public will continue to be disappointed by BBC news performance, and will continue to be fobbed off by robotic insults to the intelligence of people who care enough to complain.

### **SUGGESTED ACTION**

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Mark Thompson, BBC director-general  
Email: [mark.thompson@bbc.co.uk](mailto:mark.thompson@bbc.co.uk)

Helen Boaden, head of BBC news  
Email: [helenboaden.complaints@bbc.co.uk](mailto:helenboaden.complaints@bbc.co.uk)

Sir Michael Lyons, Chairman, BBC Trust  
Email: [michael.lyons@bbc.co.uk](mailto:michael.lyons@bbc.co.uk)

BBC Complaints homepage, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/homepage/>

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