



“We Don’t Do Propaganda”

February 27th, 2019

Earlier this month, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman, author of *Utopia For Realists*, was interviewed by the high-profile Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson. During a panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Bregman had bluntly told billionaires that they should stop avoiding taxes and pay their fair share:

“We gotta be talking about taxes. That’s it. Taxes, taxes, taxes. All the rest is bullshit, in my opinion.”

His comments went viral which, in turn, led to him being invited on to Carlson’s television show. It’s safe to say that the interview did not go as the right-wing host would have liked. In fact, Fox News decided not to air the segment. However, it was captured on mobile phone footage in the Amsterdam studio where Bregman was doing the interview and it was later distributed via Twitter. He told Carlson:

The vast majority of Americans, for years and years now, according to the polls – including Fox News viewers and including Republicans – are in favour of higher taxes on the rich. Higher inheritance taxes, higher top marginal tax rates, higher wealth taxes, it’s all really mainstream. But no one’s saying that at Davos, just as no one’s saying it on Fox News, right? And I think the explanation for that is quite simple, is that most of the people in Davos, but also here on this channel, have been bought by the billionaire class. You know? You’re not meant to say these things. So I just went there, and I thought, you know what, I’m just going to say it, just as I’m saying it right here on this channel.

Carlson was happy enough at this point. Indeed, he praised Bregman for what he’d said in Davos: “That was one of the great moments – maybe the great moment in Davos history.”

Carlson added: “If I was wearing a hat, I’d take it off to you.”

The Dutch historian continued:

America is still pretty much the most powerful country in the world, right? So if it really would want to, it could easily crack down on tax paradises. But the thing is, you guys have brought into power a president who doesn’t even want to share his own tax returns. I mean, who knows how many billions he has hidden in the Cayman Islands or in Bermuda. So I think the issue really is one of corruption and of people being bribed, and of not being, not talking about the real issues. What the family—what the Murdochs [owners of Fox News] basically want you to do is to scapegoat immigrants instead of talking about tax avoidance.

By this point, it was clear that Carlson was unhappy with how the interview was going:

And I'm taking orders from the Murdochs, that's what you're saying?

Bregman responded reasonably:

No, I mean, it doesn't work that directly. But I mean, you've been part of the [right-wing libertarian think tank] Cato Institute, right? You've been a senior fellow there for years.

The Fox News presenter interjected aggressively, seemingly rattled: "Well how does it work?"

Bregman replied:

Well, it works by you taking their dirty money. They're funded by Koch billionaires, you know? It's as easy as that. I mean, you are a millionaire, funded by billionaires, that's what you are. And I'm glad you now finally jumped the bandwagon of people like Bernie Sanders and AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a newly elected Democrat politician in New York], but you're not part of the solution, Mr. Carlson. You're part of the problem, actually. ... All the anchors, all the anchors of Fox—

By this point, Carlson had lost it: "You would have to be a moron, you would have to be—"

Bregman carried on speaking:

They're all millionaires. How is this possible? Well it's very easy, you're just not talking about certain things.

You are a millionaire funded by billionaires, that's what you are... You're part of the problem.

Bregman then correctly predicted: 'you're probably not going to air this on your show.'

He added:

But I went to Davos to speak truth to power and I'm doing exactly the same thing right now. You might not like it, but you're a millionaire funded by billionaires and that's the reason you're not talking about these issues.

Carlson: "But I am talking about these issues."

Yeah, only now. Come on, you jumped the bandwagon. You're all like, oh, I'm against the globalist elite, blah blah blah. It's not very convincing to be honest.

That was too much for Carlson who exploded:

I wanna say to you why don't you go fuck yourself — you tiny brain. And I hope this gets picked up because you're a moron. I tried to give you a hearing, but you were too fucking annoying...

Unflustered, Bregman interjected with a smile: "You can't handle the criticism, can you?"

Afterwards, Bregman shared the clip on his Twitter feed:

Here's the interview that @TuckerCarlson and Fox News didn't want you to see. I chose to release it, because I think we should keep talking about the corrupting influence of money in politics. It also shows how angry elites can get if you do that.

As predicted, Fox News did not air the segment. No doubt prompted by Bregman releasing the exchange into the public domain, Carlson addressed it on his show:

Things went fine for the first few minutes and then Bregman launched into an attack on Fox News. It's not clear that Bregman has ever seen Fox. But he wanted to make his point. Fine.

But then he claimed that [adopts a fierce voice] my corporate masters tell me what to say on the show, and that was too much.

Carlson continued:

Whatever my faults or those of this channel, nobody in management has ever told us what positions to take on the air – never – not one time. We have total freedom here and we are grateful for that. I have hosted shows on both the other cable channels so I know first-hand how rare that freedom is. On this show, thanks to Fox, we get to say exactly what we think is true, for better or worse.

But there was no convincing Bregman of that, he knew what he knew. So I did what I try hard never to do on this show, and I was rude. I called him a moron and then I modified that word with a vulgar Anglo-Saxon term that is also intelligible in Dutch.

In my defence, I would say that was entirely accurate. But you're not allowed to use that word on television. So, once I'd said it out loud, there was no airing the segment.

Carlson then pointed out that Bregman had released the exchange and that you could find it online:

There is some profanity, and I apologize for that. On the other hand, it was genuinely heartfelt and I meant it with total sincerity.

It was a far from convincing explanation for why Fox News had not aired the segment. After all, a simple bleep could have overridden any profanity: a standard procedure used in television.

Note that we are not claiming that everything Carlson says can be dismissed as kow-towing to his 'corporate masters'. Last year, for example, he admirably challenged the establishment consensus on Syria. That expression of dissent may well have boosted his ratings: always a welcome factor for a media outlet. Our point is that there is no freedom to 'say exactly what we think' on a corporate outlet. As Herman and Chomsky explained in *Manufacturing Consent*, there are structural limits in the 'mainstream' media:

the "societal purpose" of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises.¹

That phrase, 'keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises', is crucial. Thus, for instance, a Fox News presenter who looked critically at the ownership and advertising behind that network would not last long; indeed, would likely never have been promoted into that trusted position in the first place.

'You Say What You Like, Because They Like What You Say'

What was perhaps most interesting in Carlson's riposte to Bregman was his defence of Fox News:

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Even former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger understood the absurdity of this response. In 2000, he told one of us in an interview:

If you ask anybody who works in newspapers, they will quite rightly say, “Rupert Murdoch”, or whoever, “never tells me what to write”, which is beside the point: they don't have to be told what to write... It's understood.

In fact, Bregman had already noted when he released the exchange:

I stand behind what I said, but there's one thing I should have done better. When Carlson asked me how he's being influenced by Big Business and tax-avoiding billionaires, I should have quoted Noam Chomsky.

He expanded:

Years ago, when he was asked a similar question, Chomsky replied: “I'm sure you believe everything you're saying. But what I'm saying is that if you believe something different, you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.”

Long-time readers of Media Lens will recall this example very well. It came up in a BBC2 programme in 1995 called The Big Idea when Andrew Marr – then of the Independent and now with BBC News – interviewed Chomsky about the propaganda model of the media. The quote in question comes when Marr is struggling to grasp the propaganda system that filters for obedient, power-serving journalists who are able to carve out a successful career in the ‘mainstream’.

Marr: ‘I'm just interested in this because I was brought up like a lot of people, probably post-Watergate film and so on, to believe that journalism was a crusading craft and there were a lot of disputatious, stropky, difficult people in journalism. And I have to say, I think I know some of them.’

Chomsky: ‘Well, I know some of the best, and best-known, investigative reporters in the United States – I won't mention names – whose attitude towards the media is much more cynical than mine. In fact, they regard the media as a sham. And they know, and they consciously talk about how they try to play it like a violin. If they see a little opening, they'll try to squeeze something in that ordinarily wouldn't make it through. And it's perfectly true that the majority – I'm sure you're speaking for the majority of journalists who are trained – have it driven into their heads, that this is a crusading profession, adversarial, we stand up against power. A very self-serving view. On the other hand, in my opinion, I hate to make a value judgement but, the better journalists and, in fact, the ones who are often regarded as the best journalists have quite a different picture. And I think a very realistic one.’

Marr: “How can you know that I'm self-censoring? How can you know that journalists are...’

Chomsky: “I’m not saying your self-censoring. I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying. But what I’m saying is that if you believe something different, you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.”

Chomsky’s phrase, ‘if you believe something different, you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting’ sums up the propaganda system of the corporate media. What Tucker Carlson appears not to understand is that he has ‘total freedom’ to say what he likes on Fox News because he has shown that he can be trusted to remain within acceptable limits. He has obviously never heard Noam Chomsky explain how it works. Nor does he seem to be familiar with US critic Michael Parenti whose riposte to the proud boast by many a corporate journalist that ‘nobody tells me what to say or write’ was:

You say what you like, because they like what you say.

Parenti expanded on the theme during a talk titled ‘Inventing Reality’ in 1993:

And, you know, the minute you move too far – and you have no sensation of a restraint on your freedom. I mean, you don’t know you’re wearing a leash if you sit by the peg all day. It’s only if you then begin to wander to a prohibited perimeter that you feel the tug, you see. So you’re free because your ideological perspective is congruent with that of your boss. So, you have no sensation of being at odds with your boss.

Perhaps the Pulitzer Prize-winning US author Upton Sinclair put it most succinctly when he wrote:

It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.

Obviously, the same applies to a woman. Indeed, Deborah Haynes, then defence editor at The Times and now foreign affairs editor at Sky News, tweeted proudly last year: “No one tells me what to think.”

Orla Guerin, a veteran BBC News journalist currently reporting from Venezuela, believes herself to be scrupulously impartial and neutral:

Thank you for watching, but we don’t do propaganda. We call it they [sic] way we see it, even if that does not suit the pre-conceived idea/ ideals that some have.

Jeremy Bowen, the BBC News Middle East editor, opined:

We are the best source of decent, impartial reportage anywhere in the world.

At first glance, the claims made by Guerin and Bowen sound plausible. After all, the BBC is widely admired and lauded around the world. In reality, the BBC is structurally and institutionally incapable of reporting fully and honestly the crimes of the West and its allies. It has never told even a fraction of the truth about US-UK crimes in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. It has never properly reported these crimes or placed them in an accurate historical context, showing how the West has consistently attacked independent national movements abroad to ensure that local tyrants, armed and supported by ‘us’, suppress local people to the benefit of Western corporate interests. This framework of understanding is considered completely beyond the pale in ‘polite’ BBC discourse; it is not even thinkable for them. Moreover, the BBC exactly reverses this apologetic stance in its endless

channelling and hyping of condemnatory Western government claims, often fabricated, against Official Enemies such as Iraq, Libya, Syria; thus preparing the way for Western sanctions and other forms of ‘intervention’, including full-scale invasion.

BBC reporting on Venezuela is a current ugly example. Because the US, UK and its allies are the world’s leading human rights violators, and because senior BBC News journalists and editors cannot even conceive of this possibility, BBC output must be considered propaganda on every issue relating to international – and, indeed, often domestic – affairs. Our media alerts and books are chock-full of examples and analysis that show this in great detail.

To take just one recent example: if Bowen’s absurd claim about the BBC were true, it would have reported extensively on former FBI Director Andrew McCabe quoting Donald Trump:

I don’t understand why we’re not looking at Venezuela. Why we’re not a war with Venezuela? They have all the oil and they’re in our back door.

But you will never see this become the lead item on BBC News at Ten. Why not? Because that would sink the story we’re supposed to believe: that the US is acting out of humanitarian concern for Venezuelans. In a sane media, McCabe’s account of a meeting with Trump would have been central to countless news stories and discussion about Venezuela. BBC News, ITV News and Channel 4 News would all be leading with this on their news bulletins. The newspapers would have it on their front pages. In fact, our database searches show that not a single ‘mainstream’ UK newspaper has reported the remarks. The left-wing Morning Star is the only national newspaper to have covered the story.

Likewise, ‘mainstream’ news media seem supremely disinterested in similar remarks from the notorious US neocon hawk, John Bolton, resurrected from the war crimes of the Iraq invasion, and now anointed as the US National Security Advisor. He made crystal-clear the realpolitik considerations driving US policy towards Venezuela:

It’ll make a big difference to the United States if we could have American oil companies invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela.

Imagine if Putin had made similar remarks threatening war on Venezuela, and been entirely open that the objective was the vast oil reserves there. There would be no end to the headlines devoted to his monstrous intentions and the perfidy of Russian imperial ambitions.

We challenged Paul Royall, the editor of BBC News at Six and News at Ten, about not reporting the former FBI director citing Trump’s desire for war on Venezuela:

Hello @paulroyall. You are the editor of @BBCNews at Six and Ten. Why is *this* not front and centre in your news reports on #Venezuela? Why have you instead *buried* a crucial factor that helps to explain US policy towards #Venezuela?

As ever, Royall – who follows us on Twitter – remained silent. Similar challenges to Orla Guerin and Andrew Roy, BBC News foreign editor, also blew past like the proverbial desert tumbleweed. Likewise, an earlier tweet of ours was ignored:

Your news reports present a highly partial, US-friendly view of #Venezuela. By omitting crucial facts, you are misleading your audiences.

As the veteran journalist John Pilger has long pointed out, this phenomenon is called ‘lying by omission’. It is a major factor in enabling senior journalists at major ‘mainstream’ news organisations to claim wrongly, as Orla Guerin did, that, ‘We don’t do propaganda’. This is a deadly myth. Deadly, because it masks the fact that corporate media, especially BBC News, are responsible for propaganda that pushes more Western ‘intervention’, more war, more stolen natural resources, more mass deaths of innocent civilians, more refugees, more corporate profits, more fossil-fuel burning, more species loss and, ultimately, more planetary destruction; perhaps even human extinction in an era of climate chaos.