

## Media Report - Interview with John Pilger

*Dear Everyone, Below is an edited version of a very interesting interview with John Pilger on The Media Report [Radio National January 30, 2002]. He has some very interesting and challenging things to say about the role of the media and many of its weaknesses. Peace Claude Mostowik MSC*

Now to another voice often raised against the agenda of the mass media and government. Investigative journalist John Pilger has devoted much of his professional life to exposing abuses of power. He's a relentless critic of the moves to war, and of the failure of the media to expose the distortions that justify it and the excesses that characterise it. I asked him for his opinion on the quality of debate in our media over the issue of impending war.

**John Pilger:** Well I think the quality of the debate is very high among the public. But you have to turn to the letters page or you have to listen to people in their homes and shops. I don't think the media has contributed a great deal to it. I think the public are well ahead of the media. There's a kind of critical public intelligence especially about sending Australian troops to attack Iraq that has really analysed the situation quite clearly itself, and come out with some very strong oppositional views. With the exception of radio, I think that the general level of debate in newspapers and television in Australia is poor.

It's poor because so much space and so much time is given to channelling and echoing what I would call the official viewpoint. Howard does something—he farewells some ships or Senator Hill makes some statement—that is channelled as if that is all that we pretty well need to know. And the so-called debate around that is confined, generally speaking, to likeminded people. I don't find anything on the television news that would enlighten me, generally speaking, and I think the newspapers reflect—I suppose—the structure of the Australian press, when you have a restricted ownership, such a lack of diversity; then that's going to be reflected in the debate.

**Mick O'Regan:** But don't you think that there is a perennial issue that separates reporting from commentary, and that many people are arguing that what the media should do is to report on official decisions, and they should give people a sense of what is happening at government level, without necessarily going in to opinionated commentary.

**John Pilger:** Yes. Of course official positions should be reported, but they're only one position, and as I. F. Stone once said, famously, all governments lie. And that has been my experience of governments, especially at a time like this. They lie. They lie to their public. In Britain it is quite clear that Blair, over a period of time, has lied to the public. Now simply channelling those lies is not good enough. Certainly the statements of prime ministers, and the official statements, have to be reported and I agree with you, they should be reported in an unalloyed way. But apart from that, there are other positions. There are other perspectives.

Frankly, if I had to rely on the newspapers and the television to find out what was going on, I wouldn't. And it's my job to do that.

**Mick O'Regan:** Just on that I. F. Stone position—that's a very strong comment to make, that governments lie, and that for example the Blair government lied. What lies have been told?

**John Pilger:** Well that's been my experience. I don't think it's a strong statement. I think the fact that you're even surprised to hear it perhaps suggests something. Governments have been lying since probably there were governments. And especially when they want to, a government, for all sorts of spurious reasons, wants to go against the popular will and engage with a foreign power in an unprovoked attack on another country; then governments lie. I mean we'd be here all day, talking, describing and analysing the number of lies. I think I've spent half my career writing about government lies.

I. F. Stone's statement is not in any way an extraordinary one. It's simply a fact. One of the problems that we have is that journalists are far too close to governments. We have lobby correspondents. We have Canberra correspondents. We have people who become part, almost, of a court and know the politicians personally. And themselves become echoers and channelers. It's a system, rather than blaming any individual, because within that system there are people who do very good work. But it's a system that allows governments, if you want to use the softer expression, to spin something. To deceive. And journalists end up being the vehicles for that, when in fact they should be the people who are keeping the record straight—or trying to.

**Mick O'Regan:** Is that capacity of governments to spin—do you think that reflects a sort of breakdown in the relationship between the military and the public? Would it be better if, say, the Australian defence force media people were able to put to the public specific issues that were of concern? Obviously acknowledging that operational matters are sensitive. But is it the process of the filtering through the political and bureaucratic process that changes the nature of the information?

**John Pilger:** Well I don't think it's really the military's job to do that, to even engage in public relations, frankly. I think they should do as they're told. We saw the recent enquiry into the boat that went down taking 350 men, women and children asylum seekers with it, and we found out that the whole top echelon of the military and the navy—well if they weren't lying, they were doing a good job of getting close to it. So before we start talking about media relations, we simply need people in public service to tell the truth.

But I don't think it's the military's job is to defend the country. To go off and fight wars when the government of the day decides that's what it must do. And I've never been one of those that really blames the military for giving us a whole series of porkies about what they're doing in the field and what they're not doing. That's their job. I mean propaganda is part of their job when a war has started. I think we should recognise that. Our interest should be directed at governments and the deceptions that governments tell. There are always two truths. There is an official truth and then there is the real truth. There is a facade that governments will erect, and they do it now very, very skilfully, because Public Relations is almost becoming something like a science. And behind that facade, then, is generally the truth. And that's what's missing from what you described as a debate. I wouldn't even call it a debate at the moment.

**Mick O'Regan:** The issue of propaganda—is it the case that in Australia things like the Tampa affair, the issue of refugees—that there has been a politicisation of information regarding security matters—that it's very hard for people to get accurate information?

**John Pilger:** Oh, absolutely. But most information is politicised anyway. Just going back to

the point about the military, which touches on the question you've just asked. I do think that the military, because it has been forced to be involved, by the government, in the whole issue of asylum seekers; I think there is now a degree of politicisation. I think it has become immersed in a corruption as well. And that should be worrying us. Again we saw that in the recent Senate Inquiry. We saw that in the revelations about the Children Overboard.

Now that politicisation of the military—who should be simply public servants—is worrying. Yes, the politicisation of information is something that is always there. You would expect governments to politicise it, and the point is not that they shouldn't politicise it, or won't politicise it; it is that journalists should recognise that they do. And not simply become a kind of echo chamber for them. That's terribly important. And the problem of journalists being close to politicians, having a kind of milieu, a lobby around them; is that they become part of that system. And that's really, I think, the issue here. The point about journalists is that at their best they're independent minded. That they represent in the work they do—and it could vary right across the spectrum—but they represent people; not power. And too often, journalists are drawn close to power and they represent the people in power, not their readers and viewers and listeners. And I think the very sophisticated way that public relations has now developed, with all the technological aids at its disposal—that's becoming a real danger.

**Mick O'Regan:** In the last conflict in the Middle East, and in a variety of other conflicts around the world, there's been the organisational pooling of journalists in order that information can be shared between various media outlets. If we looked at the situation that prevailed in the Gulf War, can I ask you your opinion of how that pooling works, and what implications it has for the sort of information that the public receives?

**John Pilger:** Well the implication is very simple. This was the most covered war in history. And pretty well everyone missed the story. That's how organised it was. It was organised to the point that journalists ceased to be journalists. They became functionaries. And the few journalists who were able to escape this pooling system and to escape this organisation did so at their peril. Robert Fisk has told me of his rather precarious adventures in trying to get away from this iniquitous pool system. They missed the story, because the story was something like 200,000 Iraqis were killed. And many of them were killed at night. And many of them were buried alive in their trenches. There was the most awful carnage. But at the end of that war we came away with the idea—or rather the public, I can be excused for coming away with the idea—that casualties were light, that it was something of a kind of high tech surgical strike type war; and that it was a great victory.

But in fact it was a great slaughter. And the documentation is voluminous now on that. But that ought to have been reported at the time and it wasn't reported at the time because the powers who were running that war succeeded in managing and in controlling the news that came out, of tailoring it—often to their lies. We remember the very dramatic press conferences, where the reporters watched a missile blowing up a bridge with great precision. It later emerged that many of the missiles had missed the bridges and had hit civilian targets. But people weren't told that at the time.

**Mick O'Regan:** Well given what we know from the research and analysis that was done after the Gulf War, what sort of position does that put us in any conflict that might occur in the near future? And what's the solution to that blindness?

**John Pilger:** Journalists have to really examine just what they do. If they're interested in

being independent, it's quite a hard road, especially in Australia, where 70% of the capital city press is controlled by Murdoch and so on. You know that better than I. It's a hard road. But I think it is about independence. It is about departing from the pack. It is about understanding that you really can only ferret out fragments of the truth—seldom the whole truth but fragments of it—by doing it independently. And above all, not accepting the word of authority. I think that's what I'm trying to say here, is that the scepticism that one hears journalists aiming at the public—you know, they're apathetic, they don't care—often there's an almost contemptuous edge. That scepticism should be aimed at anybody in authority. Anybody in power. Anybody in government. That's called democracy.

The whole struggle for freedom of the press is now 400 years old and still going on. That's what it is about. It is about a press that doesn't believe. It's all too comfortable now. If journalists aren't convinced by that they should go to countries where it is not comfortable, like Turkey; where the whole staffs of newspapers are put behind bars for simply doing their job, where journalists work at great risk to their lives. I often feel when I go to countries like Turkey, Indonesia under Soeharto, and many other places; that it's worth a western journalist simply visiting these countries and talking to their colleagues there to get an understanding of what journalism really is about.

**Mick O'Regan:** John Pilger, thank you very much for your time.

And that was an edited version of our conversation. We'll put the audio of the full interview on the web page.