

“Government propaganda and the war on terror from 9/11 to Syria”

## Journalists and academics expose UK’s criminal actions in the Middle East

By Julie Hyland  
31 May 2018

Media on Trial held a successful event in Leeds on Sunday, in the face of sustained efforts to prevent the meeting taking place.

The group was formed by Frome Stop War, based in Somerset. Working with academics, investigative journalists and other interested parties and individuals, and drawing on the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, Media on Trial seeks to “cultivate public scepticism when faced with establishment and corporate media’s partisan reporting at times of conflict”. It held well-attended meetings in Frome and London last year. Its success in exposing the ongoing regime-change operations in Syria, and government/media propaganda to this end, has made its members the subject of an organised media smear campaign, culminating in efforts to silence it altogether.

“Government propaganda and the war on terror from 9/11 to Syria” was booked at Leeds City Museum. But in an assault on free speech, Labour-run Leeds City Council in West Yorkshire cancelled the event.

Sheila Coombes (Frome Stop War) has reported that the ban, made on May 3—World Press Freedom Day—came after a series of attacks on several of the featured speakers by the *Huffington Post*, *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers as “Assad Apologists”.

Among those targeted were Professor Piers Robinson (University of Sheffield), Professor Tim Hayward (University of Edinburgh)—both of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM)—and investigative journalist Vanessa Beeley.

Having travelled to Leeds to check out the venue, Coombes was told that Leeds City Council had cancelled the event, suggesting that “security issues” were involved. She was informed that it was a blanket ban and that no other council-run venue would host it.

Less than an hour after she had been informed, the *Yorkshire Post* ran an online article welcoming the ban, followed by a similar report in the *Huffington Post*. The

speed of publication suggests that these media outlets were aware of the ban before Coombes herself had been informed.

Coombes reports that she was in contact with police regarding security arrangements for the event and that she had been informed by the police officer in charge that he had advised Leeds City Council there was “no intelligence to assess a threat”. A second alternative private venue was also cancelled.

Media on Trial was forced to keep details of the third venue secret until shortly before it was due to open and restrict entrance to those who had already purchased tickets. The panel was eventually able to go ahead on Sunday at the Baab-ul-Ilm Islamic education centre, one of the few venues prepared to stand in defiance of this campaign of censorship. Approximately 200 people attended.

The reports delivered during the four-hour meeting provided a devastating exposure of the connection between propaganda and censorship by the media and the warmongering of governments in Britain, the United States and across the world.

Professor Piers Robinson (Chair in Politics, Society and Political Journalism) spoke on the rebranding of government propaganda as “public relations.” Drawing on his research into the Iraq war, he cited material from the Chilcot Inquiry into the war confirming the systematic manipulation and exaggeration of “intelligence” on Iraq’s supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction. This included discussions between the US and British governments over how the 9/11 terror attacks could be used for regime change operations, under the slogan of the “war on terror”, which Robinson described as a propaganda slogan for mobilising support for military operations.

Robert Stuart is an independent researcher whose presentation on the “irregularities” in the BBC *Panorama* documentary, “Saving Syria’s Children,” encouraged film producer and writer Victor Lewis-Smith to tear up his BBC

contract in disgust.

Stuart gave a presentation on his examination of film recorded by BBC personnel at Atareb Hospital in Aleppo on August 26, 2013 purporting to show the aftermath of a napalm-style bombing by Syrian government forces. The footage was broadcast the same evening that parliament delivered a shock vote against a military attack on Syria. He showed that much of it was staged. Not only did this potentially include the use of military casualty trauma simulations, but BBC personnel were travelling in vehicles displaying ISIS flags and alongside senior members of the western-funded White Helmets.

Professor Tim Hayward (Environmental Political Theory) questioned the morality of the media presenting information that was untrue and its implications for democracy and society. He questioned the media's complicity in glorifying jihadi figures, despite this being in contravention of the British governments' own anti-terror laws. He drew attention to broadcasts on Channel 4 that provided flattering accounts of British women signing up for jihad. The media were guilty of inverting the truth and placing a "lockdown" on information that breached the rudiments of journalistic integrity.

American journalist and broadcaster Patrick Henningsen (21st Century Wire), drew attention to the unprecedented conditions in which the meeting was being held, "in secret, in a tent".

It was impossible to have a functioning democracy without a functioning fourth estate, he said. This had been the gold standard but was no longer the case. Henningsen noted widespread popular opposition to war in the US that successive presidential candidates had sought to manipulate, only to betray once in power—from George W. Bush to Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

The mainstream media have enormous assets and resources but claim democracy is threatened by "fake news", when they are the purveyors of fake news and the real threat to democracy.

Peter Ford is a former UK ambassador to Syria (2003–2006) and now Director of the British Syrian Society. He noted that the government had been forced to convene the Leveson Inquiry into the media after the phone-hacking scandal involving Murdoch's *News of the World*. But those actions were trivial in comparison with the real charge sheet that needed to be presented against the media: that of "war mongering and aiding and abetting war mongering".

Vanessa Beeley is an international investigative journalist and photographer who had reported from inside Syria (including East Aleppo), Egypt and Palestine. She played an important role in exposing Syria's White Helmets as an arm of western propaganda and regime change operations.

She delivered a moving account of the situation within Syria and the capital Damascus. In addition to detailing the role of the White Helmets and other institutions financed and backed by western governments, Beeley noted that, especially following the Second World War, pro-war propaganda was deemed a threat to peace. The Nuremberg Trials in 1946 characterised propaganda to facilitate war as a serious crime against humanity; one of the gravest that could be committed. Today, those who advocate peace and the defence of international law are smeared and silenced, while those who promote war are being lauded in the media.

In the short time available for questions, contributions were made, including the possibility of practical action against war-mongering.

Julie Hyland, speaking for the *World Socialist Web Site*, was greeted warmly by the audience for raising that the high point of the international campaign of smears and censorship is the attack on Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder who is in grave danger of eviction from the Ecuadorian Embassy and extradition to the United States.

Henningson replied that the embassy had determined to cut Assange's internet access and personal communications while Syria was being targeted for military strikes. "I don't underestimate the influence of Julian Assange at those critical times. His own website was taken offline as the air strike by the US, Britain and France were happening, along with several other web sites". He added, "Julian Assange is being silenced because they don't want someone like him to have a platform".

*Video of the Media on Trial Leeds event can be viewed here.*

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>