

# Between the Lines

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Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt in collaboration with

Ross Birrell, Jakob Boeskov, Steven Duval,  
Gardar Eide Einarsson & Oscar Tuazon,  
Regina Möller, N55, John Pilger & others

Talking to her, he realised how easy it was to present an appearance of orthodoxy while having no grasp whatever of what orthodoxy meant. In a way, the world-view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it. They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird. 1

As I write, the armed forces of the United States, in close collaboration with Great Britain, are poised to go to war in Iraq and it remains to be seen whether or not they will seek a second United Nations resolution before they proceed. As a British curator invited to organise a visual art exhibition within a mile of the former World Trade Center, I feel I have a moral obligation to address this situation in a wider context.

America is not just the lone hyperpower – it has become the defining power of the world. America defines what is democracy, justice, freedom; what are human rights and what is multiculturalism; who is a 'fundamentalist', a 'terrorist' or simply 'evil'. In short, what it means to be human. The rest of the world, including Europe, must simply accept these definitions and follow the American lead (which, in most cases, Britain does exceptionally faithfully). But America defines all these things in singular terms – in terms of American self-identity, history, experience and culture, and, more often than not, in terms of American self-interest. 2



Ross Birrell



N55

It is clear that the American government has its own motives for fighting this war, just as it did during previous conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama and Vietnam. However, it is doubtful that the real reasons why the government enters this or any other war will be made explicit and it is this process of mediation that concerns me now. The media generally only provides us with access to certain information, depending on individual political agendas, with profit as the primary motive. Perhaps the most transparent link with politics is in Italy where the man controlling most of the media, Silvio Berlusconi, is also the prime minister and foreign minister. In Britain, media mogul Rupert Murdoch controls a large proportion of the 'information' provision. Chairman and chief executive of News Corporation, which is prolific in the United States, he controls no less than 175 publishing titles world-wide, wields an even greater influence over broadcast media and has an explicitly pro-war stance. In America, the media industry is also in the hands of the privileged few:

The American public gets less access to foreign news, less exposure to foreign popular culture, and is governed by elected representatives who increasingly have never ventured beyond America. [...] Why, people around the world keep asking, is the American public, in a country with the world's most advanced education system and institutions of learning, so exceedingly ignorant of world affairs?

In 2002, only nine trans-national firms dominate US and global media: AOL Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, News Corporation, TCL, General Electric (owner of NBC), Sony (owner of Columbia and TriStar Pictures and major recording interests), and Seagram (owner of Universal film and music interests). So one global super-industry now provides virtually everything that Americans see and hear on the screen, over the airwaves, in print and on the Web. 3

The fact that, more so than any other nation, the mainstream US media is controlled by huge multi-national corporations is the key to understanding its reluctance to give an objective perspective on internal politics, foreign affairs or any subject that would affect the commercial interests of those big business allies which provide its advertising revenue. The process of conglomeration that created this situation through mergers and acquisitions accelerated throughout the 1990s, largely at the expense of independent titles. Media corporations now preside over different media forms – television, radio, newspapers – and increasingly have the means to produce, distribute and cross-publicise their own products and related spin-offs. There is also clear evidence of links between the media giants, with most of the directors serving on the board of more than one of the companies. 4

In addition to co-operating with each other to ensure that this oligopoly persists, the media companies also lobby the government to deregulate the industry and allow empire-building to continue, often in return for electoral support. As Robert McChesney has noted, a 'sustained examination of the way media and telecommunication policies are produced behind closed doors in Washington [is] arguably the most off-limits story in U.S. journalism in our times. [...] The issue isn't one of private media versus government regulation, because the private media system is the direct result of aggressive regulation and massive subsidies made by the government.' 5 The American intellectual left has assayed the media as a key part of a doctrinal system (which also includes education) that produces propaganda to reinforce the government message:

These sectors of the doctrinal system serve to divert the unwashed masses and reinforce the basic social values: passivity, submissiveness to authority, the overriding virtue of greed and personal gain, lack of concern for others, fear of real or imagined enemies, etc. The goal is to keep the bewildered herd bewildered. It's unnecessary for them to trouble themselves with what's happening in the world. In fact, it's undesirable – if they see too much of reality they may set themselves to change it. 6

At the start of this text is a passage from George Orwell's notoriously dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-four. Ironically enough, it was to Communist Russia that Orwell alluded, the Soviet threat that once loomed so large in the American consciousness and which has now been replaced with the war on terror. Noam Chomsky has observed:

So magnificently has the doctrinal system risen to its task that to this day, 30 years later, the idea that the US attacked Vietnam is unmentionable, even unthinkable, in the mainstream. The essential issues of the war are, correspondingly, beyond any possibility of discussion now. The guardians of political correctness (the real PC) can be quite proud of an achievement that would be hard to duplicate in a well-run totalitarian state. 7

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Gardar Eide Einarsson  
& Oscar Tuazon



Regina Möller



Steven Duval



## Freedom of Speech vs. Freedom of Thought

How many people are proud to be citizens of this beautiful country of ours?  
The stripes and the stars for the rights that men have died for to protect  
The men and women who have broke their necks for the freedom of speech the United States  
government has sworn to uphold.  
Or so we're told...

The extent to which the freedom of speech or freedom of the press advocated in the American constitution is permitted in practice is at best questionable and at worst detracts from a capacity for freedom of thought. Professional journalism is in a state of crisis, with pressure and censorship from above dictating content. In what is explicitly referred to as 'dumbing down' in some of the marginally more enlightened British media, vocabularies become reduced and ideas less sophisticated.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language – so the argument runs – must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism. [...] But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better. [...] Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

Another trend, predicted by Orwell and consolidated by Chomsky:

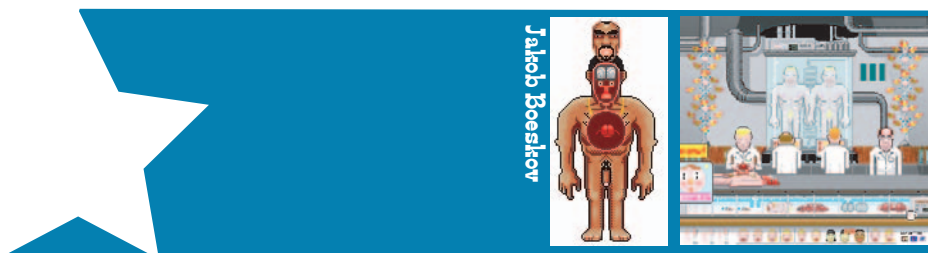
[...] to make sense of political discourse, it's necessary to give a running translation into English, decoding the doublespeak of the media, academic social scientists and the secular priesthood generally. Its function is not obscure: the effect is to make it impossible to find words to talk about matters of human significance in a coherent way. We can then be sure that little will be understood about how our society works and what is happening in the world – a major contribution to democracy in the PC sense of the word.<sup>10</sup>

## Between the Lines

In parallel to activities in the Gulf, a frenzied propaganda war is being waged on all fronts, suppressing information that would harm the interests of big business and garnering support for crusades in the name of 'freedom' and 'democracy'.

People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed. Governments molt and regroup, hydra-headed. They use flags to shrink-wrap people's minds and smother real thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to cover the mangled remains of the willing dead.<sup>11</sup>

Maybe it was a curious premonition that caused Scottish artist Ross Birrell to cross the Atlantic in November, 2000 to bequeath a copy of Utopia to the United Nations library and take the first step towards Thomas More's vision by throwing the American logo, the stars and stripes, from the Staten Island ferry.



Jakob Boeskov

In the process of gathering cuttings from the centre left British press to form a backdrop to this project, it has become increasingly difficult to get beyond the thousands of column inches dedicated to a discussion of impending war in Iraq. Conflict is the most obvious example of misinformation and propaganda. The documentaries of John Pilger close the information gap by taking a closer look: at the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the effect of international politics on the children of Iraq, conditions in Burma and the impact of globalisation on Indonesia (<http://pilger.carlton.com> & [www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com)). Aside from this, there are many other contemporary issues – human rights, the environment and biotechnology to name but a few – that are being neglected in a large part by the media. 'Between the Lines' aims to redress the balance somewhat, creating an information overload by offering access to news and publications that present an alternative and more comprehensive world-view for an American audience than that offered by the mainstream media.

The Scandinavian collective N55 has collaborated on a bookshop, realised at aperart, based on their SHOP system ([www.n55.dk/shop.html](http://www.n55.dk/shop.html)), which provides a framework for the provision of information. Crucially, SHOP also aims to create a new economy based on sharing and exchange that resists the use of money. Several artists have contributed to 'Between the Lines' with their own self-published books and pamphlets, including Regina Möller with her alternative women's magazine Regina ([www.regina-magazine.de](http://www.regina-magazine.de)). Gardar Eide Einarsson and Oscar Tuazon have collaborated to reproduce an edition of Scanlan magazine from January 1971 (originally published by Warren Hinckle III and Sidney E. Zion) which charts terrorist activities in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a publication which is almost unthinkable in today's climate. Steven Duval has consistently been dealing with a range of issues in a series of pamphlets and has produced a specially commissioned booklet for this project, highlighting some themes – from food to weapons – of immediate relevance. His aesthetics also permeate the publicity material surrounding the project, including this brochure.

The bookshop has further been stocked with titles recommended by those participating in the project and their networks and special thanks are due to Brett Bloom. Satire characterises some of the publications on offer and is used as a vehicle for Danish artist Jakob Boeskov to express his concern about the future of the biotechnology industry, particularly human cloning ([www.bodydeluxe.net](http://www.bodydeluxe.net)). On this subject, Jeremy Rifkin, one of the few voices of dissent in a burgeoning and lucrative industry, has written:

Customised human cloning offers the spectre of a new kind of immortality. Each generation of a particular genotype can become the ultimate artist, continually customising and upgrading new genetic traits into the model with the goal of both perfecting and perpetuating the genotype forever. [...] The real threat that human cloning represents is one that, as far as I know, is never talked about by scientists, ethicists, biotech entrepreneurs, or politicians. In a society where more and more people clone and eventually customise their genotype to design specifications and engineering standards, how are we likely to regard the child who isn't cloned or customised? What about the child who is born with a 'disability'? Will the rest of society view that child with tolerance or come to see the child as an error in the genetic code – in short a defective product?<sup>12</sup>

'Between the Lines' is just the tip of a rapidly melting iceberg, an attempt to expose the media as anything but objective and to offer a glimpse of a few perspectives worthy of serious consideration.

Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, March, 2003

Design: Steven Duval

### Notes

1. George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-four (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949). P. 157
2. Ziauddin Sardar and Meryl Wyn Davies, Why do People Hate America? (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002). P. 201
3. Sardar & Davies, loc cit. pp. 59, 200 & 88
4. For a full exploration of this, see Robert W. McChesney, Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times (New York: The New Press, 2000)
5. Robert W. McChesney, 'The Media Crisis of Our Times', Introduction to Peter Phillips and Projects Censored, Censored 2003: The Year's Top 25 Censored Stories (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003)
6. Noam Chomsky, What Uncle Sam Really Wants (Tucson, AZ: Odonian Press, 1997). P. 95
7. Chomsky, loc. cit. P. 88
8. Eminem, 'White America', The Eminem Show, Aftermath Records, 2002
9. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', Horizon, April, 1946
10. Chomsky op cit. P. 91
11. Arundhati Roy, 'New World Disorder: War is peace. So now we know', In These Times magazine, November, 2001.
12. Jeremy Rifkin, 'The Second Coming: The Cloning of a Human Being', published on the internet to coincide with the launch of Jakob Boeskov's Body Deluxe.