



## On Afghanistan & Taliban, Look Beyond World Media's Web of Lies

BBC's shutting down of Christine Fair is the latest example of the propaganda being churned out by media.

**C CHRISTINE FAIR**

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**OPINION**

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The [media we watch](#) informs our opinions, often for the worse. In 2003, a Gallup Poll revealed that solid majorities of Americans supported President George W. Bush's war in Iraq, which was, in stark contrast, the opposition to the war held by global polities. The invasion and the disastrous occupation that ensued continue to haunt [the United States](#). It wrecked our economy, trashed our standing as a country that upholds rule of law, generated global suspicions about American intentions towards the Muslim world, undermined our relations with key allies, and created the very conditions that gave rise to ISIS.

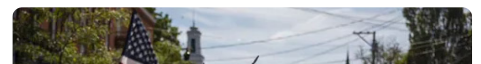
Despite the fact that global publics resoundingly rejected the war, a majority of Americans supported it. Fifteen years on, [Americans remained divided](#) on this war despite the volumes of information about it and its motivations. In March 2018, another national poll of American adults found that while 48% believed the use of military force was wrong, 43% supported its use.

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## Americans Were Asked Three Questions

In 2003, one year after the invasion, several researchers wanted to understand the bizarre beliefs Americans espoused about the war. The researchers asked Americans three basic questions, to which the answers were clearly “no” — Has the United States found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorists' organisation? Has the US found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? And whether or not they agreed that world populations supported the war, opposed it or were evenly balanced. The team found that Americans, on average, were misinformed. A majority of Americans surveyed repeatedly in 2003 believed that Hussain was working with al-Qaeda. In fact, Hussain and al-Qaeda were sworn enemies.

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Depending upon the month surveyed, anywhere between one in three and one in five believed that the United States found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, when, in fact, there were no such weapons to be found. Even though global opinion was decidedly opposed to the war, about one in four thought global publics supported it, while about one in three thought they were “evenly balanced”. Across all American adults surveyed, only one in three had no misperceptions. Unsurprisingly, those who had such misperceptions were more supportive of the war than those without.

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## The Source of News Matters

How did Americans come to be so ill-informed about a war of such enormous consequence? It's reasonable to posit some role of the media they consumed. The team also asked respondents where they got most of their news. Of the 3,334 persons asked, 19 per cent primarily obtained their news from print media while 80 per cent cited non-print means. Respondents were then asked about the specific news networks they use. Because consumers of public radio and public television were so few, they were combined into one category.

**It was not surprising that 80 per cent of those who relied upon *Fox News* were wrong on or more issues, while the majority (77 per cent) of those who relied upon public sources had no misperceptions.**



had one or more misperceptions.

Other studies have come to similar conclusions: global media which have a responsibility to inform are failing in their most basic charge.

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## My Personal Experience

Theoretically, I am puzzled by the [failures of important media houses](#) to inform their publics. Anecdotal, I have had about 20 years of my own experiences that have helped shape my understanding. Here are a few insights from my own participation in news programs that span North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.



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It should be no surprise that Pakistan television shows have been particularly problematic. There was a time when I did do Pakistani television shows because Pakistan's deep state generally viewed me as someone who is not in anyone's pocket. I have been known as a fierce critic of any policy or country that I deemed as deserving criticism.

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China? I answered in my typically blunt way — you mean, fail to bail it out of any war it starts, provide loan aid with heavy interest rates instead of grant aid and enough weapons to encourage to pick a fight with India but not help you when a fight happens?” I had not completed my final sentence when the host immediately and abruptly went to an unplanned commercial break. She told me plainly that I could not speak of China in this way. I told her plainly, “Then don’t ask me questions about China.”

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## ‘Editorial Positions’ Trump Facts

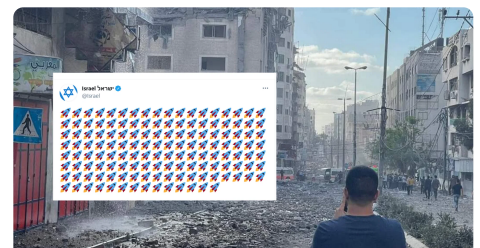
For many years, I had experienced the “editorial positions” of television networks — notably of the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* — on drones. Neither channel would indulge any position, however grounded in data, which supported the drone program in Pakistan as I did. At one point, during an *Al Jazeera* programme, the co-host, Mehdi Hassan, actually said “forget about the data”. For some time, I was persona non grata at the network for repeatedly calling out *Al Jazeera*’s fictions about the programme.



And as many confrontations I have had with what passes for news among Pakistan’s channels, I had had my own experiences with the circus of buffoonery that so often characterises India’s television channels.

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On 26 August, 2021, I did an interview with [Bloomberg Asia](#) on the developments in Afghanistan. When the panel asked me about the most likely source of income for the Taliban, I began to explain China's support to the movement that predated 9/11 and which continues to date. One of the hosts, Rishaad Salamat, immediately tried to shout me down and claimed that these assertions were merely speculation. Naturally, I stood my ground and maintained that these assertions are facts for which I have substantiating evidence.

In hindsight, it was clear that the network was worried about irritating China, which has gone to great lengths to silence any uncomfortable truth about its atrocities at home and abroad. In fairness, I don't have high expectations of journalistic integrity from a network dedicated to the global elite's wealth accumulation.

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## The Philippa Thomas Fiasco

Of more concern is my recent interview with Philippa Thomas of the *BBC*. Ms. Thomas is a popular newsreader on the network and I had been interviewed by her before. She is one of countless many persons who are hired to read the teleprompter with enthusiasm while interviewing guests, while never cultivating any substantive expertise.

As is apparent in the clip, every question Ms. Thomas posed was pre-loaded and sympathetic to Pakistani opinions. Whether I sought to explain Pakistan's historical interest in subjugating Afghanistan, its long-standing reliance upon Islamist terror groups as tools of foreign policy, or even its well-established rent-seeking strategy of claiming to be the fireman instead of the arsonist it is, she interrupted me and repeatedly asserted



**I said nothing that was not rooted in reams of data. As the video demonstrated, she abruptly terminated the interview and offered her viewers an unprofessional grimace which served to underscore her contempt for my analysis.**

Surely, if there had been a Pakistani official present, they would have offered their preferred storyline of perpetual victimhood. And indeed, such officials are frequent guests of the *BBC*. No matter what absurd falsehood they assert, they are not interrupted. And certainly, the newsreader does not say things like “Well, of course, if we had a scholar on Pakistan’s strategic culture, they would reject these claims”. It’s preposterous to even think about it.

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## Britain’s Domestic Politics Tied With BBC?

I’ve been left wondering about that interview. Was Ms. Thomas a particular ignoramus? I had to reject that assertion because the premises of her questions reflected a deep familiarity with Rawalpindi’s narrative. Also, she seemed very astutely aware of the kinds of things that would irritate them. I also reject the conspiracy theories popular in India that the *BBC* is “anti-Hindu”. The *BBC* does spend a lot of time covering uncomfortable events in India, but too many Indians would rather blame the international coverage of atrocities than the perpetrators of such atrocities.



## Great Britain has long concerned itself with the feelings of British Pakistanis because they are an important set of vote banks that few seem interested in riling up.

British authorities have long known that segments of the British Pakistani community have deep and significant ties to terrorism. However, they have struggled to not be seen as targeting those communities.

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Britain's flagship counter-radicalisation project PREVENT goes to great lengths to obfuscate one of its most important target audiences. Britain, like the United States, has long known that Pakistan ultimately is behind the deaths of its soldiers and civilians. And like the United States, it has resisted publicly chastising Pakistan for its support to terrorism generally or the Taliban and Haqqani Network specifically. Why? The United Kingdom has long worked with the ISI to obtain information about the activities of its citizens when they visit Pakistan. In this cold calculus, British soldiers signed up to be blown up. But civilians riding Britain's metros and buses didn't.

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While it's easy to be outraged that the *BBC* is happily carrying out Pakistan's information offensive, we need to ask ourselves, is there any network that is any better across the board? As I reflect upon my own experiences as a public intellectual but also my experience as a scholar who has sought to understand how media informs the public, I have come to the conclusion that the greatest threat to democracies everywhere and a secure and peaceful world is, in fact, such media houses.

Motivated by their parochial politics and demands for revenue, they misinform the global polities on issues pertaining to war and peace, climate change, the current pandemic, the salubrious benefits of vaccines or wearing masks, or simply shaping a polity to vote for one candidate over another. In short, the global polities have been reduced to idiocracies and we have only ourselves to blame.

*(C. Christine Fair is a professor in the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* [Oxford University Press, 2019] and *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* [Oxford University Press, 2014]. This is an opinion piece and the views expressed above are the author's own. **The Quint** neither endorses nor is responsible for the same.)*

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