

(Un)Covering the Empire

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The *Daily Prophet* is bound to report the truth occasionally, if only accidentally.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore,
in *Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince*

During times of great upheaval—election fraud, militarism, “terror” attacks, corporate corruption, and war—it is sometimes useful to take refuge in the wisdom of stories told to us as children. In J. K. Rowling’s wildly popular Harry Potter series, for example, the *Daily Prophet* (the wizarding world’s newspaper of record) often serves as little more than a mouthpiece for the Establishment, stenographically serving up “news” that reflects the “spin” of the Ministry of Magic, while chipping away at the reputations of those who challenge the Ministry’s power. Helped along by mentors such as Dumbledore, Harry and his young schoolmates, wizards-in-training all, begin to realize that much of what passes for official “news” in the *Daily Prophet* is nothing more than carefully constructed public-relations propaganda designed to manipulate wizard hearts and minds.

Popular children’s stories like Harry Potter often reveal much about the way the real world works. Remember the classic about the Emperor’s New Clothes? Once upon a time, a rich and powerful emperor ordered snazzy new garments from a tailor with a sense of humor, an outfit consisting of nothing more than his birthday suit. The Emperor proved so taken with his new threads that he refused to acknowledge that he was *sans* clothing, parading about for the entire world to see. All of his loyal subjects, busy bowing and scraping, couldn’t bring themselves to tell him the truth. The Emperor was naked. One person in the crowd—a lone child—refuses to wallow in this exercise in collective denial, deciding not to play along with the game. And that one child began telling others, who told others, who pointed it out to others, and soon—the story got out. The Emperor was naked. In a healthy and functioning democratic society, journalists must play the role of the child in that well-known fable. It is journalists who ask hard questions of the powerful. It is journalists who provide a rigorous accounting of the evidence as it presents itself. It is journalists who report truths about the way the world works, no matter how inconvenient or troubling. The empire is naked.

As the United States enters the twenty-first century, however, its third century as a so-called constitutional republic, most mainstream American journalists, out of fear, ignorance, or denial, refuse to acknowledge a simple fact about our great country: the empire is naked. The state of our “news” culture (and I use the term loosely) is deeply troubling. The United States is now the most powerful empire in the world. And, as citizens of the most powerful empire in world history, Americans had better know what the heck is going on. But when it comes to “news,” Americans live in one of the most heavily censored societies in the world. “Censorship” in the United States, you say? Preposterous. (Note: we are conditioned from birth to believe exactly the opposite). Choices, we are told, define our media culture, unlike those oppressive top-down state-run regimes—Cuba, say, or the pre-*glasnost* Soviet Union—in which state-controlled media tell people what to think. We’ve got dozens of television stations, hundreds of magazines, thousands of radio stations, millions of web sites. Censorship? Don’t be absurd.

Pay no attention to the fact that most Americans surveyed claim to get all of their news and information about the world from television. Or that we see, on average, more than 3,000

advertisements each day. Or that 90 percent of our media content is owned by one of six transnational corporations. Or that millions of taxpayer dollars are funneled into dozens of federal agencies for the express purpose of subsidizing the manufacture of corporate-friendly “news” in the form of video news releases broadcast daily on millions of American TV sets without being identified as such. Or that big business spends more than 1 trillion dollars each year on powerful advertising, marketing, and branding campaigns that influence the ways we think, feel, buy, and behave. Just ignore such inconvenient facts. The empire is naked.