Psywar Interview

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V-RADIO set out to get an interview with Scott Noble, the filmmaker of the film “Psywar”. Psywar is an excellent film about the power of propaganda, public relations and advertising to influence and therefore control mankind.

You can view this film at no cost by visiting http://v-radio.org/ and going to the “Must See TV” tab. On the last page you will find a link to this film. I strongly urge you to check it out. Our Linguistic Team is currently working on translating this film into other languages.

Mr. Noble said he is not taking video or radio interviews at this time. However he did agree to take some time for a text based interview that I decided to share with you here.

V-RADIO: Please introduce yourself to the readers.

Mr. Noble: Sure. I’m a writer, filmmaker and wage slave currently living on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. My first film, Psywar: The Real Battlefield Is the Mind, was recently released online. It explores the evolution of propaganda and public relations in the United States.
Can you describe for the readers what was the precipice, the moment that got you "out of the box"? What got you out of the mainstream dream and instead peering behind the curtain?

I’m not sure I can pinpoint one moment in time, but I do remember being deeply disturbed by the revelation that my aunt had been used as a human guinea pig in one of the CIA’s Cold War mind control experiments – specifically, experiments conducted at the Allen Memorial Institute in Montreal.

The Allen Memorial was then regarded as the preeminent psychiatric institution in Canada, so my grandparents decided to send my aunt there (a teenager at the time) to help her deal with certain emotional problems. She was only 16. From what I gather, her problems amounted to typical adolescent behavior (typical in our society, at least) – depression, delinquency, acting out and so forth.

Unbeknownst to my grandparents, the center’s director, Dr. Ewan Cameron, was being paid by the CIA to conduct “mind control” experiments. He would later become president of the World Psychiatric Association. Techniques included massive doses of electric shock, massive doses of barbiturates, prolonged sensory deprivation, and other tortures. Indeed, one of the CIA’s torture manuals, ‘KUBARK’, refers explicitly to Cameron’s experiments along with earlier studies in “fear based conditioning” by behaviorists like Hobart Mowrer.

Kubark describes a process of “regression” where “subjects” can be reduced to an “infantile state”. I explore these issues in my next documentary, “Human Resources”, which was recently completed and will be online in a month or two.

Perhaps owing to her young age at the time, my Aunt was never able to recover from the trauma of her experience at the Allen Memorial. She later took her own life.

In regards to your Aunt, how did you find out about what happened to her?

It was bitterly ironic in that when she emerged from the Allen Memorial she was a basketcase and diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. This was interpreted, at the time, by doctors, friends and loved ones as a worsening of her symptoms. She cried out that she had been "locked in the basement" of the center for months at a time and viciously abused by other methods -- an absurd idea, it seemed. It was only many years later when the story broke that we realized she was referring to "sensory deprivation" experiments.
She refused to participate in the lawsuit against the Canadian government and the CIA due to fears that it was a sinister plot (a few victims such as Linda McDonald received a pittance -- about a hundred grand), revealing that she had indeed become a “paranoid schizophrenic”, at least according to the typical diagnostic measures. The question is whether same would have happened if she hadn't suffered through the “therapy” of the CIA. I guess if you've been tortured for months on end, sinister plots where the government is out to get you don't seem so irrational.

In any case, I never met her in person. When we visited her house, we were never allowed inside. I was a kid at the time. We all regarded her as a sort of "crazy Aunt in the attic". I have dedicated my second film, "Human Resources", to my Aunt, whose name was Nancy Noble.

**What motivated you to make Psywar?**

It was an unusual process in that I planned for a documentary series from the outset: five or six films. So I didn't have a clear idea what subjects I would tackle first. I conducted about 30 interviews with various intellectuals, activists, former spooks, whistle-blowers, etc., and decided to start with propaganda.

Obviously, no one film can properly address so vast a subject, so I decided to design Psywar both as an introduction to the current state of psychological warfare and as a sort of history lesson about the origins and development of PR and propaganda in the United States. Future entries will explore the Cold War period and its bastard child, the War on Terror.

**The History Channel** is replete with documentaries about the propaganda techniques employed by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union against its citizens, but when it comes to propaganda techniques employed by the American government against theirs – information we could actually use – we are left with very little to go on; at least in the “mainstream media”.

Part of this owes to the historical relationship between propaganda and journalism in the United States.

The “mainstream media” has worked hand in glove with both the state and powerful corporations since the beginnings of the American propaganda industry.
During WWI, figures like Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann, Ivy Lee – the “founding fathers” of modern journalism and PR – all of them cut their teeth foisting pro-war propaganda on the American people. They worked for the Creel Committee and nascent intelligence agencies such as “The Inquiry”, which had three main goals: to demonize the enemy (in this case the Germans), to demonize dissidents in the homeland, and to convince the American public that it was their destiny to “make the world safe for democracy”. We all know how well that turned out.

A disturbingly similar pattern emerges after WWII. Fresh from the OWI (Office of War Information) you have the publishers of Time, Look and Fortune; the editors of Holiday, Coronet, Parade, and the Saturday Review; the heads of Viking Press, Harper & Brothers, Straus and Young; the board chairman of CBS; the editor of Reader’s Digest and so on. For more on this, I highly recommend Christopher Simpson’s book “The Science of Coercion”.

The virtual uniformity of “intellectual” and “mainstream” opinion during the Cold War should come as no surprise. It wasn’t just a question of shared class interests – though that was probably the most important factor – there was also this deeply incestuous relationship between the American state (and its burgeoning intelligence agencies), the “mainstream media”, elite–funded “think tanks”, and the corporations and banks which would seem to control all of the above.

By the time the “war on terror” rolled around you had a tiny handful of giant media conglomerates in near complete command of the flow of information. The Internet is throwing a considerable amount of sand in the gears. God willing, the machine will grind to a halt in the near future.

I think a lot of activists tend to assume that most of this stuff is common knowledge. In broad strokes perhaps it is. Yet a close friend with whom I discuss these sorts of issues on a fairly frequent basis was unaware of many of the incidents I cover in Psywar. For example: that the Jessica Lynch story and the toppling of the Saddam Statue were staged by “TPT”s or “Tactical Psyop Teams”, that CNN used military “Psywarriors” during its coverage of the assault on Serbia, that PR hacks now outnumber journalists, that “journalists” themselves spend most of their time regurgitating PR.
There’s an ironic coincidence relating to the film itself. Literally two weeks after I first uploaded it to the Internet and sent it around to various journalists, the DOD announced that it was dropping the term “Psyops” from its lexicon. From hence forth, they declared, psychological operations would be known as "Military Information Support Operations," or MISO.

Doesn’t have quite the same ring to it, but of course that’s the point. The “Department of Defense” used to be called the Department of War.

Are you familiar with the BBC documentary "The Century of Self"? Did it influence your making of Psywar?

Mr. Noble: It did, but not in the manner you might expect. Curtis is an extremely talented filmmaker with an immense repository of archival footage at his disposal (some of which I utilized in Psywar), and he puts out a great product. But I also find that he tends to exaggerate the importance of particular individuals, groups and fanciful ideas in lieu of basic class analysis; he also appears to self-censor, often at critical junctures. I don’t recall seeing the slightest hint of skepticism about the official story of 911 in “The Power of Nightmares”.

There was a great review of “The Century of the Self” published by Media Lens. In it, the author quotes a passage from the film:

“Politicians and planners came to believe that Freud was right to suggest that hidden deep within all human beings were dangerous and irrational desires and fears. They were convinced that it was the unleashing of these instincts that had lead to the barbarism of Nazi Germany. To stop it ever happening again, they set out to find ways to control the hidden enemy within the human mind.” (The Century of the Self - The Engineering of Consent, BBC2, March 24, 2002)

The critic goes on to state:

“As you'll know, if you've read Elizabeth Fones-Wolf’s study of the period, Alex Carey's work, and countless books by Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky, and many others, this could not be further from the truth.
Post-1945, as now, the real fear of politicians and planners was the existence of dangerous “rational” desires and fears - popular desires for equity, justice and functioning democracy; popular fears that unbridled capitalism and militarism would once again lead to horrors on the scale of the two world wars. Freud’s theories were incidental - useful in refining traditional methods of popular control perhaps, but a sideshow.”

In Curtis’ film, Bernays is presented more as a cause than effect. In reality he was joined by all sorts of other like-minded mind managers from the time period: scientists like John B. Watson, the founder of behaviorism, for example, and Ivy Lee, the unsung hero of embedded journalism, crisis management and the press release. Public relations evolved as a means of rescuing corporations from the wrath of public opinion, most notably in response to events like the Ludlow massacre.

The revolution in American advertising was brought about not by a single visionary but by a crisis in capitalism, namely overproduction, which mandated new and innovative ways of marketing products. There were alternatives. Raising wages and reducing working hours, for example, but corporations were and are mandated by law to maximize profits on behalf of their shareholders.

The consumer society is a natural outgrowth of capitalism, not Freud. Endless growth means endless mountains of junk. To sell it, you have convince people that buying objects leads to happiness.

What inspired you to include such a lengthy section on the American Constitution?

Mr. Noble: People like Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays are great exemplars of what Peter Bachrach called “The theory of democratic elitism”, but they didn’t create this philosophy. They merely updated it to correspond with new developments in technology and communication. You can go back to Mosca or Schumpeter or a whole slew of other anti-democratic philosophers from Machiavelli to Plato, but crucially, for our discussion, the Founding Fathers of the United States itself.

There is very little difference between Lippmann’s suggestion that “the people” are a “bewildered herd” which “must be put in place”, and John Jay’s remark that the “people who own the country ought to govern it”, or Alexander Hamilton’s quip that the people are a “great
beast" needing to be tamed, or Madison’s insistence that a primary function of government is to “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority”.

The overriding theme is that real democracy might produce “leveling tendencies”, in other words, an egalitarian society in which “regular people” might actually be able to participate in the running of their government (or lack thereof, depending how anarchistic your tendencies).

What has emerged as the primary form of governance around the globe is what social scientists describe as polyarchy. There’s a fancy definition for it, but the basic gist is that we get to vote every few years to elect some rich guy, write letters to our “representatives”, and if we’re really uppity – attend a demonstration – but by no means should we be permitted to actually make decisions collectively on matters of any importance. Important decisions are the purview of the enlightened ones – people like Henry Kissinger, Dick Cheney, Alan Greenspan. Or, if you like, the Founding Fathers and their “responsible set of men” – the wealthy.

I have received some criticism that the section on the Constitution and the American power structure is a “departure” from the other content. In my own view, it is impossible to understand modern propaganda without understanding the theory of democratic elitism. Indeed, the idea that modern governments (whether labeled a republic or parliamentary democracy) are or were in any way “democratic” is perhaps the greatest psyop of them all.

These structures are based on the premise that the “powers” can be “balanced by each other”, a concept which should, at this point, be recognized as a monumental failure. The majority recognized it as a con at the time of the constitutional convention, and indeed the anti-Federalists predicted quite accurately what would occur as a result.

There is a good deal of myth-making associated with colonial America. We are invited to imagine the halcyon days in which some sort of “free market” existed alongside “limited government”. Granted, it is acknowledged, there were minor problems in the form of slavery, the oppression of women and the genocide of Native Americans, but by and large you had something approaching a legitimate meritocracy: an honest to goodness bootstrap society.
The reality was quite different. As Norman Livergood explains, “In Colonial America, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting much poorer. In 1687 in Boston, the top 1% owned about 25% of the wealth. By 1770, the top 1% owned 44%. In those same years, the poor--those who owned no property--represented 14% in 1687 and 29% in 1770.”

So you had a system of rapidly increasing inequality and class conflict, culminating in the Shay’s Rebellion and other debtor riots, which necessitated a strong Federal Government to crush the nascent spirit of democracy flowering amongst the American people.

In some ways, it should not be surprising that many Americans regard the word “democracy” with contempt.

The absurdist PR spectacles known as “elections”, in which issues like gay marriage can actually sway the balance of power, deserve nothing but disdain. But we would do well to remember that the Soviet Union also called itself a democracy.

There are alternatives, touched upon in the film that do not necessitate either tyranny of the minority or tyranny of the majority, but which rely on concepts like decentralization, anti-hierarchy, consensus decision-making and other modes of social organization. For those who would simultaneously worship the founding fathers and turn property into an idol, I recommend the words of Benjamin Franklin:

“All property, indeed, except the savage’s temporary cabin, his bow, his matchcoat and other little Acquisitions absolutely necessary for his Subsistence, seems to me to be the creature of public Convention. Hence, the public has the rights of regulating Descents, and all other Conveyances of Property, and even of limiting the quantity and uses of it. All the property that is necessary to a man is his natural Right, which none may justly deprive him of, but all Property superfluous to such Purposes is the property of the Public who, by their Laws have created it and who may, by other Laws dispose of it.”
What kind of reactions have you had with regard to the film? Any memorable feedback, good or bad?

Overall the response has been very positive. Numerous professors from numerous countries have requested hard copies for use in University courses ranging from communications to sociology to Native American studies. The film is currently being translated into a number of languages, including Spanish, French and Arabic.

In terms of viewership, Psywar achieved viral status its first week, receiving 83,000 views in six days. Unfortunately its momentum was scotched when Exposure Room (the hosting site) removed it for reasons that were not clearly explained (I'm guessing bandwidth cost was the culprit). I have since re-uploaded the film to other websites.

The only significant negative feedback I've received so far has to do with the medium itself. It is argued that Psywar – a film about propaganda – is itself propagandistic. It contains moving music, slick editing and provocative imagery.

I suppose it depends how we define propaganda. If we use the simplest definition: “information that is spread for the purpose of promoting some cause”, then Psywar is indeed propagandistic. In Brave New World revisited, Aldous Huxley wrote that:

“Mass communication, in a word, is neither good nor bad; it is simply a force and, like any other force, it can be used either well or ill. Used in one way, the press, the radio and the cinema are indispensable to the survival of democracy. Used in another way, they are among the most powerful weapons in the dictator's armory.”

To me, the word propaganda contains a sinister connotation: the intent to deceive. Since I didn’t set out to deceive anyone with my film, I don’t consider it an example of propaganda. Agitprop might be a better description, referring here to the politicized artwork that flourished in the first half of the twentieth Century.
We would do well to consider the idea that the most insidious forms of propaganda do not come in the form of a plainly stated thesis or obvious political viewpoint, but in the art of pseudo-objectivity.

I am far less offended by the ridiculous bombast of Fox News than many a BBC or PBS documentary: films which pretend to examine issues in an objective, detached, rational manner but employ subtle propaganda techniques to mislead viewers. Censorship by omission is the most widely used device.

The use of audio/visual techniques in Psywar that might be interpreted as “manipulative” are, to me, simply an expression of my own creativity -- no more propagandistic than a clever turn of phrase in an essay, and no less necessary -- especially to today’s audience. It is difficult to maintain a viewer’s interest in what Bo Filter describes as our “post-literate society”, and I make no apologies for attempting to move and entertain in addition to educate. I’m no more interested in making a boring documentary than watching one.

**Now that Psywar has been out for a while, is there anything you wish you had put in the film that you missed, or anything you put into it you wish you had not?**

I had originally intended to cover the entire Cold War period in the film, but I soon realized that would be impossible. Instead, I will be examining the Cold War in my third film, “Counter-Intelligence”, which I began work on last week.

Of particular interest to me in this respect is the rise of “black propaganda”. The term is used in a variety of contexts, often benign, but a lesser known definition comes from a declassified document obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and published in Chris Simpson’s seminal work on the subject, *The Science of Coercion*. Here, black propaganda includes “clandestine warfare, subversion, sabotage, and miscellaneous operations such as assassination”.

Later Counter-insurgency manuals explicitly refer to “false flag operations” such as occurred under Operations Ajax and Gladio. False flags are acts of terrorism and or other forms of violence carried out by hidden actors which are then blamed on a designated enemy. Planted evidence and patsies are usually involved. Many scholars argue quite plausibly that the “War on Terror” amounts to Gladio redux, with Muslims replacing communists.

**Black propaganda remains the biggest taboo in journalism.**
There was an interesting sort of unspoken debate that occurred between Walter Lippmann and Harold Laswell in the aftermath of WWI. Lippmann advocated the “manufacture of consent”, which he regarded as a more humane and effective means of managing the public consciousness than brute force. Laswell, on the other hand, recommended a blending of the old and new: media control would be paramount, but selected acts of covert violence would also be necessary. It is Laswell’s vision that ultimately won the day.

One other regret about Psywar: I have a great clip of Christopher Simpson discussing the etymology of the word “communication”. I was intending to include it in the film but simply forgot about it until it was too late.

The Latin roots of the word suggest the “sharing of duties” or “sharing of burdens”. So we have terms like commune, or communion, or community and so forth: words that describe who we are and how we survive as a species. Somewhere along the line, the meaning of “communication” changed. It was no longer about the sharing of ideas but about their transmission by a select group of elites to the mass of the population. In other words, propaganda. So the relationship was altered from one of equality to one of hierarchy.

The people on the receiving end are rendered fundamentally passive in this relationship. They are not participants but spectators. The same analogy can be drawn to the entire edifice of modern government. We are not allowed to participate in any meaningful way. But we can watch television to our heart’s content.

When I made Psywar, and when I imagine people watching it, the hope is that I am not merely transmitting a message, but that viewers will become participants by engaging with the ideas, debating them with others, and hopefully taking some sort of action in response – even if it’s just sending the link around.

There’s a certain beauty to the blog and the Internet forum. It doesn’t matter if you’re a VIP or a janitor; you have equal space to express your opinions. It’s almost like the old town meetings in colonial America, prior to the constitutional convention, where slave owners and land speculators lamented the fact that the “lowliest craftsmen” were allowed to participate in debate and policy formulation. If we are ever to end the madness, we will have to recapture that spirit of real, participatory democracy and put it into practice en masse.
To view Psywar, and all of Mr. Noble's upcoming film projects please visit:
http://metanoia-films.org/psywar.php

ADDITIONAL READING –

INVENTING REALITY – Michael Parenti

TAKING THE RISK OUT OF DEMOCRACY – Alex Carey

MANUFACTURING CONSENT – Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman

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