SHADOWS OF LIBERTY

Journalism is a pillar of a free society. So is freedom of information. They need to be protected.

A news revolution is underway, with organisations across the globe promoting a more transparent, honest media agenda. You can get involved. It's easy!

GET YOUR NEWS FROM INDEPENDENT SOURCES

Numerous organisations offer alternatives to corporate media. Here are a few that Shadows of Liberty recommends:

- **Linktv.org** – broadcasts programs that engage and educate viewers about global issues often not covered in mainstream media
- **Democracy Now** – an hour-long daily independent global news program hosted by progressive journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez
- **Films for Action** – is a community-powered alternative news center and learning library for people who want to change the world
- **Truthdig** – progressive coverage of current affairs
- **Nation of Change** – a non-profit news organization that reports 24/7 on issues affecting democracy, funded entirely by public donations
- **Alternet** – news magazine and online community with original journalism and independent media links
- **Adbusters** – anti-consumerist magazine
- **Indymedia** – a collective of independent media organisations and hundreds of journalists, with grassroots, non-corporate coverage

CONTRIBUTE TO A MEDIA REFORM ORGANIZATION

There are both global and national organisations who are pushing for change – find out what they’re up to and see how you can participate:
Project Censored – a media research program that aims to teach students and the public about the role of a free press in a free society

The Center for Public Integrity – one of the US’ oldest and largest nonpartisan, nonprofit investigative news organizations. Its mission is to enhance democracy by revealing abuses of power, corruption and betrayal of trust by powerful public and private institutions, using the tools of investigative journalism

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom – actively working for a more accountable, diverse and freer media and a defence of journalism and broadcasting as a public service

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting – a national media watch group for the US, criticizing media bias and censorship since 1986.

FAIR has one of the best activism tools around – its Action Alert network, which distributes up-to-the-minute emails reporting on specific media inaccuracy and bias, encouraging you to communicate directly with journalists to get more responsible reporting. It’s a tool that has forced rewrites of stories and succeeded in getting different perspectives into the news

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism – a non-profit organization that produces high-quality investigations for press and broadcast media

**DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT**

This film attempts to present how a handful of corporations have come to control most of the information, creating a media monopoly that manipulates our political, economical, and social world. Media’s extraordinary influence and power in the world forces us to ask ourselves serious questions about the world we live in.

Through the stories of journalists revealing truths about our society, we learn about how the media monopoly operates and affects our society. This film is dedicated to these journalists, heroes of our time, who give their lives and freedoms for our information. Presenting these voices that are not heard or given a platform is what Shadows of Liberty is about.

It is very important to this project to present news events from another perspective, that of the independent journalist. Their work highlights the injustices of corporations and governments. Their stories illustrate how differently the mainstream media presents news events and their far-reaching effects on society.

My hope is for more people to get a sense of how the corporate control of information in our democracy came to be. People everywhere respond and demonstrate against injustices, yet their voices are either not reported or taken into account. This film attempts to inspire change and accountability by championing the idea of an independent media where truth and integrity are the norm, and not the exception.

Unjust wars are being fought, governments are imposing radical power, and the imbalance between the corporate and public welfare is greater than ever. The media monopoly and its role in our democracy is one of the most important and topical issues of our time.
SHADOWS OF LIBERTY - Synopsis

Shadows of Liberty reveals the extraordinary truth behind the news media: censorship, cover-ups and corporate control.

Filmmaker Jean-Philippe Tremblay takes a journey through the darker corridors of the US media, where global conglomerates call the shots. For decades, their overwhelming influence has distorted news journalism and compromised its values.

In highly revealing stories, renowned journalists, activists and academics give insider accounts of a broken media system. Controversial news reports are suppressed, people are censored for speaking out, and lives are shattered as the arena for public expression is turned into a private profit zone.

Tracing the story of media manipulation through the years, Shadows of Liberty poses a crucial question: why have we let a handful of powerful corporations write the news? We’re left in no doubt - media reform is urgent and freedom of the press is fundamental.

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MEDIA MONOPOLY QUOTES INCLUDED

“When men yield up the exclusive privilege of thinking, the last shadow of liberty quits the horizon.”

_Thomas Paine_

“The media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that’s power. Because they control the minds of the masses.”

_Malcolm X_

“The United States is unusual among the industrial democracies in the rigidity of the system of ideological control; ‘indoctrination,’ we might say, exercised through the mass media.”

_Noam Chomsky_

“We have to do more than keep media giants from growing larger; they’re already too big. We need a new set of rules that will break these huge companies to pieces.”

_Ted Turner_

“All any dictator would admire the uniformity and obedience of the U.S. media.”

_Noam Chomsky_

“The media is too concentrated, too few people own too much. There’s really five companies that control 90 percent of what we read, see and hear. It’s not healthy.”

_Ted Turner_

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INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

_(in order of appearance)_

**Amy Goodman**

*Host of ‘Democracy Now!’, Author & Journalist*

American progressive broadcast journalist, syndicated columnist, investigative reporter and author. Goodman is the host of *Democracy Now!*, an independent global news program broadcast daily on radio, television and the Internet. *Democracy Now!* began in 1996, it airs hundreds of stations worldwide with over 20 million followers in 2011 alone. *Democracy Now!* has been called the most significant progressive news institution.

**Janine Jackson**

*Program Director, ‘Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting’*

Janine Jackson is *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting’s* program director and a frequent contributor to FAIR’s magazine, *Extra!* She co-edited *The FAIR Reader: An Extra! Review of Press and Politics in the ’90s* (Westview Press). She co-hosts and produces FAIR’s syndicated radio show *Counter Spin*, a weekly program of media criticism airing on more than 150 stations around the country.

**Deepa Kumar**

Media Studies Professor
Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA. She is the author of the book *Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike*.

**Julian Assange**  
*Editor-in-Chief, WikiLeaks*  
Australian publisher, journalist, media and Internet entrepreneur, media critic, writer, computer programmer and political activist. He is the editor-in-chief and founder of WikiLeaks, a media website which publishes information from whistleblowers. The site acts as a conduit for worldwide news leaks, with a stated purpose of creating open governance.

**Robert McChesney**  
*Communications Professor, Author & Journalist*  
American professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the Gutgsell Endowed Professor in the Department of Communication. He is the cofounder of Free Press, a national media reform organization. McChesney also hosts the *Media Matters*, a weekly radio program every Sunday afternoon on WILLAM radio; it is the top-rated program in its time slot in the Champaign-Urbana area. He is the author of many works, and is among the most widely read and honored communication scholars in the world today.

**Danny Glover**  
*Actor & Director*  
American actor, film director, and political activist. Glover is well known for his roles in *The Color Purple, Predator 2, Witness*, and in the *Lethal Weapon* film franchise, as well as roles in many other movies, television programs, and theatrical productions. Glover trained with Jean Shelton at the Shelton Actors Lab in San Francisco and cofounded the Robey Theatre Company in honor of the actor, radical activist, and concert singer Paul Robeson. He is an active supporter of various humanitarian and political causes. While attending San Francisco State University, he collaborated in the longest student walkout in U.S. history, to establish a Department of Black Studies.

**Norman Solomon**  
*Journalist, 'Institute for Public Accuracy' Founder*  
American journalist, media critic, antiwar activist, and current candidate for the United States House of Representatives. Solomon is a longtime associate of the media watch group *Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting*. In 1997 he founded the Institute for Public Accuracy, which works to provide alternative sources for journalists, and served as its executive director until 2010. Solomon’s weekly column, "Media Beat", was in national syndication from 1992-2009. He is a progressive author and activist and is in the race for Congress for 2012.

**Roberta Baskin**  
*Chief Correspondent, CBS News 199297*
Baskin began her career as an investigative reporter in Chicago and Washington D.C. She has served as the Executive Director of the Centre for Public Integrity the senior Washington correspondent for NOW with Bill Moyers, senior investigative producer for the ABC newsmagazine 20/20, chief investigative correspondent for the CBS newsmagazine 48 Hours, and contributed special reports to the CBS Evening News. Baskin has won more than 75 journalism prizes.

**Thuyen Nguyen**

‘Vietnam Labor Watch’ Founder

Thuyen is a successful business entrepreneur who founded Vietnam Labor Watch, a group dedicated on regulating fair business practices in Vietnam.

**Brian Healy**

*Producer, CBS News 1972-2010*

Brian earned his M.S. from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1968. He first joined the CBS Evening News in 1972, and served in the London bureau as a field producer from 1976 to 1979. Healy has held positions as senior producer and producer for such broadcasts as the CBS Early Show, CBS Evening News, Eye to Eye with Connie Chung, and CBS News Sunday Morning. Healy worked with the legendary Ed Bradley, serving as his producer on the floor of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. He is the winner of several national Emmy Awards.

**John Nichols**

*Author & Journalist, ‘The Nation Magazine’*

Nichols is a political correspondent for The Nation magazine. He is a contributing writer for The Progressive and In These Times and the associate editor of the Capital Times, the daily newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, Chicago Tribune and dozens of other newspapers. Along with fellow author Robert McChesney, Nichols co-founded the media-reform group Free Press. American journalist, and a pioneering political blogger, Nichols has authored or coauthored many books.

**Kristina Borjesson**

*Journalist, Producer CBS 1994-97*

Kristina has been an independent producer and writer for more than twenty years. She produces and co-host’s Expert Witness radio show on WBAI in New York City. She produced for CNN’s News Stand Magazine, she won an Emmy and a Murrow award, and has been nominated for many others, including for ‘The Last Revolutionary’, a biography about Fidel Castro. She edited an award winning collection of essays, Into the Buzzsaw: Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press (2002).

**Kelly O’Meara**

*Congressional Aide, New York 1981-97*

A former House chief of staff, Kelly is a tough reporter because of her uncompromising and relentless digging for the facts. A savvy congressional watcher with long time Washington political experience, she tracked and plotted censured radar charts involving TWA Flight 800 that the National Transportation Safety
Board said didn’t exist. Her investigative reports on child vaccines have generated congressional hearings, as has her work on medicating children with mind-altering drugs. Kelly is a member of the congressional press galleries and a frequent guest on national talk radio and often can be seen on the national television talk shows.

**Philip Weiss**  

**Dan Rather**  
News Anchor CBS 1981 – 2005
Rather began his journalism career in 1950 as an Associated Press reporter in Huntsville, Texas. Later, he was a reporter for United Press (1950–1958), several Texas radio stations, and the Houston Chronicle (1954–1955). Rather was the first network television journalist to report that U.S. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. After serving as a foreign correspondent for CBS in London in 1965 and Vietnam in 1966, he served his second tenure as White House correspondent during the Richard Nixon presidency. As chief correspondent for the documentary series CBS Reports, he later became a correspondent of 60 Minutes. Then succeeded Walter Cronkite as anchor and Managing Editor of CBS Evening News for 24 years. He is now managing editor and anchor of the television news magazine Dan Rather Reports on the cable channel HDNet.

**David Simon**  
Author & Journalist, Creator of ‘The Wire’
American author, journalist, and a writer/producer of television series. He worked for the Baltimore Sun City Desk for twelve years. He wrote Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets and co-wrote The Corner: A Year in the Life of an InnerCity Neighborhood with Ed Burns. He is the creator of the HBO television series The Wire, for which he served as executive producer, head writer, and show runner for all five seasons. He was selected as one of the 2010 MacArthur Fellows and named an Utne Reader visionary in 2011. Simon also co-created the HBO series Treme.

**Robert Parry**  
American investigative journalist. He was awarded the George Polk Award for National Reporting in 1984 for his work with the Associated Press on the Iran-Contra story and uncovered Oliver North’s involvement in it as a Washington-based correspondent for Newsweek. In 1995, he established Consortium News as an online ezine dedicated to investigative journalism. Parry has written several books,

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**Charles Bowden**  
*Author & Journalist*

Charles is an award-winning journalist, essayist, author of *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy’s New Killing Fields*, and is based in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He is a former writer for the *Tucson Citizen* and often writes about the American Southwest, and drug wars. He is a contributing editor of *GQ* and *Mother Jones magazine*, and writes for other periodicals including *Harper’s Magazine*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Esquire*, and *Aperture*. He is the winner of the 1996 Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction, and a 2010 award from United States Artists.

**Peter Kornbluh**  
*Senior Analyst, National Security Archives*

Peter is director of the National Security Archive’s Chile Documentation and of the Cuba Documentation Projects. He played a large role in the campaign to declassify government documents relating to the history of the U.S. Government’s support for the Pinochet dictatorship. He is the author of several books, and he won a 1990 James Aronson Award honourable mention for writing in *The New Yorker*.

**Dick Gregory**  
*Comedian & Author*

American comedian, social activist, social critic, writer, and entrepreneur. Gregory is an influential American comic who has used his performance skills to convey his political message on civil rights, as well as many other social causes in the US and around the world. Gregory is number 82 on Comedy Central’s list of the 100 Greatest Stand-ups of all time and has his own star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

**Susan Paterno**  
*Senior Contributing Writer, ‘American Journalism Review’*

Susan is director of the journalism program at Chapman University, is an awardwinning journalist with more than 20 years experience as a reporter, writer and columnist. A senior writer for *American Journalism Review*, Professor Paterno won the National Press Club’s 2006 Arthur Rowse Award for Press Criticism. She has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Parenting* and many other publications. She has collaborated on a half dozen books, including *The Newswriter’s Handbook* and *Talk Straight, Listen Carefully: The Art of Interviewing* with M.L. Stein, the retired chair of New York University’s Department of Journalism and Mass Communications.

**Kurt Webb**  
*Gary Webb’s brother*

Kurt Webb is a business man working in the Bay area in Northern California. He is the brother of Gary Webb, an investigative reporter who focused on government and private sector corruption and won more than 30 journalism awards. In 1990 he
won a Pulitzer Prize for General News Reporting for a series of stories on the collapse of the Cypress Street Viaduct during northern California's 1989 earthquake. He also received the 1997 Media Hero Award from the Institute for Alternative Journalism and in 1996 was named Journalist of the Year by the Bay Area Society of Professional Journalists. Gary Webb was best known for his 1996 "Dark Alliance" series of articles written for the *San Jose Mercury News* and later published as a book.

**Jeff Cohen**  
*Founder of F.A.I.R., Author & Journalist*

Journalist, media critic, professor, and the founder of *Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting* (FAIR). He was formerly a lawyer for the ACLU and authored or coauthored five books that focus on media bias. He was a regular commentator for Fox News Channel’s *Fox News Watch*, for MSNBC and CNN, and appears in the *Outfoxed* documentary film.

**Silvia Rivera**  
*Managing Director, ‘Vocalo’*

Silvia is an authoritative voice on issues of leadership and diversity in public media. She is the product of youth-media training, having started her career in 1998 at Radio Arte (WRTE-FM), a youth-driven Latino public radio station. She became host/music & public affairs producer, Community Relations Director, Assistant GM of Marketing & Development, and ultimately General Manager (2006-2009). Silvia received the Founder’s Award in 2007 by the Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW). She is a founding member and Board President of the Latino Public Radio Consortium.

**Chris Hedges**  

Journalist, author, and war correspondent specializing in American and Middle Eastern politics and societies. His most recent book is *The World As It Is* (2011). Hedges is also known as the best-selling author of *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. Chris is currently a senior fellow at The Nation Institute in New York City. He spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He has reported from more than fifty countries, and has worked for *The Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, The Dallas Morning News, and The New York Times*, where he was a foreign correspondent for fifteen years (1990–2005).

**Jonathan Landay**  
*National Security Correspondent, ‘Knight Ridder’*

Jonathan is senior national security and intelligence correspondent for McClatchy Newspapers, has written about foreign affairs and U.S. defence, intelligence and foreign policies for more than 25 years. He was a co-recipient of the 2003 Raymond Clapper Memorial Award for disclosing the exaggerated intelligence to justify the invasion of Iraq. In 2005, he won a National Headliners Award, an Award of Distinction from the Medill School of Journalism, and Georgetown University’s 2007
Weintal Prize for Diplomatic Reporting Special Citation. He was a co-recipient of the National Press Club’s 2011 Edward M. Hood Award for Diplomatic Correspondence for an investigative series on contracting corruption in Afghanistan.

**Bob Baer**

*Middle East Field Officer, CIA 1976-97*

Baer was considered perhaps the best on-the-ground field officer in the Middle East. During his twenty-one years with the CIA, Baer performed field assignments in South Asia and the Middle East. During the mid-1990s, Baer was sent to Iraq, then quit the Agency in 1997 and received the CIA’s Career Intelligence Medal on March 11, 1998. Baer’s books *See No Evil* and *Sleeping with the Devil* were the basis for the 2005 Academy Award-winning Warner Brothers motion picture *Syriana*. He is currently *TIME.com*’s intelligence columnist and has contributed to *Vanity Fair, The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.

**James Bamford**

*Author & Journalist*

Dr. Bamford is a leading bestselling author on intelligence and national security issues. His books include *The Puzzle Palace, Body of Secrets*, and *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies*. Bamford has also written for *The New York Times Magazine, The Washington Post Magazine, The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, and is a contributing writer for *Rolling Stone*. He also spent a decade as the Washington investigative producer for the ABC News program, *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, and taught at the University of California, Berkeley, as a distinguished visiting professor.

**Pratap Chatterjee**

*Executive Director, CorpWatch*

Investigative journalist and progressive author, Pratap is a British citizen and grew up in India. He serves as the executive director of *CorpWatch*, an Oakland-based corporate accountability organization. He also works for the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London. He writes regularly for The Guardian and serves on the board of Amnesty International USA and of the Corporate Europe Observatory. He has been published in the *Financial Times, The New Republic, The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. He often appears as a guest expert in a wide variety of media ranging from Fox TV to *Democracy Now!*. His writing has won a number of awards.

**John MacArthur**

*President & Publisher, ‘Harper’s Magazine’*

Brad Friedman
Journalist
Journalist, most known for his criticism of election integrity issues in the USA. Friedman has a BFA from New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts. Friedman's, **THE BRAD BLOG**, covers voting rights and election integrity issues in the USA, and a number of other subjects related to media reform and political corruption.

Sibel Edmonds
FBI Language Specialist 200102
Turkish-American former FBI translator and founder of the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition (NSWBC). Edmonds gained public attention following her firing from her position as a language specialist at the FBI's Washington Field Office in March 2002. She's accused the FBI of alleged serious acts of security breaches and cover-ups. Her later claims have gained her recognition and awards.

Philip Giraldi
CIA Counter Terrorism Officer 197692
Philip was counter-terrorism specialist and military intelligence officer of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for eighteen years, working in Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Spain and speaks those nations' languages. Philip is a columnist and television commentator, and the Executive Director of the Council for the National Interest, a group that advocates for more even handed policies by the U.S. government in the Middle East. He gained a Bachelor of Arts with Honors from the University of Chicago and a MA and a Ph.D from the University of London in European History.

Daniel Ellsberg
Pentagon Papers Whistleblower
Former United States military analyst who, while employed by the RAND Corporation, precipitated a national political controversy in 1971 when he released the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret Pentagon study of U.S. government decisionmaking in relation to the Vietnam War, to *The New York Times*, and other newspapers. He completed his PhD in Economics from Harvard in 1962. Ellsberg is the recipient of many prizes and awards encouraging peace including the Ron Ridenhour Courage Prize, the Gandhi Peace Award, and the Right Livelihood Award.

Douglas McCollam
Journalist, ‘Columbia Journalism Review’
McCollam is a Washington-based legal correspondent for *BusinessWeek*. He joined *BusinessWeek* from *Legal Times*, where he was a Senior Editor overseeing much of their coverage on the intersection of the law, business and lobbying.

Walter Weiss
Detective, Murphy Police Department 20022007
Walter is a former police detective with the Murphy Police Department in Texas. In 2006, the police department was involved with the American television newsmagazine program *Dateline NBC; To Catch A Predator*, and Walter
left the department in disgust.

Luke Dittrich
Contributing Editor, ‘Esquire’

Luke is a journalist, and contributing editor at Esquire, where he writes on subjects ranging from lost atomic bombs to teenage hitmen. His forthcoming book for Random House, The Brain That Changed Everything, is about Henry Molaison, who in 1958 underwent an experimental operation at the hands of Dittrich’s grandfather. The operation obliterated Molaison’s ability to create new memories, and Molaison went on to become the most important human test subject in the history of science, revolutionizing our understanding of how memory works.

Rothwell B. Pool
Law Partner & Family Friend

R.B. practices Family Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution from Terrell, Texas. He is a long time law partner and family friend of Bill Conradt, who in 2006, became involved with the American television newsmagazine program Dateline NBC; To Catch A Predator.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JEANPHILIPPE TREMBLAY
Director/ Producer / Writer

Jean-Philippe originates from Jonquière, Québec. He studied Law and Film at Carleton University. In 1996, he made a film entitled Journey, following the story of an aspiring young filmmaker in South East Asia for one year. He was awarded an intensive apprenticeship at the S.A.W. Video Co-op. Subsequently, Jean-Philippe developed his skills as a lighting technician, on four films with Distinct Features, TV shows, commercials, and music videos. In 1998, the Canada Arts Council funded his short film entitled Rock Bottom Fill. The following year, he documented the work of an NGO ‐ South Asian Partnership Canada ‐ in Pakistan. In 2001, he was a Neg‐Assembler for films such as Insomnia. In 2002 he developed the Journey film project in South America for six months. In 2006 he completed an MA in Film Production at the London Film School. His graduation film was selected at the 50th London Film Festival. He joined DOCFACTORY that same year and began filming his first feature documentary, Shadows Of Liberty, completed in January 2012. Jean-Philippe is currently preparing a new feature.

DAN CANTAGALLO
Cowriter / Coproducer

Dan Cantagallo studied film at Harvard University and the London Film School. Alongside his brother, Dan expanded his thesis project into a feature documentary, No Outlet. He has worked on numerous shorts, music videos, and documentaries including the award-winning Operation Filmmaker. He joined DOCFACTORY to collaborate on Shadows of Liberty. Most recently, he directed the comedy, Benny The Bum, in his hometown of Philadelphia. He works as a
In the insular world of Manhattan media, there’s much handwringing over the latest blow to print publications as New York Magazine scales back from a weekly to a biweekly. But the real lesson might be the commercial failure of snarky writing, *the kind that New York demonstrated in its recent hit piece on “conspiracy theories.”*

What was most stunning to me about *the article*, pegged to the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, was that it began by ridiculing what is actually one of the best-documented real conspiracies of recent decades, the CIA’s tolerance and even protection of cocaine trafficking by the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the 1980s.
According to *New York Magazine*, the Contra-cocaine story – smugly dubbed “the last great conspiracy theory of the twentieth century” – started with the claim by “crack kingpin” Ricky Ross that he was working with a Nicaraguan cocaine supplier, Oscar Danilo Blandon, who had ties to the Contras who, in turn, had ties to the CIA.

Author Benjamin Wallace-Wells writes: “The wider the aperture around this theory, the harder its proponents work to implicate Washington, the shakier it seems: After several trials and a great deal of inquiry, no one has been able to show that anyone in the CIA condoned what Blandon was doing, and it has never been clear exactly how strong Blandon’s ties to the Contra leadership really were, anyway.”

So, it was all a goofy “conspiracy theory.” Move along, move along, nothing to see here. But neither Wallace-Wells nor his New York Magazine editors seem to have any idea about the actual history of the Contra-cocaine scandal. It did not begin with the 1996 emergence of Ricky Ross in a series of articles by San Jose Mercury-News investigative reporter Gary Webb, as Wallace-Wells suggests.

The Contra-cocaine scandal began more than a decade earlier with a 1985 article that Brian Barger and I wrote for the Associated Press. Our article cited documentary evidence and witnesses – both inside the Contra movement and inside the U.S. government – implicating nearly all the Contra groups fighting in Nicaragua under the umbrella of Ronald Reagan’s CIA.

Our Contra-cocaine article was followed up by a courageous Senate investigation led by Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts who further documented the connections between cocaine traffickers, the Contras and the Reagan administration in a report issued in 1989.

Yet, part of the scandal always was how the Reagan administration worked diligently to undercut investigations of the President’s favorite “freedom fighters” whether the inquiries were undertaken by the press, Congress, the Drug Enforcement Administration or federal prosecutors. *Indeed, a big part of this cover-up strategy was to mock the evidence as “a conspiracy theory,” when it was anything but.*

**Big Media’s Complicity**
Most of the mainstream news media played along with the Reagan administration’s mocking strategy, although occasionally major outlets, like the Washington Post, had to concede the reality of the scandal.

For instance, during the drug-trafficking trial of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1991, U.S. prosecutors found themselves with no alternative but to call as a witness Colombian Medellín cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who — along with implicating Noriega — testified that the cartel had given $10 million to the Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry.

“The Kerry hearings didn’t get the attention they deserved at the time,” a Washington Post editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. “The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention.”

Yet, despite the Washington Post’s belated concern about the mainstream news media’s neglect of the Contra-cocaine scandal, there was no serious follow-up anywhere in Big Media – until 1996 when Gary Webb disclosed the connection between one Contra cocaine smuggler, Danilo Blandon, and the emergence of crack cocaine via Ricky Ross.

But the premier news outlets – the likes of the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times – didn’t take this new opportunity to examine what was a serious crime of state. That would have required them to engage in some embarrassing self-criticism for their misguided dismissal of the scandal. Instead, the big newspapers went on the attack against Gary Webb.

Their attack line involved narrowing their focus to Blandon – ignoring the reality that he was just one of many Contras involved in cocaine smuggling to the United States – and to Ross – arguing that Ross’s operation could not be blamed for the entire crack epidemic that ravaged U.S. cities in the 1980s. And the newspapers insisted that the CIA couldn’t be blamed for this cocaine smuggling because the agency had supposedly examined the issue in the 1980s and found that it had done nothing wrong.

Because of this unified assault from the major newspapers – and the corporate timidity of the San Jose Mercury-News editors – Webb and his continuing investigation were soon abandoned. Webb was pushed out of the Mercury-News in disgrace.

That let the mainstream U.S. media celebrate how it had supposedly crushed a nasty “conspiracy theory” that had stirred up unjustified anger in the black community, which had been hit hardest
by the crack epidemic. The newspapers also could get some brownie points from Republicans and the Right by sparing President Reagan’s legacy a big black eye.

But Webb’s disclosure prompted the CIA’s Inspector General Frederick Hitz to undertake the first real internal investigation of the ties between the Contra-cocaine smugglers and the CIA officers overseeing the Contra war in Nicaragua.

The CIA’s Confession

When Hitz’s final investigative report was published in fall 1998, the CIA’s defense against Webb’s series had shrunk to a fig leaf: that the CIA did not conspire with the Contras to raise money through cocaine trafficking. But Hitz made clear that the Contra war had taken precedence over law enforcement and that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra drug-smuggling crimes from the Justice Department, Congress, and even the CIA’s own analytical division.

Besides tracing the extensive evidence of Contra trafficking through the entire decade-long Contra war, the inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of Contra-drug smuggling but didn’t want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua’s leftist Sandinista government.

According to Hitz, the CIA had “one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program.” One CIA field officer explained, “The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war.”

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA’s analysts. Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that “only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking.” That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news organizations — serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his disclosures in 1996.

Although Hitz’s report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers. On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz’s final report was posted on the CIA’s Web site, the New York Times published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood.
Several weeks later, the Washington Post weighed in with a similarly superficial article. The Los Angeles Times never published a story on the contents of Hitz’s findings though Los Angeles had been “ground zero” of the Ross-Blandon connection.

In 2000, the Republican-controlled House Intelligence Committee grudgingly acknowledged that the stories about Reagan’s CIA protecting Contra drug traffickers were true. The committee released a report citing classified testimony from CIA Inspector General Britt Snider (Hitz’s successor) admitting that the spy agency had turned a blind eye to evidence of Contra-drug smuggling and generally treated drug smuggling through Central America as a low priority.

“In the end the objective of unseating the Sandinistas appears to have taken precedence over dealing properly with potentially serious allegations against those with whom the agency was working,” Snider said, adding that the CIA did not treat the drug allegations in “a consistent, reasoned or justifiable manner.”

The House committee’s majority Republicans still downplayed the significance of the Contra-cocaine scandal, but the panel acknowledged, deep inside its report, that in some cases, “CIA employees did nothing to verify or disprove drug trafficking information, even when they had the opportunity to do so. In some of these, receipt of a drug allegation appeared to provoke no specific response, and business went on as usual.”

Like the release of Hitz’s report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000 — except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com. Because the confirmation of the Contra-cocaine scandal received so little mainstream media coverage, Gary Webb remained a pariah in his profession of journalism, making it next to impossible for him to land a decent-paying job and contributing to his suicide in 2004. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “The Warning in Gary Webb’s Death.”]

What’s a Conspiracy Theory?

So, what is one to make of New York Magazine’s decision 15 years after the CIA’s confession and nearly a decade after Webb’s death to lead off its snarky ridicule of “conspiracy theories” with such a grossly inaccurate account of what was undeniably a real conspiracy?

One might have hoped that a publication that fancies itself as iconoclastic would have had the journalistic courage not to simply reinforce a fake conventional wisdom – and have the human
decency not to join in the mainstream media’s dancing on Webb’s grave. *But that is apparently too much to expect of New York Magazine.*

There is another problem in New York’s sneering takedown of “conspiracy theories” – and that is the magazine lacks a decent definition of what a “conspiracy theory” is, especially given the pejorative implications of the phrase.

*In my view, a “conspiracy theory” is a case of fanciful, usually fact-free speculation* positing some alternative explanation for an event. Typically, a “conspiracy theory” not only lacks any real evidence but often ignores compelling evidence that goes in other directions. For instance, the current conspiracy theory about President Barack Obama being born in Kenya despite birth certificates and birth notices of his birth in Hawaii.

*By contrast, a real conspiracy can be defined as a collaboration among individuals to engage in criminal or scandalous behavior usually in a secretive manner.* There are many such examples involving high government officials, including Richard Nixon’s Watergate and Ronald Reagan’s Iran-Contra Affair.

The difference between a “conspiracy theory” and a real conspiracy is that the latter is supported by substantial evidence and the former is reliant on someone simply thinking something up, often with partisan or ideological motivation.

There is, of course, much gray area between those two poles. There are cases in which some evidence exists indicating a conspiracy but it’s short of conclusive proof. In such cases of legitimate doubt, aggressive investigations are warranted – and the U.S. news media should welcome, not punish, these lines of inquiry.

Instead, the role of the mainstream press often has been to ridicule journalists and other investigators who venture into these murky waters. Often, that ridicule leads to serious cases of journalistic malfeasance as occurred with the mistreatment of Gary Webb and the Contra-cocaine story.

Other times the smug “anti-conspiracism” makes it impossible to get at the facts and to inform the American public about wrongdoing in a timely fashion. That can allow corrupt government officials to go unpunished and sometime to return to government in powerful positions.

The other important lesson to take from New York Magazine’s lumping real conspiracies and possible conspiracies in with fanciful conspiracy theories is that each case is unique and should be treated as such. Each set of facts should be examined carefully.
Just because one conspiracy can be proven doesn’t substantiate every claim of conspiracy. And the opposite is also true, just because one fact-free conspiracy theory is nutty doesn’t mean all suspected conspiracies deserve ridicule.

Through its anti-journalistic behavior, New York Magazine makes it hard to mourn its current financial predicament as it cuts back to publishing every other week.

Indeed, the magazine is making a case that few tears should be shed if it disappears entirely.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click here.