

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

It's Not Just the U.S.: British Government Video Handouts Aired by the BBC ^[1]

At the British Chihuahua Club's 2005 competition a little dog named Diella Blonde with Attitude won the "Limit Bitch (Longhair)" award, all of which just goes to show that our friends across the pond go about things by tradition in their own way. And also by tradition, we Yanks are often perceived by them as well, you know, uncouth.

And so when the news reached Britain about U.S. government-funded video posing as journalism, British blogger David Miller wrote that it was reported in the U.K. "with our customary shake of the head at the bizarre nature of US politics. Implicitly we are relieved that, however bad things are here, at least we are not as bad as they are."

Not so fast, pal.

What Miller has now found is that the British Broadcasting Corporation has been using advocacy video news reports from a production facility funded by the U.K. government's Ministry of Defense.

"[W]e have our very own fake journalists operating in the UK," Miller reported. "The government pays for their wages and they provide news as if they were normal journalists rather than paid propagandists. Normally they work in a little known outfit with the acronym BFBS, which stands for British Forces Broadcasting Service. According to its Web site, BFBS exists 'to entertain and inform British armed forces around the world and is entirely funded by the British Ministry of Defense.'"

Miller described one "fake" reporter used by the BBC was reporting from Iraq, embedded with the Scots Guards regiment in Basra, whose report was characterized by Miller as "a straight forward piece of propaganda."

"While the Scots Guards remain the ceasefire is likely to hold strong," the "reporter" concluded. "There's been little trouble in the area since the peace was brokered and the ceasefire has been extended to December the first. But the Iraqi police and national guard still lack confidence and credibility to keep the peace on their own and should the fighting resume, the governor of Basra has given the go ahead for the Scots Guards to use more force to make route six safe again."

Radio Scotland also used the British government-funded reports, broadcasting a Christmas Day handout by another correspondent funded by the Ministry of Defense. Miller quoted one irate Radio Scotland journalist who described the report as "an audio press release for the Army."

Caught with their hands in the video handout pot, the BBC has turned defensive: a senior editor sent an email to Miller, claiming the reporter was working for an independent charitable

organization - Miller said that was contradicted by the organization's site - and so the government funding was, in effect, laundered.

"[T]he BBC had full editorial control over what was broadcast, nor, did the BBC pay for it," wrote Stephen Whittle, BBC Controller of Editorial Policy, in an email quoted in a subsequent story by Miller.

By Thursday, under increasing scrutiny, Whittle said the government-funded reporting would no longer be used, writing, "it was not ideal and will not happen again."

But across town from the Ministry of Defense, the British Foreign Office still runs government-funded "news" services, funding domestic and international television reports through such agencies as the British Satellite News which it calls "the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's own television news service with a particular focus on the Arab/Islamic world. BSN is currently used by 35 broadcasters in the Middle East and over 440 worldwide."

The Foreign Office Web site proudly proclaims that it "has an important role in efforts to improve perceptions of the UK overseas, which may affect the attitudes of foreign governments, trade and investment decisions and personal choices such as where to study and what to buy. The FCO aims to communicate the UK's values, present-day strengths and successes."

The Foreign Office also advises aspiring faux journalists that it will award a three-year contract, starting this fall.

"It is essential that the service has the flexibility to respond quickly and positively to fast-moving situations, especially in the light of recent world events," reads an announcement on the Web site. "We are therefore looking for innovative companies to supply creative solutions for promoting the UK through BSN in the fields of politics, culture, health, science and the environment."

"The secret of all this material is that it is not only free to use," wrote Miller, "but that it is used as if it was genuine news and not British propaganda." Miller also noted there are no laws in Britain that prohibit what Miller calls "fake news."

But these reports are broadcast worldwide, not just in the U.K. The "news" clips of British Satellite News, funded by the British government, are carried by the worldwide Reuters news agency, and are picked up by subscribing TV stations throughout the world, where they run on local newscasts, often without being sourced.

How did all of this start? As with so many other things, free videos meant for placement on TV news programs may well have been an American invention - in a garage in upstate New York.

In the early 1950s, a Chrysler auto mechanic in a garage in Buffalo, New York, built a perfectly balanced car that cruised on three wheels. At Chrysler headquarters in Detroit, media manager Howard Back, who told me this story, thought the idea could be promoted, so he commissioned a short film (16mm black-and-white film in those days) about the three-wheeled car and mailed copies to TV stations around the country. The stations then broadcast the clip in their local news broadcasts.

Howard Back knew he was on to something. He started distributing short films to TV stations

each time Chrysler came out with a new model car, and TV stations ran the clips on their local news. Thus was born today's video news release, the VNR.

Howard Back, who started all this, went into the VNR business for himself. He once told me about a project for General Motors about a taxi cab that was stuffed with an elephant. There was still plenty of room in the car, which viewers could clearly see was a Chevrolet.

Maybe now there could be another version - with a British lion.
