

Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence

Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 263 pp., endnotes and index.

Mark Mansfield

In their introduction to *Spinning Intelligence*, coeditors Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman assert that the relationship between intelligence agencies and the media is “fluid,” “contradictory,” and “occasionally supportive.” The dozen essays they have compiled from experts in government, journalism, and academia bear this out. While some are far more informative and insightful than others, all of them reflect a complex, evolving, and often tense relationship.

Most of the contributors to this anthology are British and focus, to a large extent, on the British experience, but there is ample commentary on media – national security dynamics in the United States, both historically and currently. And the contemporary issues these essays explore—terrorism and the media; open-source information and nuclear safeguards; balancing the public’s right to know with keeping legitimate secrets in the information age; and the influence of movies and TV programs on public perceptions of CIA and the intelligence world—are every bit as relevant here as they are in the UK.

It is understandable why Dover and Goodman placed University of Warwick Professor Richard J. Aldrich’s “Regulation by Revelation?” as the first essay in the collection, because it is largely historical in nature and sets the scene for several other pieces in the anthology. But it is, from my perspective, the least compelling piece in the book. Having served in one public affairs capacity or another at CIA for two decades, I would take issue with Aldrich’s view that US intelligence agencies “arguably...have always enjoyed a remarkably close relationship with the press” and that there has been a “longstanding determination of elements within American intelligence to court the press.” Regarding the purported “remarkably close relationship,” Aldrich might have added that it hasn’t exactly translated into laudatory press coverage of CIA for the past 35 years or so. And as for a longstanding effort to court the press, if that were the case, why did CIA have no formal public affairs office until the late 1970s, decades after the Agency was founded? There are also a number of factual inaccuracies in Aldrich’s piece, not the least of which is his statement that the US government “indicted” *New York Times* reporter James Risen in 2008. Mr. Risen has not been indicted; he was subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury to discuss confidential sources, according to a 2008 story in the *Times*.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Some media observers—mindful of well-publicized discussions between news organizations and the US government prior to publication of blockbuster stories on the Terrorist Surveillance Program, SWIFT, and CIA “secret prisons”—are under the impression that journalists’ dealings with government have always been adversarial and contentious. For them, *Spinning Intelligence* will offer evidence to the contrary. Illustrative of the “occasionally supportive” relationship cited by Dover and Goodman is an article by British journalist Chapman Pincher who, well into his nineties, reflects on a lifetime of reporting on intelligence and national security matters.

Pincher says his receipt and publication of such a steady stream of classified information over the years precipitated the “most cherished professional compliment” he ever received, made in Parliament—that he was a “public urinal where Ministers and officials queued up to leak.” But it was a two-way street, he recounts. Specifically, Pincher makes reference to a contrived front-page story he wrote, in collaboration with the UK government, concerning Britain’s first H-bomb tests off Malden Island in the Pacific Ocean in 1957. Pincher relates that Japanese, concerned about radioactive fall-out, were planning to make the tests impossible by sailing a thousand small ships into the area. If they forced the tests to be abandoned, Britain’s entire defense policy would be ruined, Pincher says he was told.

British officials solicited Pincher’s help in trying to fool the Japanese with a deception operation, and he complied. He reported that the tests, which were scheduled for May, had been delayed a month “due to technical problems with the bomb.” The *Daily Express* published Pincher’s front-page story and it was picked up by other media, but the tests went ahead in May 1957 as scheduled, with no protest fleet approaching Malden. In this instance, Pincher cooperated with the government, publishing something he knew was false. It clearly was a different era, and a different mind-set. Pincher’s article isn’t the only one that points to how government and the media have collaborated. In a piece subtitled, “A Snapshot of a Happy Marriage,” Goodman details the longstanding, mutually beneficial relationship between British intelligence and the BBC.

The most insightful essay in *Spinning Intelligence*—notwithstanding its references to former DNI Mike McConnell as “Director of Central Intelligence”—was written by Sir David Omand, former director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and the UK’s first security and intelligence coordinator. In the piece, “Intelligence Secrets and Media Spotlights,” Omand points out that journalists and “spies” have more in common than they might care to admit—both seek to uncover what is hidden, both work under tight deadlines, and both have sources they protect assiduously.

Noting that the worlds of secret intelligence and journalism “have been forced to interact but never without strain,” he cites numerous reasons for the inevitable tension between the two professions. He correctly points out that “prurient curiosity” still sells newspapers and, as both intelligence professionals who deal with the media and reporters who cover intelligence issues can confirm, the word “secret” acts as an “accelerant” on a breaking news story. That’s as true in the United States as it is in Britain.

Omand, who has a very pragmatic view of the media and national security, makes an observation that is mirrored in several articles in the anthology. When considering public perceptions of intelligence and security, we are dealing with a “magical reality” and a “psychological construct,” as opposed to an accurate portrayal of the real world. This “magical reality,” he argues, is what sells newspapers and movie tickets. Thus even if journalists are serious and well informed—and there are more than a few out there who are not—it is awfully difficult to write about the subject and remain oblivious to that perception. Editors, he says, play on this, because the economics of journalism is “harsh,” competition is “fierce,” and “people have a living to make.”

While Omand’s view may seem a bit cynical, he happens to be right. With the 24-hour “news cycle” brought about by the information age—another theme echoed in several articles—there is too often a temptation to get something in print or on the air first, rather than get it right.

Moreover, the 24-hour news cycle hasn’t resulted in the media doing a better job of covering intelligence or national security. More airtime doesn’t equate to more substantive, more thoughtful, or more accurate reporting. News organizations continue to close foreign bureaus, slash budgets, let go of experienced staff, and devote less attention to coverage of intelligence and national security issues. Omand contends that intelligence agencies have to work for greater public understanding of their role, purpose, and ethics, and greater public confidence in oversight of their secret work “in return for greater understanding of why sources and methods must remain secret.” He also lays out a “golden rule” to which I can readily subscribe from my own experience in dealing with the media: Don’t wait until a crisis hits before trying to communicate.

Among the other fine essays in this anthology is coeditor Robert Dover’s “From Vauxhall Cross with Love,” in which he examines how the US television show *24*, the British drama *Spooks*, and other programs have a “real world impact” in terms of how they help to “condition the public” to think about intelligence, the use of state-sanctioned violence, and counterterrorism. Far from being a “value neutral portrayal of intelligence,” these programs “help create the reality they operate in,” Dover writes. One clear set of messages from these and other programs, he says, is a sense of all-encompassing threat that at any moment in time the United States or the UK could be “brought to its knees by terrorist atrocities.” He says it is no wonder that when polled, the vast majority of Western populations believe that terrorists seek to “end our way of life” and we are engaged in life or death struggle.

In “Bedmates or Sparring Partners,” Tony Campbell, the former head of Canadian intelligence analysis, observes that “broadly speaking” both intelligence and media are in the same business—collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information. But there are “crucial differences” between the institutions in terms of ownership (public vs. private), customer focus (policymakers vs. the public) and modus operandi (closed vs. open). These differences, he says, naturally establish a tension, one that has taken on “vastly greater importance and sensitivity” in recent years because of, among other reasons, the global information revolution and “increased temptation” in democratic governments to politicize intelligence.

In *Spinning Intelligence*, Dover and Goodman achieve what they set out to do; they demonstrate that what they refer to as the “ménage à trois of spooks, hacks, and the public” is worthy of serious attention. As for the question they pose in the afterword—namely, are spies and journalists really that different?—Dover and Goodman conclude by saying that both of them strive to seek knowledge, to increase understanding, and to better inform their consumers.

However, the editors identify a key difference—the implications of being wrong. A journalist can issue an apology (extremely rare) or a correction, but the spy, by contrast, “has far greater weight on their shoulders.” That was true before, and it continues to be the case in the “information age.”

