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Operation Mockingbird — The CIA's History of Media Manipulation



Operation Mockingbird was a CIA program that enlisted more than 400 American journalists, as well as journalists around the world, to manipulate public opinion by spreading propaganda or what we call it today, fake news.

In an era of “fake news” and revelations of Facebook sharing user information to outside sources in an apparent attempt to influence voters for elections, the veracity of what we see in the media is more crucial than ever.

But, is this a new phenomenon?

The CIA's Love Affair With Manipulating News

As far back as the end of World War II, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has played a major role in news media here in the U.S. as well as in foreign nations,





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Operation Mockingbird was an alleged large-scale program within the CIA to manipulate news media for propaganda purposes. The program is thought to have been born out of the CIA's forefather, the Office for Strategic Services (OSS), which existed from 1942 to 1947.

During World War II, Operation Mockingbird had established a network of journalists and psychological warfare experts, operating primarily in the European theatre.

Other possible origins include the early years of the Cold War, which began in 1947, when efforts were made by the governments of the Soviet Union and the United States to use media companies to influence public opinion internationally.

Operation Mockingbird is thought to have officially begun as its own entity in the early 1950s, funding student groups, cultural clubs and magazines as front organizations.

Operation Mockingbird Exposed

Mockingbird's strategies and many ties have since become public knowledge through several high-profile investigations and exposés.

One of the first discoveries of the covert motives of Operation Mockingbird occurred in 1967, when an article in political and literary magazine *Ramparts* reported that the National Student Association received funding from the CIA.

Throughout the next decade, several investigations would probe the CIA's ties with the news media. Among the most prominent reports was writer Carl Bernstein's lengthy 25,000-word cover story detailing Operation Mockingbird, published in *Rolling Stone* on October 20, 1977.

While just a young reporter for *The Washington Post* in 1972, Carl Bernstein had also done much of the original news reporting on the Watergate scandal. After leaving *The Washington Post* in 1977, Bernstein spent six months looking into the relationship between the CIA and the press during the Cold War years.

Bernstein concluded that in the past 25 years, more than 400 American journalists secretly carried out Mockingbird assignments for the CIA, according to documents on-





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Journalists' relationships with the Agency were tacit, while others were explicit.

Some journalists were threatened and blackmailed into cooperating with Mockingbird to promote its messages. Many were given falsified or fabricated information about their actions in order to engender their support for the CIA's mission.

Bernstein reports that by 1953, Operation Mockingbird was directly overseen by CIA Director Allen Dulles. The CIA allegedly had major influence in over 25 U.S. newspapers and wire services. The tactic was straightforward: false news reports or propaganda would be provided by CIA writers to both knowing and unknowing reporters who would simply repeat the falsehoods over and over again.

Operation Mockingbird's Reach

Journalists could also serve as go-betweens with spies in Communist countries. The use of journalists had been among the most productive means of intelligence-gathering employed by the CIA.

Among the companies who lent their cooperation to the Agency were Columbia Broadcasting System, Time Inc., The New York Times, the American Broadcasting Company, the National Broadcasting Company, the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, Hearst Newspapers, Scripps-Howard, Newsweek magazine, the Mutual Broadcasting System, the Miami Herald and the old Saturday Evening Post and New York Herald-Tribune.

How effective was Operation Mockingbird overall in its efforts to control the media in relation to the public or any perceived opposition?

A primary function of Operation Mockingbird was to cover up covert and often illegal foreign operations, including the 1954 overthrowing of the democratic government of President Arbenz in Guatemala. The operation also helped cover up the overthrowing of the democratic Iranian government in 1953 (Operation Ajax) and helped to control the press during the Bay of Pigs U.S. — Cuba fiasco.

Watergate Begins the Decline of Operation Mockingbird

Eventually, the operation would begin to lose its cover. After the Watergate scandal from 1972 to 1974, the U.S. Congress became concerned over possible presidential





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Congress authorized a series of Congressional investigations into Agency activities from 1975 to 1976.

A variety of CIA operations were examined in these investigations, including CIA ties with journalists as well as numerous private voluntary organizations. None of the resulting reports, however, specifically refer to an “Operation Mockingbird.”

The most extensive discussion of CIA relations with news media from these investigations is in Senator Frank Church’s investigation, published in a final report in April 1976. The report covered CIA ties with both foreign and domestic news media. The Church investigations also brought to light the existence of the CIA’s infamous heart attack gun.

The Church report concluded that “The CIA currently maintains a network of several hundred foreign individuals around the world who provide intelligence for the CIA and at times attempt to influence opinion through the use of covert propaganda.” These conclusions would be corroborated by Carl Bernstein’s own published investigation one year later.

Measures were eventually taken to curb Mockingbird’s ties with the media.

Prior to the release of the Church report, the CIA had already begun restricting its use of journalists. According to the report, former CIA director William Colby informed the committee that in 1973, he had issued instructions that “as a general policy, the Agency will not make any clandestine use of staff employees of U.S. publications which have a substantial impact or influence on public opinion.”

In February 1976, CIA Director and eventual U.S. President George H. W. Bush announced an even more restrictive policy: “effective immediately, CIA will not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station.”

Although it’s been several decades later, some theorists believe that the program has never officially discontinued, positing that the consolidation of the multinational for-





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