

Free Speech, Freedom of the Press, and the Tapestry of Lies

Those who know his work will recognize here my debt to John Pilger, journalist and documentary film-maker, who has both informed and inspired me.[\[1\]](#)

On December 7, 2005, sixty-four years to the day after the Japanese attack on the American at Pearl Harbor, Harold Pinter, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, gave his Nobel Lecture, " Art, Truth & Politics". Here is an excerpt from that speech. "In 1958," Pinter said, "I wrote the following:"

'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.'

"I believe that these assertions still make sense," Pinter continued, "and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

Pinter went on to say this:

... language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.

But ... the search for the truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot.

....

Political language, as used by politicians, does not venture into any of this territory since the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. *What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.*[\[2\]](#)

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As every single person here knows, the justification for the invasion of Iraq was that Saddam Hussein possessed a highly dangerous body of weapons of mass destruction, some of which could be fired in 45 minutes, bringing about appalling devastation. We were assured that was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq had a relationship with Al Qaeda and shared responsibility for the atrocity in New York of September 11th 2001. We were assured that this was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq threatened the security of the world. We were assured it was true. It was not true.

The truth is something entirely different. The truth is to do with how the United States understands its role in the world and how it chooses to embody it.

....

I spoke earlier about 'a tapestry of lies' which surrounds us. President Reagan commonly described Nicaragua as a 'totalitarian dungeon'. This was taken generally by the media, and certainly by the British government, as accurate and fair comment. But there was in fact no record of death squads under the Sandinista government. There was no record of torture. There was no record of systematic or official military brutality. No priests were ever murdered in Nicaragua. There were in fact three priests in the government, two Jesuits and a Maryknoll missionary. The totalitarian dungeons were actually next door, in El Salvador and Guatemala. The United States had brought down the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and it is estimated that over 200,000 people had been victims of successive military dictatorships.

Six of the most distinguished Jesuits in the world were viciously murdered at the Central American University in San Salvador in 1989 by a battalion of the Alcatl regiment trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, USA. That extremely brave man Archbishop Romero was assassinated while saying mass. It is estimated that 75,000 people died. Why were they killed? They were killed because they believed a better life was possible and should be achieved. That belief immediately qualified them as communists. They died because they dared to question the status quo, the endless plateau of poverty, disease, degradation and oppression, which had been their birthright.

The United States finally brought down the Sandinista government. It took some years and considerable resistance but relentless economic persecution and 30,000 dead finally undermined the spirit of the Nicaraguan people. They were exhausted and poverty stricken once again. The casinos moved back into the country. Free health and free education were over. Big business returned with a vengeance. 'Democracy' had prevailed.

But this 'policy' was by no means restricted to Central America. It was conducted throughout

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the world. It was never-ending. And it is as if it never happened.

The United States supported and in many cases engendered every right wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile. The horror the United States inflicted upon Chile in 1973 can never be purged and can never be forgiven.

Hundreds of thousands of deaths took place throughout these countries. Did they take place? And are they in all cases attributable to US foreign policy? The answer is yes they did take place and they are attributable to American foreign policy. But you wouldn't know it.

It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest.^[3] The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them. You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis.^[4]

What Pinter was talking about is nothing new. In December, 1917, between David Lloyd George, Britain's prime minister during much of the first world war said to C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, "If people really knew the truth," the prime minister said, "the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know, and can't know." And if you investigate war reporting, at least from the nineteenth century to the present, you will find that insofar as any country engaged in war has a public that can be reached by what we now refer to as "mass media", that public has been lied to about war: cynically, deliberately, and over and over again.^[5]

In weaving this tapestry of lies, the mass media—from *Pravda*, to the *New York Times*, to London's *Mirror* to *Þjóðviljinn* (now deceased) and *Morgunblaðið*—have, over time and considering different examples, variously complicit. (I mention only newspapers here; but radio and television have been equally complicit. A major vector for complicity is the so-called "news services", such as the Associated Press and Reuters, upon which other mass media largely rely for content.) Each new war provides politicians and managers with new

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lessons about how potential embarrassment (i.e. the revelation of truth to the public) in the media can be avoided and the media rendered complicit in weaving the tapestry of lies. In some places, as we know, the media are simply controlled by governments. But, in general, the Western media, treasuring their “press freedom” or “freedom of information”, largely control themselves and may easily be granted their freedom as they present little danger. The public is equally complicit being for the most part thoroughly uncritical insofar as it can rise above its boredom with the news: Pinter speaks of the “vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.” For this purpose, the public, by various devices, must be kept moronized, and this effort seems to have thoroughly succeeded in the United States. It has succeeded less well in Europe, and less effort has been directed to it, politicians being aware that there are limits to how far you can moronize an educated population a significant part of which consist of the still-living remnants of nations that were all-too-recently decimated by war.^[6] Yet, it goes surprisingly well, and politicians can afford to wait until enough of those for whom the destruction of their nations is still a living memory to die off and let the powers that be get on with their business.

My audience here might ask, “OK, but what does this have to do with us? Our politicians have kept us out of wars, not pushed us into them. We do not live in a police state. We have freedom of speech here, and no one is hounded, persecuted or punished for saying whatever they want. Some of our news is censored, or self-censored, by our government or by our media themselves, but this is only light censorship, done for reasons that most of us agree with, and there are no signs that this is eroding press freedom. We don’t swallow American propaganda—or Russian, or British or Qatari—whole, as you can see from the widespread opposition here to the latest murderous suppression in Palestine and the widespread support here for a ‘yes’ vote in Scotland. Our public is pretty well educated and not entirely uncritical.”

All of this is true, dear friends; and it is to be hoped that we Icelanders sincerely appreciate the fact that, as far as these matters go, we live in a paradise as compared with most of the world. Yet we have not kept ourselves far enough distanced from the tapestry of lies and are vulnerable—and complicit. For we unfortunately have a weak Fourth Estate. Our media are docile, politically subservient and thus manipulated—perhaps most of all self-manipulated—and are not dedicated to what is required, at least in a supposedly democratic nation, in the way of getting truth to the public of the sort that is needed in order for the electorate to exercise rationally the power that is supposedly vested in it.

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Although technological developments are rapidly changing things, mass media—ours and others—are, broadly speaking, conduits for four different kinds of things: news, opinion (including especially editorial opinion), entertainment, and advertising. Upon entertainment I will not comment here, although such comment would be relevant.

Advertising is mainly for the purpose of selling goods and services, although politicians and policies are also “sold” through advertising—witness the recent Scottish independence election. In this case, if we are to have a vigilant and independent Fourth Estate, two things must be secured: first, that advertising must not be allowed to be false, misleading or disingenuous, and second, those who advertise—and thus support the media financially, the new generation of “free” newspapers surviving entirely upon this—must not be allowed to influence news reporting. If we want a free press, or free media, these two things must be policed by the media themselves, but self-policing and self-regulation are notoriously weak in most areas where it is spoken of.^[7] In any case, Icelandic media have in no way come close to meeting their responsibilities in these matters. Most of them serve particular political parties and particular lobbies and are therefore compromised in advance with regard to the policing of advertising; but in fact party-independent media do not do much better. To the extent that these two requirements are not met, media are complicit in weaving the tapestry of lies spoken of by Pinter.

Opinion is the area in which media are entitled to be partial to some particular set of views or mouthpieces for party politics. Yet, again, there are two things that are necessary if we are to have the kind of responsible Fourth Estate needed to serve a democracy. First, such opinion as is channeled to the public by the media may not be built upon falsehoods, misrepresentations or even upon deliberate omissions. There are many matters, even in the sciences, that are controversial or uncertain; and where opinion builds upon it, it will take on the uncertainty or controversial nature of the foundation upon which it is built. Opinion that has no foundation should not be transmitted by the media, and I do not see that freedom of opinion or freedom of expression extend inherently to it^[8] although we may choose to grant them. But more pertinently, opinion whose foundation is uncertain or controversial should not be transmitted by the media under the pretense that its foundation is firm and may be taken for granted. For example, if an editor or politician speaks in favor of certain political actions or policies on the basis of the idea that “markets are self-regulating”, it should at least be

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made clear that this idea is not established. And if someone supports imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation in response to the shooting down of Malaysian flight MH 17, it should be made clear that has not been established that the Russians had anything to do with that tragic incident. Otherwise, the opinions transmitted are fraudulent, and the media become again complicit in weaving the tapestry of lies. In this connection, we should keep in mind that Iceland's descent into financial crisis was in large part a media failure; and its possibility of being drawn, one way or another, into the American-NATO agenda for a European war is not negligible (a matter of which most Icelanders seem blissfully unaware.) The responsibility for not transmitting fraudulent opinion rests with the media themselves, and if they cannot control it—noting that such fraudulent opinion may come from their advertisers, political associates, editors or owners—then that invites external control. The freedom of opinion or of expression that I am sure we all support may extend to false or stupid opinion, as John Stuart Mill argued, but I cannot see that it inherently extends to fraudulent opinion.[\[9\]](#)

The second demand is that despite the fact that the media are entitled to be partial as regards opinion, there must—if we are to have a Fourth Estate that serves a democracy as it should—be a forum in the mass media for a suitable variety of opinions in controversial matters. The mass media are the vehicle through which various relevant opinions reach the public, and the publication of opinion is meant to be influential upon policymakers, legislators and the electorate. This is perfectly legitimate—indeed, required in a democracy—insofar as the influence comes from the content of the opinion laid before the public for consideration. But if the influence simply comes from the exclusion of serious contrary opinion, or from the public's being barraged by one kind of view while opposing views are, or by using other tricks of “public relations”—terrorizing the public is currently a popular one—then this is not legitimate. It is perhaps all right for one medium to be thoroughly one-sided, but it is not all right if the national media, taken together, are thoroughly one-sided. Otherwise, national media become complicit in weaving the tapestry of lies. They certainly were in the recent Scottish independence referendum, where the views and arguments of the “yes” group were given little media presence, while the “no” group enjoyed a media barrage and a studied, anti-“yes” terror campaign conducted by leading politicians.[\[10\]](#) In my judgment, the Icelandic media do practically nothing to meet the first of these two demands, while the second demand is served haphazardly and superficially—the “alternatives” are generally restricted to the rather simplistic positions advanced by the political parties. Certainly, there is no systematic effort made by the Icelandic media to secure collectively what is known as “balance”, never mind intelligent balance.

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Finally, but most importantly, nothing that is not conscientiously verified should be transmitted as news—or at least the sources and degree of verification must always be made clear. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of news media to obtain and transmit the information that “the public needs to know” in order to exercise the power that is said to reside in it in a democratic polity. Freedom of the press is not the freedom to misrepresent or distort what is reported as fact, whether by falsification, irresponsibility as to verification, by selectivity or by omission.^[11] In many jurisdictions, witnesses in cases before a court are made to swear to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”, and news reporting that is not dedicated to exactly that is the principle loom on which the tapestry of lies is woven, even when the lies themselves originate from outside of the media.^[12] The American President Obama gave a speech to the United Nations General Assembly the other day that as far as I can see consisted of little more than a mass of egregious lies and misrepresentations.^[13] I think personally that politicians and officials should be forbidden by law to lie to the public. For serious lies, including lies of omission and misrepresentation, they should be driven, by law, from office and perhaps even imprisoned, for it is through such lies that the greatest harms to individuals, nations, and mankind come about.

There is of course no chance at all that legislators—our dear politicians—will ever make laws that take politicians to task for lying, but one can dream. If anyone asks whether this would be a violation of the principle of free speech, my answer is no. Let us consider for a moment some of the more important limitations on the freedom of speech. It does not license perjury. It does not license libel or slander. It does not license academic misconduct, that is, the falsification or fabrication of data or results in a scientific or scholarly report. It does not license false advertising. It does not license falsification of a tax return, application for insurance, or mortgage application; indeed it does not license any sort of fraudulent misrepresentation. It does not license identity theft. It does not license expert testimony that is purposely false or misleading or in reckless disregard of the truth (as for example the infamous report of Frederick Mishkin and Icelandic collaborators on the stability of Icelandic banks^[14]). And so I maintain that it does not license political lying. Thus, in terms of “rights”, the way is open, I believe, to insist that politicians not lie (and to do something about it if they do).

As things stand, however, our mass media are our only protection from the lies, concealments and distortions peddled by our politicians, and the media can only protect us by exposing those lies for what they are, not by transmitting them as news. It is perfectly

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straightforward news to report Obama's speech—he did give that speech—and even to reproduce it verbatim. But this is only *part* of that news; it needs also to be reported, and explicitly documented, that the speech consisted of lies, if it did. Politicians should not be able to transmit lies to the public—sometimes the global public—through the laziness, gullibility, incompetence or complicity of either newsmen or the media that employ them. This has to do with the ethics not only of newsmen but of the mass media as such. And it, too, could be, in principle, rightly backed up by law (as it is partially by the laws of libel). Freedom of the press does not extend to fraudulent news reporting any more than the freedom of speech extends to political lying.

The Icelandic media do not come out well on this score. Since most of them are in cahoots with, or manipulated by, one or another political party, they are uncritical of political lies, at least of their crony politicians. And they devote little effort to insuring non-fraudulent news reporting in any case. They are not assiduous at providing the public with the truths that it needs to know in order for Icelandic democracy to function as any kind of genuine democracy, and they are complacent in the face of all of the tricks that are pulled on the public in order to keep it in ignorance. For instance, when some “scandal” erupts in the news, as happens with upsetting frequency, the first thing that a critical reader should ask herself is, “What is going on that they *don't* want me to pay attention to?” Scandal-mongering is one of the standard ways in which the reporting of news is rendered fraudulent, a diversion. Our politicians, and many of our economists, declare that “they didn't see our financial crisis coming”, and sometimes add that no one could have done so. But even if we believe that *they* didn't see it coming (which I don't), we would *all* have seen it coming if the news media had done the job that they must be expected to do in a democracy. Does anyone remember the legislation that was passed from 1985 onward in order to allow the “asset stripping” of our savings banks (a project that succeeded, by the way)? Did anyone ever know about it in the first place? Was it reported? Was it discussed? Do you think that it was too complex for the average person to understand? Do you think that this kind of omission supports the democratic control of policy or is in the public interest?[\[15\]](#) Thus are our news media complicit in the weaving of the tapestry of lies.

Most of the media exist as private corporations, engaged in news reporting, opinion, advertising and entertainment with the aim of turning a profit. There are of course also state media, but they are run in much the same way as private media, not least because they draw upon the same pool of personnel. This situation may be as it should be, but the way in which

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the media have come to function in society and politics needs to be squarely faced and better taken into account. Like hospitals, insurance companies and courts, there are certain standards that the media must be made to meet, despite (and not least on account of) temptations that may lead them in other directions.

The institutional framework of the media must also be regulated so as not to undermine the demands of their meeting those standards. For instance, the media corporations should not wind up in too few hands. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi is the controlling owner of most of the major Italian media corporations and is doubtless for that reason Italy's most powerful politician. The U.S. media have concentrated in very few hands, and international media moguls, like Rupert Murdoch, own a large number of large media corporations globally. The few controlling owners of mass media all have their own personal and political agendas and become the non-elected controllers of national policies. The idea of a media-controlled democracy doesn't pass the laugh test, especially when the media are themselves controlled by parties whose interests do not run with those of the public (although they can perhaps cozen the public into thinking otherwise in the short run). What I am saying here must be familiar to everyone in my audience and almost banal. Yet, nothing is done about this and the concentration of the media into an ever-smaller number of hands continues. This may seem to be less of a problem in Iceland than in some other places, but we must consider the utter dependence of the Icelandic media on a small number of outlets for all foreign news; and there is nothing in place that would prevent Rupert Murdoch from buying up *all* of the Icelandic private media before the end of this week.

In particular in Iceland, news reporting must be made to conform to the standards of truth, rather than to the interests of party politicians or to any other interests than those of supplying the public in a democratic society with the truths it needs to know in order to make up its mind and exert its influence in our struggle with the present and our course through the future. For, as George Orwell pronounced: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."[\[16\]](#) It would be nice to think that our media will autonomously with these standards, through a respect for democracy and an ambition for professionalism. But at any rate, we, the public, should demand this, whatever our particular political persuasions may be.

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As far as budding journalists are concerned, I'll close with a quotation from the famous American news anchorman, Dan Rather, when explaining in an interview taken by John Pilger why he had failed in his role as a journalist in the case of the Iraq war (the last one, now there's a new one):

. . . I have said, whether those of us in journalism want to admit it or not, then, at least in some small way, fear is present in every news room in the country. A fear of losing your job, a fear of your institution - the company you work for - going out of business, the fear of being stuck with some label, "unpatriotic" or otherwise that you will have with you to your grave and beyond, the fear that there's so much at stake for the country, that by doing what you deeply feel is your job will sometime be interference; all these things go into the mix. But it's very important for me to say, because I firmly believe it: I'm not the Vice-President in Charge of Excuses, and we shouldn't have excuses. What we should do is take a really good look at that period and learn from it. And, you know, suck up our courage.^[17]

[1] Invited lecture presented at the international conference, "Tjáningarfrelsi og félagsleg ábyrgð - Kenningar og útfærsla" (Freedom of Expression and Social Responsibility - Theory and Practice), held at the University of Akureyri on 29 September 2014 and arranged by the Media Studies program and the Faculty of Social Sciences. Those who know his work will recognize here my debt to John Pilger, journalist and documentary film-maker, who has both informed and inspired me.

[2] Emphasis added.

[3] These are the most powerful lines in Pinter's speech and have been frequently quoted, not least by John Pilger.

[4] The full text of Pinter's speech may be read at:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html

[5] For this history, see the film by John Pilger mentioned in footnote 17, below.

[6] Some of these people, particularly the Germans, actually learned something from the Second World War, but, as I go on to indicate, the now-up-coming generations seem to be as clueless as their pre-war ancestors.

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[7] Some instances in which the media have “policed” themselves have been as abusive and repressive as any government would be. See, for example, Paula Cruickshank, “42 Seconds That Sullied Helen Thomas—and New Media”, that can be found at:

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/07/31/42_seconds_that_sullied_helen_thomas_-_and_new_media_119431.html

This article, incidentally, quotes several interesting clauses from the (U.S.) Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, the content of which I believe it would be wise for our own journalists to incorporate into their ethical code. Birgir Guðmundsson informs me that some such has been proposed but that Icelandic journalists have not been willing to adopt.

[8] In the sequel, I call this “fraudulent opinion”.

[9] There is a difference between what is false and what is falsified, or what is unsubstantiated but pretends to be substantiated.

[10] The use of media terror campaigns is well known and a standard device of politicians, as Hermann Göring famously pointed out. In an interview in his cell in Nuremberg on January 3rd, 1946, Göring said “. . . the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship. . . .?[T]he people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. *It works the same way in any country.*” (emphasis added). In Scotland recently, the threat was that of financial ruin; in the Cold War, the threat was the awful, lurking Russian hordes. Today, people in California are apparently terrified of being beheaded by militant Muslims. In short, Göring knew what he was talking about. Of course, as I indicate below, the media should warn the public of genuine threats, as they often do not (as for example, the obvious and verifiable threat of the collapse of the Icelandic banks in 2008, or, earlier, the riskiness of buying DeCode stock); but they should not uncritically communicate the threats manufactured for mass consumption by politicians and demagogues.

[11] In this paper, as the reader should easily understand, I use the term “lie” as an abbreviation for all of these sorts of misrepresentation.

[12] It is perhaps important to emphasize that it is often not possible to discern the truth; and in certain cases there may be no truth to discern, although I draw the reader’s attention to the opening passages of Pinter’s Nobel speech. Obviously, the media cannot be expected to arrive at the truth in such cases. But what it can do is to inform its audience either that the truth cannot be discerned or that there may be no truth to discern. The important thing is not to represent things to be more or less evident than they are and to educate the public.

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[13] Speech of 24 September 2014; full text available here: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/11119048/Full-text-of-Barack-Obamas-speech-to-the-UN-General-Assembly.html>

The then-Secretary-of-State, Colin Powell, delivered an even more egregious fabrication to a plenary session of the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, concerning Saddam Hussein's supposed collection of "weapons of mass destruction". The media did not do their job—it would have been easy enough to expose this fraud for what it was—and Powell's ploy worked so well that it was doubtless an inspiration to Obama. The fraudulence of Powell's performance has been richly documented. As for Obama's speech, one has to assess the few kernels of information about current events that may be considered reliable, or tentatively reliable, in a morass of propaganda, channeled by the media, the like of which has been rarely seen. These few items reveal Obama's speech to be thoroughly fraudulent.

[14] Frederic S. Mishkin and Tryggvi T. Herbertsson, "Financial Stability in Iceland" (Reykjavík: Icelandic Chamber of Commerce, 2006). The report is available at: <http://www.vi.is/files/555877819Financial%20Stability%20in%20Iceland%20Screen%20Version.pdf>

Warnings from competent sources—including Fitch, Merrill Lynch (rather ironically) and the Danske Bank—were coming from all directions at the time. But without having to understand any technicalities, it was clear that the banks were so highly leveraged (i.e. had issued loans that far surpassed their assets) that any small contraction in the interbank credit market (practically inevitable) would cause them instantly to collapse.

[15] The first real analysis of this process that I know of appeared not in the media but in an MA thesis in sociology by Þorvaldur Logason, *Valdselítur og spilling: um spillingarorsakir hrunsins á Íslandi 2008* (University of Iceland, 2011). The Icelandic National Broadcast (RÚV) ran a short program in 2013 about the projected publication of a book (yet to be published) based upon the thesis, which is how I learned about the matter. Þorvaldur says that there was some minor media coverage around 2001-2002, which certainly passed me by. But this dangerous attempt to appropriate the assets of the savings banks should have received intensive, analytical coverage. Suppose someone thinks that Þorvaldur's analysis and critique was mistaken. The point remains: there should have been detailed coverage and a public discussion. By 2008, it was far too late.

[16] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Part 3, Chapter 2. This book, originally published in 1949, is available in many editions and is in the process of entering the public domain.

[17] Transcribed from the sound track of John Pilger's documentary film, "The War You Don't See" (2011). The film (along with most of Pilger's other films) can be viewed at <http://johnpilger.com/videos> and is highly recommended for anyone interested in the responsibility that attaches to the freedom of the media.

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