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## The Tyranny of Official Editors: An Interview with Matthew Alford

Matthew Alford  
Lecturer & Author  
University of Bath

Daniel Broudy  
Professor  
Okinawa Christian University

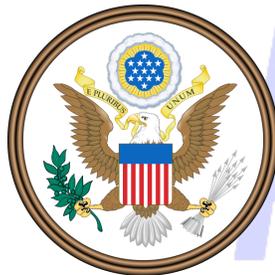
The following interview with Matthew Alford aims to expand on some major themes in his book 'Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy' (Pluto Press, 2010), by revisiting recent individual challenges to American political and corporate power. Among today's pressing questions for common citizens are: how do these centers of power operate to protect the prevailing order and what kinds of propaganda must be manufactured and disseminated to achieve those ends? Dr. Alford postulates that although our problems stem from impersonal systems of coercion, we should not neglect the fact that these systems comprise real people with the influence and interest to edit society's key truths.

Propaganda Model | Hollywood | power |  
cinema | agenda setting | democracy

*Daniel Broudy: In your book, you explored how popular cinema reflects broader systems of power. How would you define the concept of power today, and what images and/or metaphors does US power, in particular, evoke for you?*

Matthew Alford: Let me deal with the metaphor part of the question first.

The official symbol of the United States is the Bald Eagle. A 'top predator' simultaneously carrying arrows and olive branches seems like a pretty accurate logo to me. If the Republic had been formed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps the Presidential Seal could have featured a Reaper drone.



Popular culture also provides us with metaphors for power, though they are invariably airbrushed to suit commercial and political interests. For example, Sly Stallone's John Rambo character functions as an emblem for the American nation – benevolent, reluctantly violent, muscle-bound, victimised.

If you're looking for accuracy, though, Rambo is a shaky metaphor for the US. Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* is closer to the truth.

I was interested to see Wikileaks founder Julian Assange evoking Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when he wrote about US tech giants: "If you want a vision of the future," he said,

"imagine Washington-backed Google Glasses strapped onto vacant human faces – forever."

Well, at least that'd be better than Orwell's stamping boot but you get the picture.

DB: *And what about the concept itself?*

MA: Power is the ability to influence behaviour. As Steven Lukes observed, it's best to understand the imposition of power at a systemic level. However, I think it's important – particularly as researchers and journalists doing original work – not to neglect the importance of Lukes' first face of power.

So, from my field, consider the ongoing personal impact of media moguls on the politics of entertainment. For example, following the release of the subversive film *Fight Club* (1999), NewsCorp's notoriously conservative boss Rupert Murdoch personally and quietly took steps to ensure that products with such a 'dark tone' would never again emerge from his studio.



In other words, individuals do matter – we are not simply dealing with depersonalised capitalist forces.

The problem whenever power, rather than authority, is introduced into a relationship – whether personal or institutional – is that it has to be backed up by coercion, and this invariably becomes abusive. This should always be opposed.

I am not advocating particularly major change with unpredictable outcomes. For example, I do not think that there's anything wrong with the world operating under market principles – it's just that this market should be a bit more like a jumble sale and a bit less like an arms bazaar.

DB: *I've had countless conversations with people working in the US military in Korea and Japan and am constantly struck by the common and seamless themes woven into their perspectives on the supposed necessity of the American global military presence. Themes of protecting good against whatever kinds of evil appear to abide in so many films I've seen and dialogues I've participated in. I wonder about the extent to which service members' views are molded by today's Hollywood narratives.*

MA: The common sense view I hear time and again is that

without the American will to protect its empire, other nations like Russia and China would fill the power vacuum, be less mindful of human rights, and indeed be more liable to risk war with the US and each other. These are legitimate concerns expressed by ordinary people, including many in the military, and sometimes they even tally with the truth.

The major flaw with this argument though is that in numerous key regions, including Israel/Palestinian territories, Iran, and Korea, one of the main institutions standing in the way of peace, security, and democratic reforms is the US itself. Since this information is so poorly elucidated by the mass media, the vast majority of us are understandably liable to give passive support to 'the devil we know'.

Hollywood plays its part in this fairy tale vision of the West. The default position for commercial cinema is to present the US as a benevolent, even saintly, entity. You'll recognise this if you've seen blockbusters like *Air Force One* (1997) or *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) in which the leading heroes of the narrative are representatives of executive office from the real world.

The default position is to show that the political system functions and should be exalted. It's doubly important because this sanitisation of 'our' power systems applies to fictionalised representations of real world events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (*13 Days* (2001)), and Israel's Operation Wrath of God (*Munich* (2005)), and the US' campaign to kill Osama bin Laden (*Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)).

*DB: I recently read an interview featuring a young Okinawan researcher examining America's post-WWII history in Okinawa and posing hard questions to her interviewee – a mid-level Marine fresh from an Afghanistan battlefield. During the interview, he insisted that Japan "got what it deserved" during the war. Asked to support his view, he cited the 2001 movie Pearl Harbor. At that, she shrugged her shoulders in disbelief, wondering how a grown man could get his history from a melodramatic Hollywood production. I noticed in your extremely thorough examination of Hollywood's cinematic power that the 2001 release of Pearl Harbor failed to make the cut. Any particular reason?*

*MA: I do mention Pearl Harbor briefly in the book. I did not think it warranted much further commentary because it was already one of the most derided films of the Millennium. Pearl Harbor was, of course, supported by the Department of Defense and even made with the connivance of Secretary of Defense William Cohen.*

*DB: It's just that Pearl Harbor perpetuated a lot of myths about World War II?*

*MA: Yes, and these kinds of myths are left to fester – or encouraged to fester – all the time. Often the myths are much more seriously sanitized than those in Pearl Harbor.*

Take *Windtalkers* (2002), which is similarly set in WWII in which Nicolas Cage sacrifices himself to save Navajo soldiers. The Pentagon – which the credits thank for its "crucial assistance" – ensured that the film did not explicitly say that the Marine command ordered its men to kill the Navajo if captured, even though this is an historical fact established by Congress.

The original script also has a Marine stabbing a dead Japanese soldier in the mouth to retrieve a gold filling. "The activity is 'unMarine'," said the Department of Defense, insisting on its removal and trying to pin the blame for such activities on conscripts, even though the National Archives has footage of a Marine yanking teeth from the jaw of a dead Japanese soldier.



The original script has Cage kill an injured Japanese soldier who is attempting to surrender by blasting the soldier with a flame-thrower. The Department of Defense complained; the scene was eliminated.

Another scene, where a Marine is brutally shot in the back by Japanese whilst he is handing out chocolates to children, is left in for our viewing pleasure.

I actually had to interview a senior industry figure who worked on *Windtalkers*, so I felt I should admit in a somewhat apologetic tone that my book had been very critical of the film. He responded to me: "nothing you can say can be worse than what I personally feel about *Windtalkers*".

As is so often true, you can have a hundred million dollar budget movie and even its makers know that it's politically and creatively just total drivel.

*DB: But the Pentagon does not always have the chance to edit important footage, does it? I imagine it was not a very pleasurable time for the DoD when it could not edit the public's viewing of Bradley Manning's "Collateral Damage".*

I'm wary of seeing Manning's efforts as a kind of victory, though it caused some discomfort amongst the military brass. At the end of the day, no one was even punished at the

Pentagon, Manning languishes in jail for a victimless crime, and the Iraqis in that video still lie cold in the ground.

The struggle for justice is theatrical – never more so than with the Wikileaks saga – but it is also very real, and our collective objective must be for justice to prevail, not to make a few generals blow a heart valve.

There's a danger, incidentally, in celebrating occasional examples of critical material in the media.

Two examples come to mind in relation to Rupert Murdoch's *Twentieth Century Fox*. In 2010, the British graffiti artist Banksy designed the opening sequence for an episode of *The Simpsons*, which showed *Simpsons* merchandise being made in comically brutal sweatshops. The result? Some brief excitement amongst politically-minded people. Otherwise, not much. Maybe it even gave the impression that the upper-management of NewsCorp were rather tolerant and encouraging of diversity.



Similarly, although the Fox movie *Avatar* (2009) was widely received as a shocking liberal attack on US militarism, Murdoch's own first comments after seeing the film were that it would be good to use the 3D technology on Sky's football games.

In other words, progressive change has to come through fundamental changes to corporate and political systems, and we should be careful of these 'inoculations' or 'media mirages' along the way.

*DB: In a 2012 article with Tricia Jenkins, you lower your sights on the CIA and its "work" in Hollywood. At one point, you suggest that Hollywood doesn't necessarily endorse capitalism as much as the security perspective of foreign policy (pp. 93-4). It seems to me that such a perspective develops from people in positions of power sworn by institutional or political policies, or by brute economics, to maintain the system. As you know, Dwight Eisenhower named this system the military-industrial complex. In light of Edward Snowden's revelations, what can we call this system today?*

MA: There are a couple of points to address there, Dan. Firstly, Hollywood does endorse capitalism; it epitomises

capitalism. It just is not consciously compelled to do so by the government. The government is much more concerned about the representation of military power, lest that pitiful gathering of liberal celebrity activists actually ever coalesce into something remotely meaningful.

Secondly, what do we call this collaborative nexus? Some scholars have used the term 'military-industrial-entertainment-media' complex but, since President Eisenhower's original draft of his "military-industrial-complex" speech was also supposed to include Congress, for me the terminology just gets a bit, *errr*, complex. I prefer just to say that so-called 'national security' organisations such as the CIA, NSA, and Armed Forces routinely harbour illegitimate concentrations of power.

Again, maybe we can think of this more easily in pictures. David Edwards from Media Lens told me he sees "the US corporate-military complex as a handsome guy in a dark suit with a face like Jon Hamm from *Mad Men* – broad, warm smile; hand outstretched for shaking. As you get closer you realise the 'face' is hanging loose; in fact it's a mask. Beneath the mask there is a featureless, smooth surface without eyes, mouth or nose". In other words, the system is best represented as Joel Bakan's psychopath from *The Corporation*.



*DB: A sobering metaphor for today's vast security state, to be sure! It's funny though – in a theatre of the absurd sort of way – that we feel some measure of security by the masked men and women of Anonymous working in concert across the globe against tyranny. How did we arrive at this intersection in history where publics shrink in democracy from their duties of citizenship?*

If the public is anything like me, they'll struggle to motivate themselves to mow the lawn, let alone organise themselves against a vast plutocracy. So I think the blame should be less on ordinary people and more on the liars and killers.

That said, I think President Kennedy's aphorism – "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind" – has been much neglected by the media and people in general since the end of the Cold War. It was neglected by Kennedy too, of course, but that's another story! My point is that quite apart from the moral imperative to stop large-scale abuses of power, there is also the question of our own prosperity and survival. We are only ever one big, bad decision away from war with a rival – be it Iran, Pakistan

(both of whom with which we have come close to direct war over the past five years) or even Russia (with which our relationship has been on a downward spiral for twenty years and looks set to worsen still) – that has the potential to lead to body bags on the soil of our own countries and that of our allies.

In fact, I must be the only person who opposed the 2003 Iraq War on the grounds that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction (though we ultimately discovered this wasn't the case at all). I opposed it for the usual reasons too. But the idea that we should fight a country *only if* they have incredibly dangerous weapons, with which they can retaliate immediately, seemed somewhat twisted to me. Invading Iraq was a massive crime, but if Baghdad had anything like the weaponry the West had alleged, the invasion would have been *suicidal* to boot – with Israel in the firing line for starters. Although the public's anger at the Iraq War has helped dissuade the US from so-far striking Iran with shock and awe, the political currents could quickly turn – unless we can ditch this knee-jerk assumption that it's somehow sensible to initiate the destruction sequence for any country that is on the brink of manufacturing WMD. It's just not.

And that brings us back to the Bald Eagle. Because hidden in the details of these key international relationships, we can see the US acting in bad faith at every turn. It likes us all to believe it is holding out the olive branches but all it has is a talon-full of arrows.

*DB: Returning to your earlier point concerning the various names that have been applied to this complex, or system, could you expand briefly on why you feel these are not legitimate forms of power?*

MA: Legitimacy develops from consensus, transparency, honesty, rationality, and adherence to constitutional and international laws – none of which well describes the likes of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Netanyahu, or upper management in the CIA, NSA and corporations like NewsCorp.

Etched into the CIA's wall at its Langley headquarters is a biblical verse from the Gospel of John: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". What truth? The CIA and NSA is run by a shady bunch of lawyers without the slightest concern for telling the truth.

It all reminds me that an organisation's marketing slogan has a tendency to highlight its most glaring fault: "Fair and balanced" (Fox News); "Have it your way" (Burger King); "More music variety" (Heart FM); "Everyone gets what they deserve" (Buchenwald).

The CIA has about as much legitimacy as Chicken McNuggets.

*DB: Given the sorts of prevailing media narratives currently being developed to frame consumers' understanding and opinions of Edward Snowden/Wikileaks, what can Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model tell us about this system you're talking about?*

MA: In the case of Snowden, the media cannot bring itself to just 'enjoy crushing bastards' (as Julian Assange nicely put it). Rather, it has to play the game of 'balanced' reporting, within narrow ideological lines, as though the US has one iota of legitimacy in its posture. So everything is about Assange as a character. "The 'Spy' Who Loved Himself" was one headline, with the article posing the question "Are the courageous efforts of individuals like Edward Snowden being reduced to spy games?" The obvious answer is "Yes, they are, but by the media itself."

*DB: I wonder what sorts of realistic Hollywood film narratives, if any, will develop around these scandals in the future.*

MA: Alex Gibney's *We Sell Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks* came out in 2013. It's a documentary but follows the same formula as a piece of entertainment, which has inevitably twisted and compromised the message.

I've had some experience myself with this political declawing in film production. I worked with a director for a documentary film called *The Writer with No Hands* (2014) about alleged government assassinations. The post-production process was two years of gear-grinding agony because the director wanted to make a piece of entertainment for a mass market, which necessitated – in his eyes – diminishing the political content and using subtle editing techniques to make me into a bogus 'character' with a 'narrative arc'.

I doubt that films about Assange will be conceived with the aim of destroying him but the results will no doubt be similar. Commercial filmmakers – even accomplished independent ones like Gibney – just feel the need to operate like this: minimal accountability, moral framework and political content; maximal characterisation, story, and a challenging angle at all costs.

*DB: The Propaganda Model was first advanced in the 1980s. How can it be used to help us understand contemporary film and Hollywood cinema today?*

MA: The Propaganda Model is more relevant today than in 1988, both as applied to news and entertainment media. For example, there has been a constriction in media ownership

over the past three decades. Ben Bagdikian explains that whereas just one generation ago the individuals who owned the media could fit in a 'modest hotel ballroom,' the same owners could now fit into a 'generous phone booth'. I think we should be extending this metaphor much more frequently to ask, 'Who are they ringing, how effectively, and why?'

It's this kind of approach that led to the Leveson phone hacking enquiry and, although that has its flaws and limits, ultimately it is the simplest way to call corporations to account and, if necessary, lead to their dissolution.

*DB: Do contemporary films reflect modern systems of power, in your view? Are they part of much broader power structures?*

MA: Yes, in that a significant body of the most expensive movie productions broadly reflect the interests and worldview of the political and media elites. The Defense Department worked on productions like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Battleship* (2012), and *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011). Likewise with the *Superman* (2013) reboot, which also generated recruitment adverts for the National Guard on the grounds that "One American icon inspires another".

But Hollywood is also a broad church. I do, occasionally, watch something that I actually want to watch, you know.



*DB: Democracy is predicated upon the notion of an informed electorate, and progressive social change is contingent upon asking hard questions. What role does Hollywood play within this equation? What would you identify as some of the most important issues and dynamics they ought to focus their attentions upon? And in what ways can students and scholars apply the PM to motion pictures*

MA: The historian Ben Urwand recently used fresh archives<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For details on Urwand's research visit: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-hollywood-helped-hitler-595684?page=show>

to expose ties between Hitler and Hollywood, whose research began when he noted the absence of Hollywood movies about the Nazis throughout the 1930s and the suppression of a screenplay *The Mad Dog of Europe* in 1933. This kind of thing is worthwhile.

Applying the PM itself is, I think, unnecessary. I'll elaborate on this later if you like.

*DB: Please do ...*

MA: ... As for Hollywood itself, I don't actually think it "ought" to apply itself to "progressive social change". That's up to filmmakers and their audiences. But equally the CIA, White House, and Pentagon do not have the right to push covertly for regressive messages on screen either.

Nor is it reasonable or healthy that the same half a dozen giant media conglomerates dominate all fields of entertainment (and news) at the expense of creative diversity.

So I think some changes are a matter of urgency at a policy level and these could be fairly modest. For example, if filmmakers work with the government they should have to declare this by law at the start of the opening credits: "This film was produced in collaboration with the CIA/White House/Department of Defense and therefore subject to their amendments". See how long the practice lasts then.

*DB: These lines you're drawing connect with your earlier call for greater honesty and transparency. They remind me, too, of the public's periodic calls for politicians to wear the logos of their corporate sponsors so that citizens can better understand where the real interest in new legislation lies. So, how have you formally modified the PM to include the study of film?*

MA: The modifications are fairly minor – the 'advertising' filter needs to account for product placement and the commercialisation/standardisation of the industry, and the fifth filter requires more emphasis on the role of demonising foreigners rather than in exalting the wonders of the free market.

*DB: Does the propaganda model have universal applicability, in your view? Why or why not?*

MA: It does, in the sense that it is very difficult to do lucrative work that challenges state and private power, within a commercial, cultural industry. Even Karl Marx couldn't do it. I tried to do it myself: Pluto Press and I marketed my anti-Hollywood book as keenly and thoroughly as we could and I

made tuppence. To earn enough money to survive, your job cannot be to critique and protest the system at a fundamental level with facts or theories.

The exceptions to this are so few that you could meet the lot of them at the Ecuadorian embassy Christmas disco.

In fact, that highlights a secondary point – if you actually do break the mould, be prepared for real persecution. The most serious whistleblowers don't just end up penniless; they end up in makeshift prisons – embassies, briggs, and airports. So far it seems that Western civilisation is still generous enough to allow them to remain alive in these boxes, although suspicious deaths like that of *Rolling Stone* journalist Michael Hastings may rightly make us double-take.

But the Propaganda Model is less useful in the sense that for vast swathes of culture, governmental concentrations of power are not a direct source of either information or flak and it does not readily differentiate between the seriousness of the propaganda messages, meaning that the model is just too blunt an instrument to explain its de-radicalisation. Rage Against the Machine can happily exist alongside New Kids on the Block, and neither is a spokesman for the state or Sony.

This is one of the main reasons why I cannot see much use in continuing to pursue the Propaganda Model. As Herman admitted, the model is a “first approximation” and really the work is now done – thanks to Jeff Klaehn in no small part, actually. My third and final article on the model will be published in Alison Edgley's new volume on Chomsky in 2014/15.

I suppose it's still worth defending the model against mud-slingers, but the model itself is so well-honed now that it should simply be in the 101 for every Politics, Media, Film, American Studies, and Cultural Studies undergraduate programme in the Western world.

*DB: You've said much about what these power structures are, how they work in Hollywood (and by extension in corporate media), as well as how pervasive and significant their influences are on society. Public discourse today is rife with talk of a growing chasm between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Citizens feel increasingly marginalized in the face of these powerful forces setting the agenda and boundaries of the expressible. Do you feel there's a way out of this condition?*

*MA: The way out is what retired British MP Tony Benn calls the most revolutionary idea of all: democracy. It requires, of course, massive non-violent public pressure. We just need more and more people to believe in democracy – genuine democracy – and keep acting on it at every opportunity.*

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## Bios



**Matthew Alford** earned his PhD from the University of Bath in 2008 where he now lectures on courses in Sociology, Film, Media, and Politics. He has also taught at the **University of Bristol**. His work focuses on the relationship between entertainment, political power, and propaganda in the United States and has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as

**Scope: An Online Journal of Film and TV Studies**, Westminster Papers for Communication and Culture, and 49th Parallel, as well as in feature articles for the Guardian and New Statesman. Dr. Alford has been interviewed as an expert on Hollywood propaganda for publications and broadcasters including **Vanity Fair**, **BBC**, **Russia Today**, **Press TV** and Al Jazeera.

**Daniel Broudy** studied rhetoric and linguistics at Deakin University where he earned a doctorate in 2007. He has been a lecturer at The University of Maryland University College and is presently Professor of Rhetoric and Applied Linguistics at Okinawa Christian University. He is coauthor of the 2010 book, *Rhetorical Rape: The Verbal Violations of the Punditocracy* and co-editor of the 2013 book, *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*. His scholarly work has appeared in **System**, **The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus**, and *Synaesthesia* journal. He is currently co-editing with Jeffery Klaehn a new volume focused on Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's “Propaganda Model,” due out in the spring of 2014.