

Investigative journalist Abby Martin and the challenge of enquiry

Broadcasting dissent





Dawit Abebe, *X-Privacy IV* (2014)

“ART DEFINED MY EARLY CHILDHOOD AND SHAPED MUCH OF MY DEVELOPMENT”

‘We are here for your fucking freedom!’ a US soldier bellows, pointing a gun at a crowd of sceptical locals. The nineteenth-century concept of manifest destiny propelled American settlers across the expanse of their own fledgling country, and its legacy lives on in modern-day Fallujah.

It’s easy to see how the less-sullied manifest destiny of earlier times, which powered the penetration of the west, farming and building along the way, remains an important aspect of the American psyche, how it served as moral engine to the unification of both coasts and the completion of a country according to a utopian idea of the rural idyll following revolution and civil war. This concept underpinned the creation of the modern world’s most powerful nation state, a new Rome.

More recently, manifest destiny has become associated with the American dream. We might claim that it operates abroad as the moral justification for America’s self-styled stewardship of the world, but James Truslow Adams’s ‘American Dream’ is still remarkably effective at keeping the folks at home busy. The idea that people, as a result of their individual qualities, should achieve happiness, and that such happiness is inextricably dependent on wealth creation, personal property and status defies actual experience, yet the dream endures. (There is a Randian sting, though - if you don’t achieve this happiness, perhaps you lack the necessary intrinsic qualities. It might simply be that you are a loser, and are thus culpable for your own dire situation.)

Decency, fairness and co-operation are not alien to America, but perhaps the increasingly aggressive intervention of American interests abroad and the American dream’s tendency to offer false hope to its own people mean that the only way to preserve America’s egalitarian qualities is to commit an act of heresy towards what has become a toxic mix of ideologies.

What is modern dissent? In the 2016 presidential election, 48.2%¹ of voters went with Hillary and, effectively, oppose the presidency of Donald Trump (who

won 46.1% of the votes). Yet much of their consternation appears to be based not on fact but on opinion, opinion derived from tastemakers, shallow pundits and colourful memes. Vociferous popular disapproval did nothing to prevent Trump’s election. Could it be that when people are bombarded by inflammatory messages, polarising hyperbole and downright lies they lose faith in the power and function of facts and truth? We have witnessed the depressing spectacle of Donald Trump effectively defeating journalism by making the truth irrelevant, by subordinating it to advertising tag-line rhetoric: ‘Make America Great Again!’

How then can we begin to reinstate the credibility of journalism? And how can we help people to develop meaningful analytical skills rather than encouraging reaction junkies whose rational thinking evaporates on contact with propaganda? Might we be able to balance our diet of information by looking to newer and more dynamic sources to redress our deficiencies?

Abby Martin is an investigative journalist, news presenter and activist best known for her forthright, engaging and confrontational style.

Her journalistic and media credentials are eclectic and varied: she has worked on presidential campaigns, appeared on Joe Rogan’s podcast, interviewed the president of Ecuador, and lent her voice to the band KMFDM on their album *Hell Yeah*. Her involvement in three documentary films - 99%: *The Occupy Wall Street Collaborative Film* (2013), *Project Censored, the Movie* (2013) and *The Choice Is Ours* (2016) - has engaged a wider audience, while the main thrust of her activities over the last ten years has been investigative journalism and critical analysis of the mainstream media.

In 2009 Martin founded Media Roots (a platform for citizen journalism), aiming to increase non-professional involvement in new, and traditional, media. A spell covering the Occupy Oakland actions, part of the wider



Dawit Abebe, *Mutual Identity V* (2014)

Occupy Wall Street movement, evolved by 2012 into her role hosting *Breaking the Set* on RT America (a Russian-backed America-based TV network that blends criticism of mainstream media with investigative journalism). Biased? Not exactly. Martin gained widespread coverage in 2014 when she closed an episode of *Breaking the Set* with a clear condemnation of Russia's activity in Ukraine. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, not without comment, the show came to an end soon afterwards.)

In 2015 Martin began working with journalist and activist Michael Prysner, creating *The Empire Files*, a programme that seeks to expose widespread corruption, inequality and proxy war and how they fit into the underlying motivations of state power.

She is also an artist, and says that her psychedelic paintings help her to process some of the more harrowing and depressing aspects of modern life.

Described as 'vibrant, artistic and outspoken' by the writer Jeremy Koss² and featured as a kind of corporate dragon slayer in *Millennial Magazine*³, Abby Martin is doing what many like-minded intellectuals and activists have failed to do: she makes the ugly and sometimes invisible machinations of modern Western power dynamic and interesting for a growing audience outside academic circles - an audience that she has helped to create and educate. This mirrors, echoes and highlights the current struggle for journalism's soul. Is it to be a part of the

apparatus of accountability within society? Or will it be co-opted into the growing arsenal of state propaganda?

Broadly critical of American power and the ways it has spread and perpetuated so-called American interests, Martin posits these priorities as fundamentally those of an elite that presides over a manipulated public by means of distraction, outright lies and 'divide and conquer' techniques. These are cynically bolstered by a mainstream media, which she seeks to undermine and move away from in her own work.

An eternal hindrance to the voice of the independent TV journalist is the conservative remit of the channel or network. Much worse, though, is an uninterested and unreachable public. YouTube and social media, and finding less-rigid backing, have been essential in her quest to deliver unfiltered content to her audience. Though it was a Russian-backed television channel that brought Abby Martin to the public eye, she proved that the hand that feeds can still be bitten. In her on-air statement about Putin's annexation of Crimea, she minced no words:

Just because I work here, for RT, doesn't mean I don't have editorial independence, and I can't stress enough how strongly I am against any military intervention in a sovereign nation's affairs. What Russia did is wrong. - Abby Martin, Breaking the Set (broadcast 3 March 2014)

“WE DON’T LIVE IN A DEMOCRACY, WE LIVE IN AN OLIGARCHY - A SYSTEM RUN BY A SMALL GROUP OF VERY WEALTHY PEOPLE. ”

This is indicative of a consistent (and laudable) streak of defiance which seems to run straight through this journalist, who upset Zionists while in the Middle East and received death threats while working in Latin America. If such is the price of her attitude, then the reward is a far greater level of agency as a journalist. Speaking of teleSUR, the channel which hosts *The Empire Files*, Martin makes the relationship plain: ‘The show is totally independent of teleSUR . . . We merely sell them the content; they have zero control over anything we do.’⁴

Fifty years on from the 1968 student uprisings, in a period of unprecedented tumult and critical awareness in America, *Trebuchet* talks to Abby Martin with a hopeful, if wary, interest in hearing her take on reporting, journalism, politics and art.

Abby Martin: America had never seen that kind of people power before, where millions of student and youth activists took to the streets to demand an end to the imperial war machine.

Yet the obvious fact is that their lives were literally on the line with the implementation of the draft. Today, the military industrial complex has become much more efficient. It’s privatised the armed forces to eliminate the need for the draft. The death and misery wrought by the US Empire is largely outsourced around the world, and has little effect on its population today.

Unfortunately, I think things in the US have to get a lot worse before we have another show of force in the streets like that to truly bring politicians to heel.

Is it true that if you show people the truth of what’s going on there will be change simply don’t care. Is there a difference between the American public as opposed to the American state?

It’s a conundrum. As someone who has dedicated their entire professional life to exposing the evils and wrongdoings of their government, it’s hard for me to accept that people may just be too cynical to care, even if they knew how bad things really were.

I do think the majority of people in this country are thirsty for knowledge, that they want to understand how corrupt the system is and to change the world for the better. But people are disillusioned and disempowered for a good reason. We don’t live in a democracy, we live in an oligarchy - a system run by a small group of influential very wealthy people.

A 2014 Princeton study⁵ shows us that the chance of any legislation passing is only 30%, even if 100% of Americans support it, because of the corporate stranglehold on the legislative process. James D’Angelo of the Congressional Research Institute has looked at the way transparency has been weaponised in our society to actually reinforce corporate power. Americans are fooled into thinking that the visibility of Congressional voting makes the representatives accountable to their constituencies, yet it only makes them accountable to their corporate donors.

As Goethe famously said, ‘The best slave is the one who thinks he is free’ - the perfect recipe to control society is to make people believe they have free will when really the parameters of the system will never allow true change to actually occur.

You have said that you first became critically aware when your high-school boyfriend went to war, which led you to question the state’s actions. Before that point, growing up in materialistic 1990s America, what were the influences on you and how did you avoid all that Reagan-era propaganda?

I didn’t avoid the hyper individualism of the Reagan era. I was sucked into mindless consumption, like all teenage girls, an immature narcissist who tried too hard to fit into the crowd. I lived in a predominantly white neighbourhood but was lucky enough to be in the Bay Area, with tons of access to diverse circles and intellectual stimuli.



I grew up in a staunchly democratic household, so I considered myself a liberal without really knowing what that meant. I was vaguely aware of international and domestic issues beyond my own purview but I never considered myself politically awakened until 9/11.

Which came first, your art or your politics?

Art defined my early childhood and shaped much of my development. My brother was a fantastic comic artist, my mother a painter and ingenious crafter. My grandparents had a ceramics studio in their garage that we would work in every other day, doing everything from creating the moulds to firing the kiln. I always loved drawing, and would keep ten-plus books at all times that I was constantly drawing strips and characters in. When some of my art got featured in my favourite *Archie* comic, it inspired me to continue creating. It was always just a side hobby until let myself go and started to let it flow without thinking about my intentions. I cultivated my own abstract style, which eventually evolved into more refined collages.

Politics came next, and still inspires many of my artworks. I haven't been able to focus much on art since beginning *The Empire Files*, so I try to use it at least therapeutically to de-stress about the depressing-as-hell shit I'm immersed in on a daily basis!

What drives you to keep working in the manner you do, to remain direct and questioning?

Seeing the complete lack of pointed questioning and honesty in today's media landscape inspires me to continue being as direct as possible, including about my own opinions. Objectivity in journalism has always been an illusion, so I would much rather know the bias of those I am getting my news from. This can be extremely off-putting to some, yet refreshing to others who are tired of seeing plastic anchors robotically discuss the 'trivial' issues of life and death.

When I worked at Russia Today, it was fun to emulate the look of a mainstream anchor but then 'break the set' both literally and figuratively by railing against the world. I was trying to challenge the stereotype of the ornamental female sidekick. But I've always faced constant attacks no matter what, just as a woman putting myself out there. I have hundreds of emails saved from men overtly sexualising me, generously offering to 'teach me' how to speak and do my job better, from tokenisation to being told I'm too angry, through to stalking and straight-up death/rape threats.

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Why did you choose broadcasting rather than another form of investigative journalism? Was it the best way to delve into the topics you were interested in (and to reach a wide audience)?

When I woke up to the fact that the corporate media served as an arm of the government and would always line up behind the establishment to sell the next military exploit, I knew that the problem extended far beyond one political party.

My passion for a free and open media arose out of the realisation that no matter what the issue, no one will hear the message unless a forum exists to share it. Ninety per cent of everything Americans see, hear and read is owned by only six massive corporations. Only about 120 or so people serve on the boards of those corporations, and they also serve on interlocking boards of other interests from weapons to oil. This massive conflict of interest and media censorship begat the widespread distrust in mainstream media that Trump's 'fake news' phenomenon capitalised on.

We must continue to inject sanity into the discussion, and provide analysis about how we got here without succumbing to blind loyalty to the institutions that got us here in the first place.

You generated a large amount of criticism for your candid *vox pops* in Israel. What led to the outcry?

I spent a month in the West Bank in 2016 and it was the most important experience of my life. The entire region

is under brutal occupation and Israeli military law, which bans any sort of resistance, even non-violent protest. Today, the remaining Palestinian territory is shrinking, encroached on by rapidly expanding illegal settlements. The Gaza Strip is an open-air prison; the Israeli authorities count calories and ban basic amenities from entering the (locked down) territory.

This is the stark reality shrouded from Americans, who sponsor the state of Israel with over ten million of their tax dollars every day. The situation has always been presented to the world as an equal fight, an endless cycle of violence and one of the 'most complicated situations in the world'. In fact, it's one of the most simple to understand. It's a classic case of coloniser and colonised, occupier and occupied. This colonial project survives on lavish US funding, a carefully crafted public image campaign, and threats against public figures who speak out against Israel's moral supremacy.

We produced a docuseries from our trip to Palestine about issues like refugee camps and home demolitions that people can watch on our YouTube channel. One of the episodes is a series of interviews with Jerusalem residents that reveal how mainstream the desire for the mass killing and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is among Israelis, contradicting the manufactured image of Israel as a liberal, democratic and peace-loving nation.

This garnered a lot of controversy; however, the sentiment is reflected in polls across the region, showing that over seventy per cent oppose Palestinian statehood or ending the occupation, and fifty per cent want to ethnically cleanse the 1.5 million Palestinians citizens living inside Israel.

Have you been accused of staging or prepping those topical interviews?

People will always try to deflect hard truths that counter their agenda, which was the case here. All of these interviewees were picked from the passers-by in the bustling shopping and restaurant area of Jerusalem; we did not cherry-pick people in any way. I strived to get a diverse range of opinions, finding people from all ages and backgrounds: religious and secular, self-described leftists and conservatives, Israeli-born and immigrants from abroad. In fact, every single interview I conducted appears in the episode. I asked very vague questions, like ‘What is it like to live here?’ and ‘What do you think about the situation?’ Many were quick to share their extreme racism and even call for mass murder, as if these were totally normal and acceptable views. Keep in mind, they said these things knowing they were speaking on-camera to US media.

A potential criticism of *The Empire Files* might be that it focuses too much on US wrongdoing and/or allied international interventions into the Third World. Your YouTube detractors point out that you don’t talk so

much about North Korea. How do you respond?

It’s not daring or important for Western journalists and commentators to relentlessly and solely criticise officially designated enemies. Everyone knows North Korea isn’t an ideal democratic state. But no one cares to ask how it became a military fortress, constantly having to posture itself on the world stage with its nuclear weapons.

We don’t learn much about the Korean War, but we should, because it wiped out thirty per cent of the Korean people and bombed the entire country’s infrastructure back to the Stone Age. If people took the time to truly understand history, they would understand the urgency to report on the US government’s criminal record of international terrorism. US anchors give glowing platforms to weapons contractors and Pentagon officials, when they should be putting their jobs on the line to hold their own government to account because it is responsible for vast numbers of global atrocities, wars that have needlessly killed tens of millions of people, torture programmes, endless coups, assassinations and usurpations of other countries’ democratic processes.

There is a reason that the world finds the USA, not North Korea, to be the greatest threat facing humanity.

People have read a lot of things into your leaving RT? What didn’t work for you at RT, and what is more satisfying about your work on *The Empire Files*?

I left the network of my own accord because I wanted to be in the field, personalising the stories I was reporting

“THIS COLONIAL PROJECT SURVIVES ON LAVISH US FUNDING, A CAREFULLY CRAFTED PUBLIC IMAGE CAMPAIGN.”

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on day to day. The hysteria about Russian meddling has deeply disturbed me, because the last thing we need is an escalating Cold War with a nuclear power.

The collective madness about Russia-gate has caused these mass hallucinations across the political aisle and across the pond. The neoliberals and Democrats in our country are still struggling to deal with the fact that their candidate lost to a reality-TV star con artist, and they want badly to deflect the blame for this defeat towards a mysterious foreign enemy instead of facing responsibility.

It's absurd to call a network currently hosting Larry King, Chris Hedges, Jesse Ventura and Lee Camp a mere 'Putin propaganda' network. When I worked there, I spoke out on air about the actions of Putin, Russia and RT's coverage during the Crimea incursion, and not only was I not fired but I still had the prime-time opinion show on the network for another year.

I moved on to long-form documentary storytelling because I want to retell lost chapters of American history, as well as make space for the voices of the marginalised and oppressed. Our show, *The Empire Files*, analyses current and historical events with the US Empire as a starting point, reclaiming the narratives set by the imperialists and colonisers throughout history. Every issue facing people and the planet is rooted in this global situation: the supremacy of the US Empire, enforcing its economic order for the benefit of the 0.1 per cent through its brutal military might.

From travelling to countries in the crosshairs of the US, like Venezuela and Colombia, and listening to victims first-hand, to creating in-depth exposés of massively influential corporations like Chevron and Monsanto, we choose stories that are not being told accurately, with enough historical analysis.

Unless we understand how we got here, we won't get very far in changing it.

Finally how is the relationship with teleSUR? They seem to have given you lots of freedom to shape your show?

I create *The Empire Files* with my partner and we sell the show to teleSUR with total editorial freedom, but I am proud to be creating content for a channel that is seeking to challenge the corporate media hegemony.

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In these times we desperately need a hegemony of truth. To have a complete identity, a person must be able to face the ugly or disavowed aspects of themselves. Culpability is always an aspect of self-knowledge, and the same is true for a nation or state.

Some success was made in the US in terms of public opinion following mass protest and widespread disapproval that was cemented in the wake of the Vietnam War by bitter reflection in the arts and film, but as Martin states, this largely shifted brutal violence abroad, where it affects professional soldiers and extant foreign communities.

Now Americans are again finding that 'their lives are on the line', although it's not the draft and enemy combatants that today's college students have to fear but their fellow citizens, those for whom the American dream has failed and who take on the uncomfortably familiar role of the lone gunman or 'school shooter'.

It's interesting to see how these domestic problems are spun by the established media and vested interests. These surreal events kill more Americans than terrorism, and they are more frequent than attacks from abroad. In the most recent incident, in Florida, the killer Nikolas Cruz bought his automatic weapon legally. Yet networks show self-defence for teachers being rolled out while President Trump talks about more security for schools. Gun control is off the menu for all but protesters and a few ignored voices from the political class.

The protests following this tragedy and organised dissent like the Occupy movement might confirm Martin's



Dawit Abebe, *Mutual Identity IV* (2014)

faith in people's 'thirst for knowledge' and desire to change society; the success of her direction like that of so many hopeful agitators, depends heavily on us, the lumpen masses. How much inconvenience are we willing to put up with in order to effect change?

Crucially, before we can jump that hurdle we must be weaned off the hypnotic and false constructs of the mainstream media. Martin is convinced of the corporate world's hold on the networks, citing examples recently on *The Jimmy Dore Show*⁷ of several broadcasters who were effectively silenced when they strayed from the official line on Iraq. Martin shows us a depressing cage constructed of lies, illusions, nostalgia and sleight of hand.

When Plato wrote about the 'Cave', describing the prisoners therein, their heads fixed in place, staring at shadows on the wall, not knowing anything of the world outside, he meant it as a metaphor not a prediction. Today we seem to be reinforcing the 'Cave' by making the distracting light show ever more seductive! America is the most powerful nation on the planet, but its national narratives are badly due an upgrade to include the dark and often bloody aspects. Ideally, we need a global narrative, the purpose of which is to elucidate reality rather than throw a convenient veil over power.

Despite this, Martin is right to be hopeful: unlike the prisoners in the Plato's Cave we can look away, we can seek out information from sources that are interested in our active freedom rather than our continued dependence or effete cynicism.

Image: Courtesy of KHGallery

1. Newsweek US edition, 19 November 2017 (<http://www.newsweek.com/rump-impachment-approval-ratings-contested-election-results-74938>).

2. 'Real Talk' in *SOMA Magazine*, 27.3 (May–June 2013), pp. 52–3.

3. Hysen, Britt, RT Host Abby Martin Takes On 'Corporate Media', *Millennial Magazine*, 28 July 2014 (<https://millennialmagazine.com/2014/07/28/abby-martin/>).

4. Norton, Ben, 'Venezuelan Opposition Spreads Lies About U.S. Journalists, Inciting Violence, Death Threats', *AlterNet*, 3 June 2017 (<https://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/venezuela-abby-martin-mike-plysher-lies-death-threats>).

5. See <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/testing-theories-of-america-politics-elites-interest-groups-and-average-citizens/62327F513959D0A304D46893B382B992B>.

6. See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCG29FnXZm4F5U8xpppcisQ>.

7. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qkRPPv2EY>.