



Interview with Abby Martin

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Intro: Abby Martin is a visual artist and independent journalist. She is the founder of Media Roots, a board member of Project Censored, former host of RT's Breaking the Set and creator and host of The Empire Files on teleSUR. Ladies and Gentlemen, Abby Martin.

Zain Raza: Abby, it's so great to have you here today [...] And what we are experiencing today when people are coming out is almost every day in Cali[ifornia]. I mean, sometimes in San Francisco you have the fog, but in Germany as soon as the sun shines everybody is coming outside. A couple of people texted me today saying *Zain, I'm not going to come today because the sun is shining outside*, I'm like, okay, you know I hope it shines forever, but anyway. That's why you're here, let's find a solution to all the problems. You've been an activist, documentary maker, you've hosted Breaking the Set, you're at teleSUR, you're on the streets, you've got so much experience in this field of journalism, activism. Talk a little bit about your life journey. What inspired you and where do you want to go with that?

Abby Martin: Well, Zain, like a lot of people I didn't grow up politically conscious or politically astute. I kind of got a crash course in US imperialism with Zinn, Chomsky, Chalmers Johnson when I was a freshman at college and I was just astounded at the damage that the US empire has done. I mean the violent economic oppression and military subjugation around the world and so I was so alarmed.

At the time, I still kind of blamed the Bush administration. I was trapped in that partisan mindset. And then the media started selling us Iraq. You know I was swept up in that post-911 hysteria, bought into the Afghanistan war, didn't really understand how both parties were complicit until of course Nancy Pelosi's impeachment was from the table for a war criminal who was committing war crimes and the media just kind of uniformly switched one day over to selling us the WMDs and I was just so disturbed. I thought why is this happening?

And through my anti-war activism I realized that you need media for the people, right? Because it doesn't matter what your issue is, you could be passionate about GMOs, you could be passionate about the water supply, about war, as long as you don't have a free media it doesn't matter. You can't get those issues out there. So I just dove head-first into media comprehension, media literacy, and really fighting for a free and open people's media for the people by the people and that's what started my journey today.

Zain Raza: That's very interesting because this journey kind of ended up at the CIA and the intelligence community's table and in January 2017 they came up with this document called *Assessing Russian Intentions in Greece and US Elections*. They actually took the time, limited resources, despite all the poverty, to mention you in this document. This document basically was trying to find ways of showing how Russia interfered in the election and since you worked at RT, you hosted the show *Breaking the Set*, that mentioned you, and let me quote what they wrote: *'Overwhelmingly focused on criticism of the US and western media, governments, as well as the promotion of content that is radical.'* So, before you answer this question, I find it really funny, because I think in an open and democratic society, if you're criticizing the Western government, isn't that something people should be welcoming?

Abby Martin: You would think so, Zain, and unfortunately that's why a lot of anti-imperialist journalists like myself, like Chris Hedges, have to go to places like *Russia Today* to provide that alternative, the counter narrative to that corporate media hegemony that pushes imperialism down our throats. We were all waiting with bated breath for this intelligence report. For months we were being told by the corporate media, by the establishment, the neoliberal establishment and intelligence agencies, that they were going to come out with this conclusive proof that Russia meddled in the election and so we were all waiting for this report.

And fortunately, when it came out I was stunned. I was stunned that I was in it. I was a part of the reason why Trump won. Because half of the report, Zain, was about... it was a crude analysis about RT. It was literally just talking about RT programming. And no, it wasn't talking about how I praised Putin nor, you know, whitewashed the reality of what was going on in Russia. No, none of that, in fact I never did that on my show. In fact, I was one of the anchors who actually spoke out against Putin and kept my premier show for over a year.

Zain Raza: When Russia invaded the Crimea, you criticized that on open air. That's the point that you're trying to make.

Abby Martin: Absolutely. I criticized it on air and I was able to keep my prime time show for an entire year after that. I continued to criticize Putin. I talked about the downing of MH-17 etc. and hosted vigorous debates about the Ukraine situation. But back to the intelligence report. I mean, what's amazing about it, Zain, back to your point, is that this is the real threat, right? This is the real threat, it's talking about real issues. Because when you look at what that intelligence report entails, it's literally talking about how my show covered fracking, covered income inequality, Occupy Wall Street, and how it was some sort of Russian warfare operation that we hosted a third-party debate. That's what C-SPAN does every year.

So you have to understand that this basis, right, this basis that everything's Russian propaganda, if you talk about realities in our country, if you talk about the fact that half of Americans are living in poverty, they don't have more than a thousand dollars in their bank account, that's Russian propaganda. You can't criticize US foreign policy, the murderous imperialism that we're carrying out around the world unless you're a Russian propagandist. And that logic has unfortunately bled over to now, here we are a year and a half later where literally activists who are protesting oil pipelines are useful idiots for the Kremlin. I mean Jill Stein talking about US imperialism is repeating Russian talking points. It's a really disturbing atmosphere that we're living in.

Zain Raza: I mean if you think about it, I don't know the exact numbers because I think the official account isn't there and there are so many secret operations going on, secret bases, but I think it's something like over 150 countries with 1,200 installations, it's not like we don't as journalists look at America as America. If it was Great Britain today in that position or if it was India today in that position with that military scope, we would probably be criticizing them. And what I don't seem to understand is, when there is a military footprint on this planet and the wars in Libya and Iraq, why do we still not call the Empire what it is?

Abby Martin: Yeah, people think I'm talking about Star Wars when I speak about the US Empire. It's amazing to me, we have so many bases that even Pentagon officials won't even tell you the number of bases because there are so many lily pad bases off of that official 900 number that they don't even know. We're talking about 56 military interventions that have subjugated and usurped the democratic processes in Latin America alone. We're talking about, you know, catastrophic wars that have killed millions, tens of millions of people, the use of chemical warfare, violation of international treaties, exemptions from international treaties, the list goes on and on.

But the reason you don't hear about this is because we're the best country in the world, right? We can do whatever we want. We're not the empire because we're the moral arbitrator of what's right and good and holy. We have the freest media in the world, we have the freest democracy in the world. So of course when the media works hand and glove with the establishment to sell this notion, it's a weapon. The media is a weapon of the empire.

It's not just to protect the corporate structures, to protect the empire and to sell these wars and narratives. And you see it time and again, Zain, where we just have to keep marginalizing ourselves and fighting on the margins to fight for the truth because we're just lambasted with attacks day after day from the corporate media structure. It's incredible.

Zain Raza: So tell me about your experience with RT, I don't want to get too deep into it because this is not an evening for RT but how would you compare it to your colleagues that are in the western corporate media. Did somebody call you, let's say Putin the mastermind, from his basement in the big castle that he lives in, that's the perception that you get if you're following the news. Did he call you up and say *Hey Abby, you're supposed to report that, and not report that*, or how was your experience working there?

Abby Martin: Well, it's incredible. When you look at the corporate media, you can tell who's our friend and who's our foe, right, they tell you who is the enemy and who is our friend. So Russia, Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, those are the enemies. So if there's any state-funded entities from those countries, they are also enemy networks. It doesn't matter if Al Jazeera is somehow legitimate even though it's run by a Qatari theocratic dictatorship with virtual slave markets. So that part was always kind of hypocritical to me. Why is that okay? Why is it okay to have state-funded media enterprises funded by empires, right, BBC, France 24, Radio Free Europe?

Zain Raza: Sorry if I break you off, but the German media we hear is funded by 7.6 billion euros I think, something along that line, and there's no criticism, it's actually okay.

Abby Martin: It's lauded.

Zain Raza: And the other point is that a large part of its finance is not through the conventional taxes over here but through a system that you call GEZ which basically sends you a letter every three months telling you if you don't pay you're going to get the consequences, and let me just add to that, I saw a report recently where farmers that opened a small stable for their cows had to pay GEZ because the moment you get space they assume you're consuming media, so I was thinking okay, a good way to educate a cow, but anyways, getting back to the point, sorry to break you off, it's like state media, corporate media right? So there we get to the next point, teleSUR, you're now there, what is teleSUR and what is The Empire Files?

Abby Martin: So I wanted to say really quickly about RT that I had more freedom there and I was able to have more editorial freedom than virtually anyone at corporate media. So there is limitations and there is framing and there is parameters of debate that you're allowed to say. At RT, I was able to have so much editorial freedom that I was actually challenging my funder over and over again and what the whole experience showed me was not only do we have an enormous amount of freedom there where we can really talk about anything.

But that shows you what corporate media anchors and pundits and journalists don't do. They don't put their jobs on the line, they don't put themselves on the line to fight for that editorial freedom, to say *No, I'm not going to cover this story today or I am going to do this and I am going to put my job on the line to do so*. RT is simply an alternative, that's why it's such a threat to this corporate media narrative because it provides that space to challenge the corporatocracy, challenge capitalism, challenge empire, that's why I worked there.

TeleSUR is different, because you know in a world where we're fostering this cold war mentality against Russia, I think it's really important to have RT. I think it's important to hear what Russia has to say and the perspectives that Russia brings. But teleSUR came out of a contagion of this pink-tie, this progressivism that erupted in Latin America. We're talking about a region of the world that was subjugated and ravaged by colonialism for decades, if not centuries.

Cuba was always an anomaly but with the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999 I think sparked this movement. And so teleSUR came out of a joint venture with Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro to counter that corporate media narrative that was set as a weapon to destroy these countries, to destroy their democratically elected leaderships. And it's a joint venture between six countries right now, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Cuba, Ecuador and Venezuela, and I'm honored because I feel like it really fits within my value system because they really tell that kind of marxist perspective and the working class perspective and telling the voices of the marginalized and oppressed who have been completely obfuscated from our history books and the entire narratives of what we know about reality, Zain.

The Empire Files is a show, it's a long form documentary show and investigative series that sees every issue through the lens of US Empire because you cannot look at the world either internationally or domestically in the US without looking through that lens. The world needs to be looked at in terms of colonized and colonizers. In terms of Israel, we love to use Israel as that military garrison in the middle east because it's surrounded by kind of these post-colonial semi-independent states that haven't cow-tailed to US economic hegemony yet. So that's why we like Israel in that center.

But the Empire Files retells these stories, retells these narratives, uplifts the voices of those marginalized and oppressed people who haven't had their chance to tell their stories and reclaiming the narratives that have been written by the victors. And we've had the chance to go to these countries and be on the ground and see firsthand how just completely, patently absurd the corporate media narratives are everywhere from Colombia to Venezuela.

Zain Raza: So talk about Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia. I mean it's really interesting because the indigenous people in these countries do not get a voice. First of all there is this language barrier obviously and, second of all, who wants to go into the jungles of these places and spend millions of euros or dollars to talk to these people and their concerns. What are the concerns of the indigenous people and what sort of challenges are they facing both domestically and internationally?

Abby Martin: Well, it differs country to country, but I mean Ecuador is a really interesting example because I went to the rainforest, to this pristine rainforest that has just been completely savaged by Chevron. And so I saw kind of-

Zain Raza: Chevron being...

Abby Martin: Chevron, the massive oil company that you know also sponsors a lot of corporate media, so you know, corporate media is basically subsidized by defense contractors and oil companies. But when I was in the rainforest, talking to victims who are indigenous there and who have died since from contamination, and it was an insight in how Ecuador was before president Correa took it and challenged the Empire and started giving more rights to indigenous people and the indigenous movement had backed him and his presidency and he gave rights to nature which was a really-

Zain Raza: In the constitution, right?

Abby Martin: In the constitution, correct. And so you kind of saw you know pre-colonial and postcolonial mentality there where they had just opened their country up to be ravaged by imperialism and then they were trying to fight back against that. In terms of Venezuela, the indigenous population there is completely obscured from our media. We don't ever hear from the tens of millions of people who actually are die-hard chavismo, you know, that's a very serious political force in the country and we just hear constantly that there's a totalitarian dictatorship where Maduro's forces are mowing down protesters. The reality is completely different. It's very complex. People can watch my reports to learn more but the indigenous movement, a lot of Afro-Venezuelans who you don't see their voices ever been given gravitas for. So it was incredible to go and give a voice to those people's voices and hear their perspectives because they are really virtually absent.

In Colombia, it was interesting because as much as we hear about Venezuela, we hear nothing about Colombia. And this is a country... we poured 10 billion dollars into Colombia over the last 15 years. President Kennedy created paramilitary death squads there and we're talking about a hidden war even though FARC has been demilitarized and laid down their arms, there's still just as many social leaders, activists, indigenous leaders, trade unionists being executed, targeted for execution by these paramilitary death squads who have very close ties with Uribe's party and the Santos government.

And it's just shocking. It's shocking that this isn't told, you know, it's shocking that we don't know that Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. I talked to a teacher who has to live in exile because he's so scared to do his work. So it's very fascist and very reflective of the US Empire.

Zain Raza: And about Venezuela, okay there might be some human rights abuses and violations probably did occur, I'm not sure about that, but what I feel is left out of the entire coverage, for example is that the role of finance, I mean people, financiers on Wall Street or Frankfurt or London, just decide collectively *we're not going to invest in this thing anymore, we're going to do an investment strike*. And so that has a huge effect on the currency and then you see all these supermarket reports coming in. This is what I find particularly interesting, that the role of finance is left out, the role of capital if you want to put it that way. So you actually went into the supermarkets, what did you see? And you also analyzed the media, I mean you put all the newspapers on the table. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Abby Martin: Yeah, I mean we hear the same reports, right? You can virtually make up anything about Venezuela, you can definitely make up anything about North Korea, people regurgitate it based on no verification whatsoever. So I hear constantly, you know, people are starving and eating rats in the streets. Look, there is a serious economic crisis.

The thing is very complicated, there is economic warfare going on with private vs public ownership, like you said. The detrimental, devastating sanctions that the US forces has put on Venezuela has actually caused a lot of this economic crisis, so, this is what the West likes to do, it puts devastating sanctions on countries like North Korea and Venezuela and then it uses the effects of those sanctions to then slap human rights violations and further penalize these countries. I did go in the supermarkets. When you see these videos and pictures of just empty shelves completely and like you are in *The Walking Dead*. It's absurd, it's patently absurd.

There is a shortage of specific items and that's for a very specific reason. I mean these items are, you know, it's like again, it's an economic war. I won't get into the nuances of it, but, it's just not true, when you see just like this footage that you see over and over again. It's specific items and that's what people get from the government, they get those items that have shortages every month in a bag, called CLAP.

So, I just don't understand this like very trivialized, childish narrative that just totally removes the other part of the story. As far as the media ownership: I mean we hear the same thing with every country that the US wants to overthrow and commit regime change in: it's totalitarian, there is no democracy, they don't have a free media, people are starving-

Zain Raza: And there are "national security threats"...

Abby Martin: (laughing) Yeah, Venezuela is going to come and eat us? So yeah, a lot of that, you know, it's almost the opposite in a lot of these cases but yeah, I mean the media, a lot of it is privately owned and when I was there I saw newspapers that were saying Trump needs to take care of Maduro on the front page. I mean, way more liberated than, you know, way more hostile, let's say, toward the government than our media is.

Zain Raza: So, let's move on to a different direction, because talk about teleSUR which is a sort of Latin America-wide initiative, I will put it that way or RT, Russia, but I'm really particularly interested in citizen journalism and you started Media Roots, a citizen journalist-based outlet which you can see online, you can hear the podcast. So talk to me about the basic ingredients of citizen journalism and the importance of it as well.

Abby Martin: I wanted to say one more thing about teleSUR really quickly is that I have so much editorial freedom there, you know, I interviewed president Correa multiple times, I had no questions vetted. Can you imagine if someone came in and interviewed Trump and like didn't have their questions looked at?

Zain Raza: Hillary Clinton I think... the Clintons had to throw out somebody from the White House, because that journalist was critical. Do look that up on YouTube or type it on Google, you'll find that.

Abby Martin: Yes... so just complete editorial freedom, I have no boss, I literally sell a show to the network and they air it. So it's very insulting to say that, you know, I'm lying on behalf of these countries. It's absurd.

Media Roots started as a citizen journalism project and I was self-taught, just kind of like how I met you years ago in Berlin and look where the organization has come, Zain, I mean it's just a little bit of commitment and dedication and never really expecting a reward, you know, you are not doing these to get on the front cover of magazines, you are not doing these to get recognition. You are doing it because you know it's right and you know that you probably always are going to be on the margins, fighting for what's right.

But Media Roots, it started off as just an aggregate of censored stories and covering progressive movements in my backyard, covering Occupy Wall-Street, covering different protests, DEA raids, stuff like that, police brutality, the Oscar Grant rallies, and then RT found me through there. But I think the tools of what it takes to be a citizen journalist scares the hell out of the establishment, and that's why you see anyone who's kind of taking measures into their own hands and creating their own media and trying to decolonize their mind and be media creators is a threat, right? They're all Russian stooges and Kremlin operatives.

But that is what is so beautiful about the era of digital technology, that we are living in and that is everyone has the tools and capacities to teach themselves, teach others, work with peers to formulate groups that, you know, you can learn from each other. I was lucky enough to have a community center where I was able to learn final cut and editing and how to use a camera. But really it's a self-taught thing.

I think journalism school hammers in your head of how to be an objective journalist and makes you think that you have to be tens of thousands of dollars chained to student debt when that's in fact not at all. It's not this Ivy League prestigious out of touch thing. Anyone can do it, people are doing it but again you have to be media literate, you have to be a critical thinker and you have to understand how to ingest the media landscape and understand the biases, because it's just one component of the whole package.

Zain Raza: I wanted to say, like when I interviewed Edward Snowden last year and I was one of the very few people to do that from Germany, I had no background in all of this journalism school and then I went online and saw all of this center of investigative reporting techniques, methods and stuff like that and it's really funny when people come up to me and say: *Zain, where did you study journalism?*, I'm just like: In my heart, you know? I just opened up at some point and said I have to change things.

One of the inspiring moments was Noam Chomsky's book "Manufacturing Consent", which kind of shows structurally speaking how the corporate media in the United States and that research goes twenty years, it's actually a scientific paper, not even a book, of how the corporate media controls the function of the information and when it comes from the beginning to the end it's something completely different, like in terms of reality.

But getting back to this objective media, you have just advocacy media, sort of thing, like we should send out our message, we should be constructive and not just be critical, and I'm a big fan of critical media, because that's a scientific way. You have to be, have scientific rigour, you have to question, but I think it's also scientific to be constructive. I mean, think about our technology in that term. We got the cure for cancer, would everybody be saying *No, Zain, that's not objective, that's unscientific*. No, because it's a solution. So, can journalism also be an advocate, a constructive arbitrator of information?

Abby Martin: Absolutely, that's why I'm a proud advocacy journalist. I think objectivity is horseshit and I think that journalists who pretend like they're objective are lying to themselves because everyone has an overt bias, you know, you think that opinion just belong in that op-ed pages and that everything else is just, straight up, just objective journalism, no! Everyone couches their opinions and polls from this glob of neoliberalism and the think tanks and the experts and the defence contractors and the anonymous government officials and they cite those people to couch their own biases and opinions and I would much rather know where someone is coming from, where their bias is, wearing their heart on their sleeve, and then I can determine from myself if it is accurate information.

I think that again, you are hammered in the thinking that you need both sides of the story, right? I didn't even know where Palestine was until I was 18. So, I think that that tells you a lot about the only side of the story that we're are told, right, about that issue, which is very upsetting, that in Germany, you know, you have a Haaretz journalist banned from the public square from even discussing or being critical of Zionism and Israeli war crimes.

But look, I don't need to know why Monsanto poisoned Anniston, Alabama for decades with PCBs. I don't need to see their press release and compare it to the victims that have died. I don't need to know why the Pentagon drone-bombed another wedding in Yemen. I don't need to know from these people and compare it to the victims who are suffering these atrocities with my tax dollars.

Zain Raza: If you think about it, that's like comparing Martin Luther King, *Hey Martin, can you tell me what your opinion is about racism* and then go to the Ku Klux Klan and asking the White Supremacists, let's, kind of weigh in the issue, that the same that you 're trying to say, right?

Abby Martin: Yeah, and you see it all across the corporate media. It's just constant just regurgitation of government officials. You even have them, you know, every time there is a dapper Nazi, you see a whole think piece about them. It's disgusting. But I'm a proud advocacy journalist a) because we don't have time, Zain, we are running out.

Capitalism is eating itself, and you just mentioned diseases, I mean Goldman Sachs, we've come to such a stage of late capitalism and where now Goldman Sachs is just openly saying it's against their profit model to cure patients of diseases. So, we don't have time left and I'm advocating for the truth, I'm advocating for marginalized and oppressed people to reclaim their power and reclaim the truth.

Zain Raza: So, let's sum it up. And the part I'm trying to sum up is solution-oriented. My brain is working really fast right now, so let me sum it up. How would you advise people to a) become citizen journalists? Not advise, what sort of, like if someone's sitting here in the crowd or watching on YouTube and that person wants to actually change the world tomorrow. What is the first challenge or the challenges that they should take into account and what is the underlying thing that they should always keep in mind despite the hardships that they face?

Abby Martin: I think the context. The context that is missing from all of these trivialities and the stories that you mentioned in your intro, I mean, the daily inundation of these superficialities, we need to understand the context behind them, how we got here. History is instructive. We need to learn from history so we can prevent future wars, we can prevent going down this horrible disastrous path time and time again, generation after generation. So I think a) reclaiming and relearning history, understanding how we got here, b) teaching yourself the tools to be media literate and a critical thinker- [no audio for ca. 11 seconds]

Abby Martin: [...] the huge, huge base of support that you have here, Zain, and it's really inspiring for me and I think this is where it all starts. You start a hub and the progressive thinkers come to that hub and they just keep building and that's how social movements start, that's how progressive movements start and that's how we fight and end empire and end wars. We have to challenge that propaganda. We have to unmask the brutality of what's going on. And from there I think we can find a much better system than what we have now.

Zain Raza: Inspiring words, Abby (Applause) Abby Martin, visual artist, journalist and filmmaker, thank you so much for coming today.

Abby Martin: Thanks so much, Zain.

Zain Raza: I'll see you later.

Abby Martin: See you later, thanks.

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