

The Propaganda Model: a retrospective

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ABSTRACT *This article describes the “propaganda model” of media behavior and performance, initially set down in the book Manufacturing Consent, and addresses some of the scholarly criticisms leveled against the model since its inception a decade ago. Drawing on contemporary examples of media reporting, the article argues for the continuing, if not increasing, relevance of the propaganda model in explaining current media behavior.*

KEY WORDS *Conspiracy Theory, Mass Media, Political Economy, Propaganda*

In *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media*, Noam Chomsky and I put forward a “propaganda model” as a framework for analysing and understanding how the mainstream US media work and why they perform as they do (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). We had long been impressed by the regularity with which the media operate on the basis of a set of ideological premises, depend heavily and uncritically on elite information sources and participate in propaganda campaigns helpful to elite interests. In trying to explain why media perform in this way we looked to structural factors as the only possible root of the systematic patterns of media behavior and performance.

Because the propaganda model challenges basic premises and suggests that the media serve antidemocratic ends, it is commonly excluded from mainstream debates on media bias. Such debates typically include conservatives, who criticize the media for excessive liberalism and an adversarial stance toward government and business, and centrists and liberals, who deny the charge of adversarialism

and contend that the media behave fairly and responsibly.¹ The exclusion of the propaganda model perspective is noteworthy for one reason, because that perspective is consistent with long-standing and widely held elite views that “the masses are notoriously short-sighted” (Bailey, 1948, p. 13) and are “often poor judges of their own interests” (Lasswell, 1933, p. 527), so that “our statesmen must deceive them” (Bailey, 1948, p. 13); and they “can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality” (Walter Lippmann, 1921, p. 310). In Lippmann’s view, the “manufacture of consent” by an elite class had already become “a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government” by the 1920s (Lippman, 1921, p. 248).

Clearly, the manufacture of consent by a “specialized class” that can override the short-sighted perspectives of the masses must entail media control by that class. Political scientist Thomas Ferguson contends that the major media, “controlled by large profit-maximizing investors do not encourage the dissemination of news and analyses

that are likely to lead to popular indignation and, perhaps, government action hostile to the interests of all large investors, themselves included” (Ferguson, 1995, p. 400). Political scientist Ben Page provides evidence that there are common “elite-mass gaps”, with “ordinary citizens ... considerably less enthusiastic than foreign policy elites about the use of force abroad, about economic or (especially) military aid or arms sales, and about free-trade agreements. The average American is much more concerned than foreign policy elites about jobs and income at home” (Page, 1996, p. 118). Page notes that “the problem for public deliberation is most severe when officials of both parties and most mainstream media take positions that are similar to each other and opposed to the public” (Page, 1996, p. 119). The propaganda model explains the “elite-mass gaps”, as well as elite and mainstream media hostility to this mode of analysis: refusal to allow it entry into the debate is understandable given that the gaps are embarrassing and suggest that the media do serve narrow elite interests.

This article briefly describes the propaganda model, addresses some of the criticisms that have been leveled against it and discusses how the model holds up a decade or so after its publication.² Examples are provided to illustrate the ways in which the propaganda model helps explain the nature of media coverage of important political topics at the turn of the century.

The Propaganda Model

What is the propaganda model and how does it work? Its crucial structural factors derive from the fact that the dominant media are firmly embedded in the market system. They are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people (or other companies);

and they are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their advertisements to appear in a supportive selling environment. The media also lean heavily on government and major business firms as information sources and both efficiency and political considerations and, frequently, overlapping interests, cause a certain degree of solidarity to prevail among the government, major media and other corporate businesses. Government and large non-media business firms are also best positioned (and sufficiently wealthy) to be able to pressure the media with threats of withdrawal of advertising or TV licenses, libel suits and other direct and indirect modes of attack. The media are also constrained by the dominant ideology, which heavily featured anti-communism before and during the Cold War era, and was often mobilized to induce the media to support (or refrain from criticizing) US attacks on small states that were labeled communist.

These factors are linked together, reflecting the multi-leveled capability of government and powerful business entities and collectives (e.g. the Business Roundtable; the US Chamber of Commerce; the vast number of well-heeled industry lobbies and front groups) to exert power over the flow of information. We noted that the five factors involved—ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communist ideology—work as “filters” through which information must pass, and that individually and often in cumulative fashion they greatly influence media choices. We stressed that the filters work mainly by the independent action of many individuals and organizations; and these frequently, but not always, have a common view of issues as well as similar interests. In short, the propaganda model describes a decentralized and non-conspiratorial market system

of control and processing, although at times the government or one or more private actors may take initiatives and mobilize co-ordinated elite handling of an issue.

Propaganda campaigns can occur only when they are consistent with the interests of those controlling and managing the filters. For example, these managers all accepted the view that the Polish government's crackdown on the Solidarity Union in 1980 and 1981 was extremely newsworthy and deserved severe condemnation; whereas the same interests did not find the Turkish military government's equally brutal crackdown on trade unions in Turkey at about the same time to be newsworthy or reprehensible. In the latter case the US government and business community liked the military government's anticommunist stance and open-door economic policy; the crackdown on Turkish unions had the merit of weakening the left and keeping wages down. In the Polish case, propaganda points could be scored against a Soviet-supported government, and concern could be expressed for workers whose wages were not paid by Free World employers. The fit of this dichotomization to corporate interests and anticommunist ideology is obvious.

We used the concepts of "worthy" and "unworthy" victims to describe this dichotomization, with a trace of irony as the varying treatment was clearly related to political and economic advantage rather than anything like actual worth. In fact, the Polish trade unionists quickly ceased to be worthy when communism was overthrown and the workers were struggling against a western-oriented neoliberal regime. The travails of today's Polish workers, like those of Turkish workers, do not pass through the propaganda model filters. *Both* groups are unworthy victims at this point.

We never claimed that the propa-

ganda model explained everything or that it illustrated media omnipotence and complete effectiveness in manufacturing consent. It is a model of media *behavior and performance*, not of media *effects*. We explicitly pointed to the existence of alternative media, grassroots information sources and public scepticism about media truthfulness as important limits on media effectiveness in propaganda service, and we urged the support and more vigorous use of the existing alternatives. Both Chomsky and I have often pointed to the general public's persistent refusal to fall into line with the media and elite over the morality of the Vietnam War, the desirability of the assault on Nicaragua in the 1980s and the merits of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990s, among other matters. The power of the US propaganda system lies in its ability to mobilize an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward. We also emphasized the fact that there are often differences within the elite that open up space for some debate and even occasional (but very rare) attacks on the *intent* as well as the tactical means of achieving elite ends.

Although the propaganda model was generally well received on the left, some complained of an allegedly pessimistic thrust and implication of hopeless odds to be overcome. A closely related objection concerned its applicability to local conflicts where the possibility of effective resistance was often greater than in the case of national issues; but the propaganda model does not suggest that local and even larger victories are impossible, especially where the elites are divided or have limited interest in an issue. For example, coverage of issues such as gun

control, school prayer and abortion rights may well receive more varied treatment than, for instance, global trade, taxation and economic policy. Moreover, well-organized campaigns by labor, human rights or environmental organizations that are fighting against abusive local businesses can sometimes elicit positive media coverage. In fact, we would like to think that the propaganda model can help activists understand where they might best deploy their efforts to influence mainstream media coverage of issues.

The model does suggest that the mainstream media, as elite institutions, commonly frame news and allow debate only within the parameters of elite perspectives; and that when the elite is really concerned and unified and/or when ordinary citizens are not aware of their own stake in an issue or are immobilized by effective propaganda, the media will serve elite interests unpromisingly.

Mainstream Liberal and Academic “Left” Critiques

Many liberals and some academic media analysts of the left did not like the propaganda model. Some asked rhetorically where we got the information used to condemn the mainstream media if not from the media themselves (a tired apologetic point that we answered at length in our preface). Many of these critics found repugnant a wholesale condemnation of a system they believed to be basically sound, its inequalities of access regrettable but tolerable, its pluralism and competition effectively responding to consumer demands. In the postmodernist mode, global analyses and global solutions are rejected and derided and individual struggles and small victories are stressed, even by nominally left thinkers.

Many of the critiques displayed a barely concealed anger, and in most of them the propaganda model was dismissed with a few superficial clichés (conspiratorial, simplistic, etc.), without fair presentation or subjecting it to the test of evidence. Let me discuss briefly some of the main criticisms.

Conspiracy Theory

We explained in *Manufacturing Consent* that critical analyses such as ours would inevitably elicit cries of conspiracy theory, and in a futile effort to prevent this we devoted several pages of the preface to an explicit rejection of conspiracy and an attempt to show that the propaganda model is best described as a “guided market system”. Mainstream critics still made the charge, partly because they are too lazy to read a complex work, partly because they know that falsely accusing a radical critique of conspiracy theory will not cost them anything, and partly because of their superficial assumption that, since the media comprise thousands of “independent” journalists and companies, any finding that they follow a “party line” that serves the state must rest on an assumed conspiracy. (In fact, it can result from a widespread gullible acceptance of official handouts, common internalized beliefs, common policies established from above within the organizations based on ideology and/or interests, and fear of reprisal for critical analyses from within the organization or from the outside.) The apologists cannot abide the notion that institutional factors can cause a “free” media to act like lemmings in jointly disseminating false and even silly propaganda; such a charge must assume a conspiracy.

Sometimes the critics latched on to a word or phrase that suggests a collective purpose or function, occasionally

ironically, to make their case. Communications professor Robert Entman, for example, stated that we damaged our case by alleging that media coverage of the 1973 Paris accord on Vietnam “was consciously ‘designed by the loyal media to serve the needs of state power’ ... which comes close to endorsing a conspiracy theory, which the authors explicitly disavow early on” (Entman, 1990, p. 126). The word “consciously” was Entman’s, and he neglected numerous statements about the media’s treatment of the Paris accord that did not fit his effort to bring us “close to” a conspiracy theory. To say that we “disavow” a conspiracy theory is also misleading: we went to great pains to show that our view is closer to a free market model; we argued that the media comprise numerous independent entities that operate on the basis of common outlooks, incentives and pressures from the market, government and internal organizational forces.

The propaganda model explains media behavior and performance in structural terms, and intent is an unmeasurable red herring. All we know is that the media and journalists often mislead in tandem—some no doubt internalize a propaganda line as true, some may know it is false, but the point is unknowable and unimportant.

Chomskian Linguistics

Some of the criticisms of the propaganda model have been laughable. Carlin Romano, in his review in *Tikkun*, located the weakness of the model in Chomskian linguistic theories that allegedly view everything as rooted in deep structures (Romano, 1989). He was unaware that the rooting of corporate behavior and performance in structure is the core of modern industrial organization analysis, that I had al-

ready used it in a 1981 book, *Corporate Control, Corporate Power*, and that I was mainly responsible for the chapter in *Manufacturing Consent* that presented the propaganda model. Of course, whether traceable to Chomskian linguistics or industrial organization theory, the substantive issues are: are the assumptions plausible? does the model work? But showing a possible esoteric origin is a form of putdown that suggests remoteness from and lack of touch with real media people.

Failure to Touch Base with Reporters

Romano did in fact follow up with the admonition that we had failed to ask reporters why they did what they did. He implied, without offering any evidence, that the journalistic bias we criticized might have been revealed as for good cause, if we had only asked for an explanation. However, apart from the fact that we did speak with quite a few reporters, the criticism is inane. Are reporters even aware of the deeper sources of bias they may internalize? will they not tend to rationalize their behavior? More important, if we find, for example, that in reporting on the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran elections of 1984, they asked different questions in the two elections in exact accord with the propaganda line of the US government, would asking journalists what went on in their minds serve any useful purpose? This line of criticism, like the insistence on inquiry into reporter–proprietor intentions, is a diversionary ploy that essentially denies the legitimacy of a quantitative (or scientific) analysis of media performance.

Failure to Take Account of Media Professionalism and Objectivity

A more sophisticated version of the last

argument, put forward by communications professor Daniel Hallin, is that we failed to take account of the maturing of journalist professionalism, which he claims to be “central to understanding how the media operate” (Hallin, 1994, p. 13). Hallin also states that in protecting and rehabilitating the public sphere “professionalism is surely part of the answer” (Hallin, 1994, p. 4).

However, professionalism and objectivity rules are fuzzy and flexible concepts and are not likely to override the claims and demands of deeper power and control relationships. Professionalism arose in journalism in the years when the newspaper business was becoming less competitive and more dependent on advertising. Professionalism was not an antagonistic movement by the workers against the press owners, but was actively encouraged by many of the latter. It gave a badge of legitimacy to journalism, ostensibly assuring readers that the news would not be influenced by the biases of owners, advertisers or the journalists themselves. In certain circumstances it has provided a degree of autonomy, but professionalism has also internalized some of the commercial values that media owners hold most dear, like relying on inexpensive official sources as *the* credible news source. As Ben Bagdikian has noted, professionalism has made journalists oblivious to the compromises with authority they are constantly making (Bagdikian, 1987, p. 180). Hallin himself acknowledges, moreover, that professional journalism can allow something close to complete government control through domination of sources (Hallin, 1994, pp. 64, 70).

Although Hallin claims that the propaganda model cannot explain the case of media coverage of the Central American wars of the 1980s, when there was considerable domestic hostility to the Reagan policies, in fact the model works extremely well there,

whereas Hallin’s focus on “professionalism” fares badly. Hallin acknowledges that “the administration was able more often than not to prevail in the battle to determine the dominant frame of television coverage”, “the broad patterns in framing the story can be accounted for almost entirely by the evolution of policy and elite debate in Washington”, and “coherent statements of alternative visions of the world order and US policy rarely appeared in the news” (Hallin, 1994, pp. 64, 74, 77). This is exactly what the propaganda model would forecast. If, as Hallin contends, a majority of the public opposed the elite view, what kind of “professionalism” allows a virtually complete suppression of the issues as the majority perceives them?

Hallin mentions a “nascent alternative perspective” in reporting on El Salvador—a “human rights” framework—that “never caught hold”. The propaganda model can explain why it never took hold;³ Hallin does not. Even though 700 journalists were present at the Salvadoran election of 1982, allegedly “often skeptical” of election integrity (Hallin, 1994, p. 72), why did it yield a “public relations victory” for the administration and a major falsification of reality (as described in *Manufacturing Consent*)? Hallin does not explain this. He never mentions the Office of Public Diplomacy, the firing of *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner, or the work of the flak machines.⁴ He does not explain the failure of the media to report even a tiny fraction of the crimes of the contras in Nicaragua and the death machines in El Salvador and Guatemala, in contrast with media inflation of Sandinista misdeeds and the double standard in reporting on the Nicaraguan election of 1984. Given the elite divisions and public hostility to the Reagan policy, media subservience was phenomenal and arguably

exceeded that which the propaganda model might have anticipated.⁵

Failure to Explain Continued Opposition and Resistance

Both Hallin and historian Walter LaFeber in a review in the *New York Times* (LaFeber, 1988) pointed to the continued opposition to Reagan's Central America policy as somehow incompatible with the model. These critics failed to comprehend that the propaganda model is about how the media work, not how effective they are. Even the sophisticated and sympathetic Philip Schlesinger calls ours an "effects" model, that "assumes that dominant agendas are reproduced in public opinion", but he immediately quotes our statement that the "system is not all powerful... Government and the elite domination of the media have not succeeded in overcoming the Vietnam syndrome" (Schlesinger, 1989, p. 301). Nowhere does he cite us saying anything like his summary of our alleged views on effects. We also stated explicitly with regard to Central America that the elite was sufficiently divided over tactics to allow space and considerable debate. We did stress, however, that the parameters of debate did not extend to fundamental challenges to the US intervention (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, pp. xii–xiii).

By the logic of this form of criticism of the propaganda model, the fact that many Soviet citizens did not swallow the lines put forward by *Pravda* demonstrates that *Pravda* was not serving a state propaganda function.

The Propaganda Model is too Mechanical and Functionalist and Ignores the Existence of Space, Contestation and Interaction

This set of criticisms is at the heart of

the negative reactions of the serious left-of-center media analysts such as Philip Schlesinger, James Curran, Peter Golding, Graham Murdock and John Eldridge, as well as that of Daniel Hallin. Of these critics, only Schlesinger both summarizes the elements of our model and discusses our evidence. He acknowledges that the case studies make telling points, but in the end he finds ours "a highly deterministic vision of how the media operate coupled with a straightforward functionalist conception of ideology" (Schlesinger, 1989, p. 297). Specifically, he claims that we failed to explain the weights to be given our five filters; we did not allow for external influences, nor did we offer a "thoroughgoing analysis of the ways in which economic dynamics operate to structure both the range and form of press presentations" (quoting Graham Murdock); and although we put forward "a powerful effects model" we admit that the system is not all powerful, which calls into question our determinism.

The criticism of the propaganda model for being deterministic ignores several important considerations. Any model involves deterministic elements, so that this criticism is a straw person unless the critics also show that the system is not logically consistent, operates on false premises, or that the predictive power of the determining variables is poor. The critics often acknowledge that the case studies we present are powerful, but they do not show where the alleged determinism leads to error nor do they offer or point to alternative models that would do a better job.⁶

The propaganda model deals with extraordinarily complex sets of events, and only claims to offer a broad framework of analysis, a first approximation, that requires modification depending on local and special factors, and that may be entirely inapplicable in some

cases; but if it offers insight in numerous important cases that have large effects and cumulative ideological force, it is arguably serviceable unless a better model is provided. Usually the critics stick to generalities and offer no critical detail or alternative model; when they do provide alternatives, the results are not impressive.⁷

The criticism of the propaganda model for functionalism is also dubious, and the critics sometimes seem to call for more functionalism. The model does describe a system in which the media serve the elite, but by complex processes incorporated into the model that involve mechanisms and policies whereby the powerful protect their interests naturally and without overt conspiracy. This would seem one of the model's merits; it shows a dynamic and self-protecting system in operation. The same corporate community that influences the media through its power as owner, dominant funder (advertising) and major news source also underwrites the efforts of Accuracy in Media and the American Enterprise Institute to influence the media through harassment and the provision of right-thinking experts. Critics of propaganda model functionalism such as Eldridge and Schlesinger contradictorily point to the merit of analyses that focus on "how sources organize media strategies" to achieve their ends.⁸ Apparently it is admirable to analyze corporate micro strategies to influence the media, but to focus on global corporate efforts to influence the media is illegitimate functionalism.

Golding and Murdock criticize the model for its focus on "strategic interventions", that allegedly cause us to "overlook the contradictions in the system. Owners, advertisers and key political personnel cannot always do as they wish." Analyzing "the nature and sources of these limits" is a "key task" of critical political economy (Golding

and Murdock, 1991, p. 19). The Golding–Murdock claim that the propaganda model focuses on "strategic interventions" is a surprising misreading, as the model's filters are built-in and operate mainly through the internalized recognition and enforcement of constraints and choices based on the structure of power. Strategic interventions certainly occur, but are of distinctly secondary importance.

It is also untrue that the propaganda model implies no constraints on media owners and managers; we recognized and spelled out the circumstances under which the media will be relatively open—mainly, when there are elite disagreements and when other groups in society are interested in, informed about and organized to fight about issues. The propaganda model does start from the premise that a critical political economy will put front and center the analysis of the locus of media control and the mechanisms by which the powerful are able to dominate the flow of messages and limit the space of contesting parties. The limits on their power are certainly important, but why should these get first place, except as a means of minimizing the power of the dominant interests, inflating the elements of contestation, and pretending that the marginalized have more strength than they really possess?

Enhanced Relevance of the Propaganda Model

The dramatic changes in the economy, the communications industries and politics over the past dozen years have tended on balance to enhance the applicability of the propaganda model. The first two filters—ownership and advertising—have become ever more important. The decline of public broadcasting, the increase in corporate

power and global reach and the mergers and centralization of the media have made bottom-line considerations more influential in the US, in Europe and many other countries. The competition for advertisers has become more intense and the boundaries between editorial and advertising departments have weakened further. Newsrooms have been more thoroughly incorporated into transnational corporate empires, with budget cuts and even less management enthusiasm for investigative journalism that would challenge the structure of power (Herman and McChesney, 1997). In short, the professional autonomy of journalists has been reduced.

Some argue that the Internet and the new communication technologies are breaking the corporate stranglehold on journalism and opening an unprecedented era of interactive democratic media. There is no evidence to support this view with regard to journalism and mass communication. In fact, one could argue that the new technologies are exacerbating the problem. They permit media firms to shrink staff even as they achieve greater outputs, and they make possible global distribution systems that reduce the number of media entities. Although the new technologies have great potential for democratic communication, there is little reason to expect the Internet to serve democratic ends if it is left to the market (Herman and McChesney, 1997, pp. 117–35).

The third and fourth filters—sourcing and flak—have also strengthened as mechanisms of elite influence. A reduction in the resources devoted to journalism means that those who subsidize the media by providing sources for copy gain greater leverage. Moreover, work by people such as Alex Carey, John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton has helped us see how the public relations industry has been able to manipulate press coverage of issues

on behalf of corporate America (Carey, 1995; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). This industry understands how to utilize journalistic conventions to serve its own ends. Studies of news sources reveal that a significant proportion of news originates in public relations releases. There are, by one count, 20,000 more public relations agents working to doctor the news today than there are journalists writing it (Dowie, 1995, pp. 3–4).

The fifth filter—anti-communist ideology—is possibly weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union and global socialism, but this is easily offset by the greater ideological force of the belief in the “miracle of the market” (Reagan). There is now an almost religious faith in the market, at least among the elite, so that regardless of evidence markets are assumed to be benevolent and non-market mechanisms are suspect. When the Soviet economy stagnated in the 1980s, it was attributed to the absence of markets; the disintegration of capitalist Russia in the 1990s is blamed on politicians and workers failing to let markets work their magic. Journalism has internalized this ideology. Adding it to the fifth filter in a world where the global power of market institutions makes non-market options seem utopian gives us an ideological package of immense strength.

Further Applications

The propaganda model fits exceedingly well the media’s treatment of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the subsequent Mexican crisis and meltdown of 1994–5. Once again there was a sharp split between the preferences of ordinary citizens and the elite and business community; polls consistently showed substantial majorities opposed to NAFTA—and to the bailout of in-

vestors in Mexican securities—but the elite in favor. Media news coverage, selection of “experts”, and opinion columns were skewed accordingly; their judgement was that the benefits of NAFTA were obvious, were agreed to by all qualified authorities, and that only demagogues and “special interests” were opposed.⁹ The effort of labor to influence the outcome of the NAFTA debates was harshly criticized in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, with no comparable criticism of corporate or governmental (US and Mexican) lobbying and propaganda. With the Mexican meltdown beginning in December 1994, the media were clear that NAFTA was not to blame, and in virtual lock-step they supported the Mexican (investor) bailout, despite poll reports of massive general public opposition. Experts and media repeatedly explained that the merit of NAFTA was that it had “locked Mexico in” so that it could not resort to controls to protect itself from severe deflation and unemployment. They were oblivious to the profoundly undemocratic nature of this lock-in (Herman, 1999, pp. 183–6).

As is suggested by the treatment of NAFTA and of labor’s right to participate in its debates, the propaganda model applies to domestic as well as foreign policy issues. Labor has been under siege in the US for the past several decades, but you would hardly know this from the mainstream media. A 1994 *Business Week* article noted that “over the past dozen years ... US industry has conducted one of the most successful union wars ever”, helped by “illegally firing thousands of workers for exercising their right to organize”, with unlawful firings occurring in “one-third of all representation elections in the late ’80s” (Bernstein, 1994, pp. 70). But this successful war was carried out quietly, with media co-operation. The decertification of unions, use of replacement workers and long and de-

bilitating strikes such as that involving Caterpillar were treated in a very low key, and in a notable illustration of the applicability of the propaganda model the long Pittston miners’ strike was accorded much less attention than the strike of miners in the Soviet Union (Tasini, 1994, pp. 7–9). For years the media found the evidence that the majority of ordinary citizens were doing badly in the New World Economic Order of marginal interest; they discovered this issue only under the impetus of Pat Buchanan’s right-wing populist outcries during the 1996 presidential election campaign.

Another striking application of the propaganda model can be seen in the media’s treatment of the chemical industry and its regulation (Herman, 1999, pp. 231–52). Because of the industry’s power, as well as the media’s receptivity to the demands of the business community, the media have normalized a system described by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* as “deliberately poisoning us, then policing the results”. Industry is permitted to produce and sell chemicals (and now also bioengineered foods) without independent and prior proof of safety, and the “policing” by the Environmental Protection Agency has been badly compromised by underfunding and political limits on enforcement as well as testing. Although industry denials of harm from its products—from lead in gasoline to asbestos and Agent Orange—and fraudulent testing have been notorious for many years, the media still use the phrase “junk science” to refer to the science employed by environmentalists and lawyers suing the industry on behalf of its victims, not that sponsored by industry. They have internalized industry usage, just as they have normalized a *status quo* of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) rather than of safety first.

In the health insurance controversy

of 1992–3, the media’s refusal to take the single-payer option seriously, despite apparent widespread public support and the effectiveness of the system in Canada, served well the interests of the insurance and medical service complex (Canham-Clyne, 1994). The uncritical media reporting and commentary on the alleged urgency of fiscal restraint and a balanced budget in the years 1992–6 fit well the business community’s desire to reduce the social budget and weaken regulation. The applicability of the propaganda model in these and other cases, including the “drug wars”, seems clear (Chomsky, 1991, pp. 114–21).

Final Note

In retrospect, perhaps we should have made it clearer that the propaganda model was about media behavior and performance, with uncertain and variable effects. Perhaps we should have

spelled out in more detail the contesting forces both within and outside the media and the conditions under which these are likely to be influential. However, we made these points, and it is quite possible that nothing we could have done would have prevented our being labeled conspiracy theorists, rigid determinists and deniers of the possibility that people can resist (even as we called for resistance).

The propaganda model remains a very workable framework for analyzing and understanding the mainstream media—perhaps even more so than in 1988. As noted earlier in reference to Central America, the media’s performance often surpassed expectations of media subservience to government propaganda. It did so, also, in their reporting on the Persian Gulf and Yugoslav wars of 1990 and 1999, respectively (Kellner, 1992; Mowlana *et al.*, 1992; Herman, 1999, pp. 161–6; Chomsky, 1999). We are still waiting for our critics to provide a better model.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion and illustration of the narrow focus of mainstream debates on media bias see Chomsky, 1989, pp. 160–80.
- ² Noam Chomsky analyses some of these criticisms in Chomsky, 1989: Appendix 1.
- ³ The government, a primary and powerful source, was pressing its case hard, and trying to downgrade human rights issues: it mobilized its resources of “flak” and anti-communist ideology to keep the media in line; and the owners and quite a few journalists of the dominant media were not unsympathetic to the government attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government.
- ⁴ On the firing of Raymond Bonner from the *New York Times*, its significance in curbing media criticism of US policy and the role of the *Wall Street Journal* as a media flak machine, see “The Wall Street Journal As Propaganda Agency”, chapter 9 in Herman, 1999.
- ⁵ For compelling documentation on this extraordinary subservience, see Chomsky, 1989, pp. 197–261.
- ⁶ I should note that the case studies in *Manufacturing Consent* are only a small proportion of those that Chomsky and I have done that support the analysis of the propaganda model. Special mention should be made of those covering the Middle East, Central America and terrorism. See especially Chomsky, 1983, 1986, 1989; Herman, 1982; Herman and O’Sullivan, 1990.
- ⁷ In fact, the only attempt to offer an alternative model was in Nicholas Lemann’s review of *Manufacturing Consent* (Lemann 1989). For an analysis of this effort see Chomsky 1989, pp. 145–8.
- ⁸ The quotation is from Schlesinger (1989: 284), cited approvingly by Eldridge (1993: 29).
- ⁹ For a fuller account, “NAFTA, Mexican Meltdown and the Propaganda System”, chapter 14 in Herman, 1999. See also Lee, 1995.

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