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# Why Anti-Realist Views Persist in Communication Research: A Political Economic Reflection on Relativism's Prominence

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## Abstract

The article seeks to explain why denials of reality are tolerated and go largely unchallenged in communication research. It proposes that the acceptance of anti-realist views is related to communication theorists' general hostility toward radical political economic critiques of media institutions and coverage. Unwilling to undertake research which lucidly exposes the central power relations in society, communication scholars sympathetic to corporate ownership and elite opinion resort to a particular form of obscurantism. This form of obscurantism does not only misrepresent uncongenial work, but espouses an apparently abstruse – though rather vacuous – anti-realist philosophy, which pre-empts consideration of ideas that threaten to expose the workings of existing institutional structures and communication scholars' role in defending them.

## Keywords

media bias, news, political economy, propaganda model, realism, relativism

[...] there was really little that critical theory could say on the *systematic* patterns of capital accumulation.

This [...] bias has been amplified many times over by the postists [i.e. post-modernists hostile to scientific thinking]. The latter have been only too happy to abandon the systematic study of capitalist reality altogether and instead delve into the deconstruction of post-structuralism, identity, race and gender. The capitalists, for their part, have been keen on subsidizing this promising line of 'critical research'. And why wouldn't they? The investment carries hefty dividends.

...

By spreading ignorance, the postists have helped keep the central power relations of capitalism unknown and therefore difficult to oppose. And with the intellectuals neutralized and the laity stupefied [sic], there

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has been little to prevent the wholesale spread of capitalism. (Nitzan and Bichler, 2009: 54–55, emphasis in original)

## Introduction

Communication research suffers from a proliferation of easily discreditable scholarly views of the relativist variety.<sup>1</sup> Yet these views are rarely challenged within the field. Meanwhile, more plausible ideas are harshly criticized and, even more often, ignored. Why do these phenomena occur and are they related?

The idea that mainstream media coverage serves corporate and state interests when these are at stake, is well supported by evidence (Bennett et al., 2008; Dimaggio, 2010; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Preston et al., 1989), but is marginalized in both academic scholarship and public discourse (Herring and Robinson, 2003; Mullen, 2010; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010). This marginalization is not altogether surprising given the persistent commitment of most communication theorists, since the field's inception, to corporate and state interests and given the subservience of scholarship to these interests (Lippmann, 1922; for additional examples see Schiller, 1989: 136–55). Arguably one of the clearest cases of this tendency in academic scholarship is the negative reception of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model (Herring and Robinson, 2003; Mullen, 2010; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010),<sup>2</sup> which sought to expose corporate and state interests in ostensibly neutral media products. Scholars who have documented the marginalization of the model have so far focused on the low rate of citations accorded its authors and on misplaced criticisms of the model (Herring and Robinson, 2003; Mullen, 2010; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010). However, the dogmas justifying such treatment of radical political economic critiques have not been thoroughly explored.<sup>3</sup>

The present work argues that the lionization and uncritical acceptance of relativistic views and the marginalization of radical political economic thought are related. The relationship between them is one of ideological legitimation and mutual reinforcement. Thus, a relativistic climate contributes to the obfuscation of facts and arguments which would otherwise expose the subservience of significant sectors within academia to existing institutional structures.

The identification of relativist intellectual dogmas is worthwhile for several reasons. For one, these dogmas are almost universally glossed over, including by their opponents, and have a remarkable resilience in communication research despite the few scattered attacks mounted against them (Gauthier, 1993, 2005; Lau, 2004; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; see also Windschuttle's (2000) scathing critique of such views).<sup>4</sup> Second, an important step toward realizing the ideal of genuine free exploration in the social sciences is a hard look in the mirror and a clear understanding of the serious pitfalls and lacunae within the discipline. Third, the analysis of belief-systems underpinning social phenomena – one of which is the intellectual culture itself – is a sociological task par-excellence, well within the purview of traditional social science and the study of how ideas are communicated and adopted.

The article starts with a recapitulation of the main findings about the marginalization and unjustified criticism of Herman and Chomsky's work. It then draws on a prominent case study of 'marginalizing criticism' of Herman and Chomsky, and examines it in detail. Next, it directly moves on to the critic's record of endorsement of relativist ideas in the discipline of media and communication studies. Later, it traces these ideas back to their original formulations within the discipline and critically engages them. Once relativism's flaws are discussed, the article registers its obstinacy within communication studies literature. Finally, the article provides a political economic explanation for relativism's persistence within the discipline and critiques Herman and Chomsky's work for lack of explicitly expressed disagreements between themselves and some of the proponents of the relativist dogmatisms.

## Modes of Marginalization – An Assessment of the Evidence

It would be an understatement to say that communication scholars are reserved about radical political economic critiques of the media. One particularly cogent political economic critique which has received largely negative responses is Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model, formally stated and empirically applied in a book titled *Manufacturing Consent* (originally published in 1988).

The Propaganda Model posits that a number of institutional factors built into the American mainstream media lead to a bias favoring the interests of the corporate sector and the state. The institutional factors behind the said bias include the corporate ownership, size, and profit orientation of mainstream media, their dependence on advertisers' money, reliance on official sources and pro-establishment experts, negative responses to media content (especially if organized by groups with substantial resources), and a mobilizing ideology widely shared across society. Herman and Chomsky go on to demonstrate in compelling detail how pro-business and pro-government bias shows up in actual news products, by analyzing, among other things, the coverage of paired examples of near-identical events with varying consequences for business and state interests, and by registering the narrow range of debate in the media on several key issues, corresponding to the spectrum of tactical elite disagreements. Throughout, Herman and Chomsky point to available but untapped evidence and critical comment which the media could have used to challenge business and state interests but chose not to (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Although apparently liberal communication scholars could be expected to be sympathetic to such an argument, especially as prominent critics have acknowledged the Propaganda Model's evidential and argumentative strengths (see Herman, 1996, for a review of the criticisms), the reaction turned out to be quite the opposite. Indeed, media analysts' overwhelming antagonism to the Propaganda Model has been documented by previous studies.

Consider Herring and Robinson's (2003) analysis of eight prominent studies on the media coverage of US foreign policy. These eight studies offered findings and explanations similar to those of the Propaganda Model and thus were pushing against the boundaries of acceptable opinion in 'moderate'<sup>25</sup> communication studies' circles. Judging by Herring and Robinson's (2003) reasoning, the eight scholarly works had two broad options of repaying intellectual debt: citation of Herman and Chomsky and/or citation of mainstream and non-radical media analysts making essentially identical arguments, specifically, Lance Bennett and Daniel Hallin. As Herring and Robinson make clear, with one exception, the eight studies chose to cite the latter two scholars.

One could object, however, that if essentially identical ideas have been cited and discussed, then no substantive marginalization had actually taken place. At worst, one could argue, Herman and Chomsky have been personally marginalized. While Herring and Robinson 'consider but reject a personal explanation of this marginalization' (2003: 555), they do not explicitly discuss the possibility that the marginalization in its very essence – not only the motivation behind it – was personal (i.e. a marginalization of the *persons* Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky). In other words, one may agree with Herring and Robinson that Herman and Chomsky are marginalized, but insist that the marginalization is restricted to their personae, and does not extend to their ideas. Such a conclusion would seriously undermine the significance of Herring and Robinson's focus on citations and main findings. However, toward the end of their essay, Herring and Robinson provide a redeeming clarification to the effect that there are indeed substantive differences between Herman and Chomsky and the works of Hallin and Bennett who have been cited approvingly by the eight studies. While Herman and Chomsky fundamentally dispute the very legitimacy of media subservience to corporate and government interests and question the morality of US foreign policy, Hallin and

Bennett seem to accept them or, at the very least, to take no position on these issues (Herring and Robinson, 2003: 563–64).

Thus, as Robinson and Herring argue, it is no wonder that politically ‘moderate’ communication scholars at the margins of acceptable opinion would rather identify themselves with likeminded scholars, than with the radical Herman and Chomsky. Robinson and Herring could perhaps be criticized at the time for drawing conclusions from a potentially unrepresentative sample of eight ‘significant’ studies, which they take to be ‘research-based analyses of the media and US foreign policy by academics published either as books by major publishers or articles in major journals’ (Herring and Robinson, 2003: 558, F23). However, further research has demonstrated the robustness of their insight.

Andrew Mullen (2010) has provided large-scale quantitative data on the low levels of citation of the Propaganda Model. As he points out, only 2.6 percent in a sample of over 3,000 journal articles, and only 11 out of a sample of 48 communication textbooks attended to the Propaganda Model (Mullen, 2010: 679–80). Aside from the tendency to gloss over the Propaganda Model, the few scholars to engage with it produced a stream of negative commentary. The next section discusses some of this negative commentary and its implications.

### **‘Marginalizing Criticism’ of a Political Economic Critique**

A clear feature of most of the negative commentary on the Propaganda Model has been the false attribution of claims to Herman and Chomsky and attacks on straw men in lieu of tackling their actual arguments (Herman, 1996; Herring and Robinson, 2003; Mullen, 2010). However, among the commentary Mullen (2010) surveys, the critique by leading media sociologist Michael Schudson (1989) stands out and merits special notice, for three reasons. For one, its rendering of Herman and Chomsky’s views was not, for the most part, an attack on straw men, but can be described more accurately as an unwillingness to draw the same conclusions from the same facts. Second, Schudson’s essay is an authoritative and influential review of the state of the art of communication research (which has since been updated more than once, e.g. Schudson, 2002, 2005). For this reason, it offers insight not only into how prominent spokespersons for the discipline understand the Propaganda Model but also into how they view it in relation to other – more widely held – ideas. Third, virtually none of the critics of Herman and Chomsky’s marginalization have critically engaged Schudson’s evolving views on the matter or discussed their implications for the field (for an exception see Dimaggio, 2010).

Before turning to Schudson’s criticism of the Propaganda Model it bears notice that he approves of corporate control over the media. As he has written:

[S]ome scholars write as if corporate ownership and commercial organizations necessarily compromise the democratic promise of public communication [...] but the evidence is more nearly that the absence of commercial organizations, or their total domination by the state, is the worst case scenario. (Schudson, 2005: 175)

Leaving aside that Schudson seems to be drawing an *ought* (i.e. ‘worst case scenario’) from an *is* (i.e. ‘the evidence’), and that no argument is given to the effect that the only alternative to ‘corporate ownership’ is ‘domination by the state’, Schudson clearly believes that ‘the absence of commercial organizations ... is the worst case scenario’. Simply put, Schudson views commercial or business domination over the media as a desideratum. It is in this context that Schudson’s opposition to Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model should be understood.

Schudson (1989) originally had three (or to be exact three and a half) main objections to the Propaganda Model: 1. That it is ‘a rather blunt instrument for examining a subtle system’,

characterized by ‘more heterogeneity and more capacity for change (however limited that capacity) than they [Herman and Chomsky] give it credit for’ (Schudson, 1989: 269). 2. That some of the examples of bias provided in support of the model – specifically those pertaining to the coverage of elections in Central America – are ‘not so careful’ (Schudson, 1989: 269), as they ignore an alleged diminution in bias when compared to foreign affairs reporting a generation earlier. 3. That the Propaganda Model does not say ‘[W]hat institutional mechanisms or cultural traditions or contradictions of power provide room for debate and revision [in media coverage]’ (Schudson, 1989: 270). In addition, Schudson argued that Herman and Chomsky didn’t ‘locate any essential difference between the role of leading news institutions in the United States and *Pravda* in the Soviet Union’ (Schudson, 1989: 269), without specifying his exact reservation. Presumably, in this latter argument Schudson had relied on the prima facie implausibility of the *Pravda* analogy. Let us examine each objection in turn.

Objection 1 can be read in at least two distinct ways. Either Schudson is asserting that the propaganda model does not acknowledge the existence of some heterogeneity in the media, or he has in mind a particular threshold of heterogeneity for which the Propaganda Model fails to account. The first of these readings seems to be false. Herman and Chomsky do not deny the existence of some heterogeneity in the media, ‘[R]ather’, as Herman and Chomsky explicitly point out, the media ‘permit – indeed, encourage – spirited debate, criticism and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus’ (1988: 302). The second reading, however, seems to be more plausible. That is, Schudson may be dissatisfied with the *level* of heterogeneity that Herman and Chomsky ascribe to the media. Still, given that Schudson himself acknowledges the ‘limited’ ‘capacity for change’ within the media system and concedes that ‘[T]heir [Herman and Chomsky’s] documented examples ... remain quite powerful’ (Schudson, 1989: 269), it is unclear where he differs with Herman and Chomsky on the question of heterogeneity. Put otherwise, Schudson does not provide either an exact or a rough estimate of the level of heterogeneity which has been presumably overlooked by Herman and Chomsky.

Objection 2 has to do with the appropriateness of Herman and Chomsky’s examples from the coverage of Central American elections. Contrary to them, Schudson appears to be persuaded of a reduction in bias exhibited by media coverage of several Central American elections, as compared to media coverage a generation earlier (*vis-à-vis* Vietnam). Seemingly, in order to show a diminished level of bias one would at least have to engage with some of the evidence about the conditions under which the said elections took place and juxtapose them against media coverage, including the quantitative figures and qualitative data which Herman and Chomsky (1988: 87–142) adduce to support their claims of media bias. Not least, a historical comparison of news coverage would also be necessary to demonstrate a decline in bias over time. Schudson offers no such detail, basing himself instead on Hallin’s alleged conclusion that bias has reduced. However, as Edward Herman had later pointed out, Hallin has acknowledged (with reference to the coverage of Central American elections), that ‘the administration was able more often than not to prevail in the battle to determine the dominant frame of television coverage’, that ‘the broad patterns in the framing of the story can be accounted for almost entirely by the evolution of policy and elite debate in Washington’, and that ‘coherent statements of alternative visions of the world order and U.S. policy rarely appeared in the news’ (Hallin, 1994: 64, 74, 77; cited in Herman, 1996: 121). Hallin also mentioned a ‘nascent alternative perspective’ in reporting on El Salvador – a ‘human rights’ framework – that ‘*never caught hold*’ (Herman, 1996: 121, emphasis added).

Hallin is undoubtedly correct in arguing that ‘[I]t seems to me there is little doubt that it was far harder for the administration to control public opinion in the 1980s than the 1960s’ (Hallin, 1994: 11) due to widespread public opposition to its policies. But Herman and Chomsky have never disputed this point. Quite the contrary, as Chomsky has written elsewhere:

[I]f the population is out of control and propaganda doesn't work, then the state is forced underground, to clandestine operations and secret wars; the scale of covert operations is often a good measure of popular dissidence, *as it was during the Reagan period*. (1989: 34, emphasis added)

Schudson may have conflated changes in public opinion – which *Manufacturing Consent* never denied – with changes in media coverage. The latter changes may have indeed occurred in one or another sense, but Schudson (and one might add, Hallin) have not provided any comparative evidence or argument to sustain this claim.

Schudson's third objection refers to Herman and Chomsky's alleged failure to mention the factors that can open up room for debate in the media. Of all the objections, this one appears to be the closest to a genuine straw man, or at best a crucial omission. Consider the following excerpts from *Manufacturing Consent*:

As the war progressed, elite opinion gradually shifted to the belief that U.S. intervention [in Vietnam] was a "tragic mistake" that was proving too costly, thus enlarging the domain of debate to include a range of tactical questions hitherto excluded. Expressible opinion in the media broadened to accommodate these judgments. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 172)

The organization and self-education of groups in the community and workplace, and their networking and activism, continue to be the fundamental elements in steps toward the democratization of our social life and any meaningful social change. Only to the extent that such developments succeed can we hope to see media that are free and independent. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 307)

Thus, Herman and Chomsky not only provided an example of circumstances under which media discourse actually became more diverse, but also outlined the preconditions for more far-reaching changes in the media system and coverage.

Finally, Schudson's implicit reference to the implausibility of the comparison between mainstream media institutions in the United States and *Pravda* obscures the nature of the comparison. The statement 'essential difference between the role of leading news institutions in the United States and *Pravda* in the Soviet Union', leaves the reader wondering about the precise meaning of 'role' (or for that matter, 'essential difference'). Does 'role' imply the organizational structure of the media or does it denote the features of the news content? – The former is dubious at first glance given the differences between the two societies (in the Soviet case the state directly intervened in the media), but the latter appears to be an open-ended empirical question. Schudson chooses to remain silent on the precise meaning of the term 'role' and the questions it raises, but these can be easily answered by consulting *Manufacturing Consent*. A perusal of the six indexed mentions of *Pravda* in the book – which Schudson had presumably checked<sup>6</sup> – and an additional non-indexed mention (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 112, 139, 184, 185, 194, 199, 332 N2), indicates that *all* of the comparisons without exception are limited to the news contents of *Pravda* and U.S. media (i.e. the comparison does not extend to how the media are controlled and managed). Could Schudson have missed it?

Crucially, Schudson does not explain why he finds these content-related and apparently plausible comparisons objectionable. I might also add parenthetically that in (at least) three cases the *Pravda* comparison serves Herman and Chomsky as a thought experiment rather than as a statement of fact. Moreover, Herman and Chomsky explicitly clarify at the end of their book that 'the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 302). Thus, contrary to Schudson's characterization, Herman and Chomsky seem to identify 'essential differences' between the US media and *Pravda*.

This exhausts Schudson's objections. None of them, however, appear to have any scholarly grounds. Nonetheless, these objections serve as a bridge to a discussion of scholarly views which Schudson seems to endorse.

## Record of Endorsement

It should be instructive to compare Schudson's reaction to Herman and Chomsky's evidentially and argumentatively sound work, to his treatment of other scholarly works which suffer from basic conceptual and argumentative problems (problems which shall be discussed in the next section). Schudson (1989) explicitly relates his objections to Herman and Chomsky's work to the necessity of considering what he deems to be valuable work. As he writes:

[T]he weaknesses in the political economy perspective lead necessarily to greater scholarly attention to the social organization of the newswork and the actual practices of creating the news product. (Schudson, 1989: 270)

It is worth noting, however, that all of the works which Schudson cites next – and which presumably have not received sufficient 'scholarly attention' – have been published a long time before Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*. Thus, by implication, Herman and Chomsky's contribution to the discipline of communication studies is rendered close to nil in Schudson's scholarly bookkeeping. But what is the nature of the works Schudson is so sanguine about?

The first one he mentions is Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester's widely cited essay 'News as purposive behavior: On the strategic use of routine events, accidents, and scandals', published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1974. The centerpiece of the essay, as Schudson notes, is a particular 'typology of news stories' based on whether the news occurrence is planned and whether its planners are or are not promoting it as news. For present purposes, however, it suffices to mention Schudson's takeaway insight from reading this work. 'For Molotch and Lester', he writes,

it is a mistake to try to compare news accounts to 'reality' in the way that journalism critics ordinarily do, labeling the discrepancy 'bias'. Instead, they seek out the purposes that create one reality instead of another [...] Molotch and Lester reject what they call the 'objectivity assumption' in journalism – not that the media are objective but that there is a real world to be objective about. (Schudson, 1989: 271)

Despite due attribution, Schudson didn't explicitly comment on the validity of this philosophical insight at the time. Instead, he proceeded on the assumption that it was valid. Indeed, after citing Molotch and Lester to the effect that 'newspapers reflect not a world "out there"' but 'the practices of those who have the power to determine the experiences of others' (Schudson, 1989: 271, citing Molotch and Lester, 1974: 54), Schudson quickly leaped to the following derivative question: '[I]n what may these practices consist?' (Schudson, 1989: 271). He then directly moved on to a discussion of studies that surveyed news practices, which (presumably unlike the world 'out there') were reflected in newspapers' contents. Needless to say that if newspapers can in principle reflect the world 'out there' but fail to do so under systematically identifiable circumstances, several important questions pertaining to bias may arise. Schudson effectively sets these questions aside.

Because Schudson is not always explicit, some readers may doubt if he had actually endorsed Molotch and Lester's denial of reality. Any lurking doubts about Schudson's actual position on the question of the existence of reality and the world out there can be safely dispelled, I believe, through a closer reading of his essay as well as by examining its later version. As he points out, without attribution this time, '[N]ews is not a report on a factual world [...] it is not a gathering of



facts that already exist[s]’ (Schudson, 1989: 274). Schudson is mindful, however, that his position is problematic. He struggles to point out that his position does not amount to saying that ‘journalists *fake* the news’, but only to saying that ‘journalists *make* the news’ (Schudson, 1989: 263, emphasis in original). However, he immediately inserts an oblique comment which implies something else altogether: just as ‘journalists *make* the news’, he argues, ‘scientists “make” science’, in ‘precisely’ the same sense suggested by ‘sociologists of science’ (Schudson, 1989: 264). But by the late 1980s, when Schudson was writing, sociologists of science were making far-reaching claims about nature being the *creation* of science, rather than the object of its discoveries (e.g. Barnes and Bloor, 1981; Latour and Woolgar, 1986/1979).

Still, Schudson is quite consistent when he rejects the idea that ‘journalists *fake* the news’. Indeed, a denial of reality along the lines of Molotch and Lester’s views (who explicitly eschew ‘an objective distinction between telling a truth and telling a falsehood’; Molotch and Lester, 1974: 104 F6), effectively annuls, in the absence of a notion of ‘real’ or ‘true’, any coherent notion of ‘fake’.

Another indication that a denial of reality was indeed among Schudson’s views at the time comes from an updated version of his 1989 essay published in 2005. For reasons that will be discussed below and which extend beyond communication studies, openly stated relativistic views have – to an extent – fallen into academic disrepute during the 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, writing 16 years later Schudson finally sees fit to acknowledge that ‘journalists do not create hurricanes or tornados, elections or murders’ (Schudson, 2005: 173). ‘*In the past*,’ Schudson adds, ‘I joined nearly all other social scientists who study the news in speaking of how journalists “construct the news”, “make news” or “socially construct reality”’ (Schudson, 2005: 173, emphasis added). The upshot is that ‘[I]n the past’ Schudson’s position was in some sense different and has since changed. But how precisely did it change and how is it different?

When commenting on Molotch and Lester’s essay, 2005’s Schudson appears to distance himself from their views. Recalling Molotch and Lester’s rejection of ‘the assumption that there is a real world’, Schudson now feels that ‘[T]hirty years later, it looks overstated’ (Schudson, 2005: 181). Leaving aside the conundrum of how one can ‘overstate’ the non-existence of the world (plainly, it is either there or it is not), the reason for this so called overstatement perplexes. According to Schudson, Molotch and Lester failed to recognize

that one of the constrains within which journalists operate is *the need* to write ‘accurately’ about actual – objectively real – occurrences in the world [...] The reality-constructing practices of the powerful will fail (in the long run) if they run roughshod over the world ‘out there’. (Schudson, 2005: 181, emphasis added)

Even if one overlooks the confounding scare quotes around the terms ‘accurately’ and ‘out there’ in what is presumably intended as a recantation of earlier anti-realism, this description seems unfair to Molotch and Lester. Indeed, they had no hesitations whatsoever acknowledging essentially the same ‘need’ Schudson is referring to (while simultaneously denying the existence of the world). Consider the following quote from Molotch and Lester: ‘if newsmaking results in published accounts considered by a multitude to differ from “what happened” [...] the legitimacy of newsmaking as an objective enterprise is undermined’ (1974: 110).

Clearly, the issue has never been about the ‘*need*’ to write “‘accurately” about actual – objectively real – occurrences in the world’ (or in the ‘world “out there”’), which Molotch and Lester acknowledge in their mention of newsmakers’ aspiration to the ‘legitimacy’ of an ‘objective enterprise’, but rather the existence of these ‘actual [...] occurrences’. Formulations such as ‘the need’ to write ‘accurately’ without running ‘roughshod over the world “out there”’, and the aspiration to the ‘legitimacy’ of an ‘objective enterprise’, do not commit the authors to the existence of a real

world (a point Molotch and Lester understood). Both ‘need’ and ‘legitimacy’ can be logically accommodated within a thoroughly relativistic philosophy which denies reality. Schudson does not claim that the ‘need’ can be realized, while Molotch and Lester do not equate ‘legitimacy of news-making as an objective enterprise’ to the possibility of describing the world out there.

Although Schudson clearly wishes to register a disagreement with Molotch and Lester as well as his own change of heart, he maintains a notable degree of ambiguity on the core issue (i.e. does he or does he not accept the existence of an objective reality, rather than someone’s ‘need’ to feign its existence?). It is also worth noting, however, that the ambiguity as to where Schudson stands on the core issue of reality’s existence is further compounded by two additional facts: on the one hand, the earlier approving mention of anti-realist sociologists of science does not appear in the 2005 version of Schudson’s claim that ‘[J]ournalists make the news just as [...] scientists make science’ (2005: 173); and on the other hand, a decade later Schudson (2014) has written a short essay commenting on a special issue of *Journalism*, where he has discussed rather approvingly one of the more extreme anti-realist works in the sociology of science, without even a hint of challenging its anti-realism.<sup>7</sup>

Schudson, however, is not the only prominent media scholar who viewed anti-realist positions as preferable to the Propaganda Model. One of the four textbooks which Mullen (2010) tabulates as containing an extensive discussion of the model (within a minority of 11 out of 48 surveyed textbooks which contained any mention of the Propaganda Model), is Stuart Allan’s (2004) *News Culture*. After an extensive summary of the model, Allan states:

Any conflation of news with propaganda is, in my view, unsustainable. The propagandist, unlike the journalist (at least under ordinary circumstances), sets out with the deliberate intention of deceiving the public, of concealing ‘the truth’ so as to direct public opinion in a particular way through manipulative tactics, devices and strategies. To make the point bluntly, then, journalists are not propagandists [...] [T]his is not to deny, however, that the factors Herman and Chomsky attribute to ‘propaganda’ with their notion of ‘filtering’ are crucial determinants shaping the operation of the news media [...] I wish to suggest, however, that its more compelling insights regarding the determinants of news coverage need to be further developed, in the first instance by taking account of the everyday practices journalists engage in when constructing news accounts as truthful ‘reflections’ of reality. (2004: 55–56)

Yet Herman and Chomsky’s model does not presuppose that individual journalists are conscious deceivers and propagandists. As they write:

[M]edia news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on the basis of professional news values. Within the limits of the filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases for news choices are hardly imaginable. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 2)

Thus, Herman and Chomsky hold that media *institutions* – rather than individual journalists – carry out a propaganda function. Surely Allan who has carefully summarized the model knows this. And yet imagining that the proposition ‘journalists are propagandists’ is somehow entailed by the Propaganda Model serves the purpose of advertising the usefulness of studies which focus on ‘everyday practices journalists engage in when constructing news accounts as truthful “reflections” of reality’. As the reader may suspect by now, after the familiar scare quotes around ‘the truth’ and “‘reflection” of reality’, it does not take long before Allan reaches both Molotch and Lester and other anti-realist communication scholars, whose work is surveyed amicably without qualifications and criticisms. How this anti-realism constitutes ‘further development’ of Herman and Chomsky’s ideas remains unclear.

It is time to consider the intellectual foundations and merits of Molotch and Lester's main philosophical insight, as well as two other influential scholars' work whose positions both Schudson and Allan find agreeable.

## The Intellectual Foundations and Impact of Relativism

Molotch and Lester's philosophical insight – the idea that the existence of the world ought to be questioned – was by no means a lone voice in the wilderness in the 1970s, when this idea gained respectability in some areas of sociology and philosophy (Sokal, 2008). The genesis of this intellectual phenomenon is beyond the scope of the present work, but an explanation of its position within communication research will be ventured in the next section. For now, I will discuss the works of media sociologists Gaye Tuchman and Herbert Gans, who have been recognized as supporters of existing institutional structures. As political economist Robert W. McChesney has argued, the works of Tuchman, Gans, and a few others have

tended to accept the dominant institutional arrangements as a given. The institutions were unassailable, and the work tended to concentrate upon newsroom organization, professional practices, and the implications for content. (2008: 128)

Beyond the unquestioning acceptance of existing institutional structures of the mainstream media – chiefly their business ownership – these scholars have also expressed anti-realist views. An earlier but also highly influential expression of these views had appeared in Tuchman's ethnographic work, whose anti-realist formulations are more nuanced than Molotch and Lester's and somewhat more ambiguous but ultimately boil down to virtually identical conclusions. Although Tuchman explicitly mentions 'presentation of supporting evidence' (1972: 667) as a journalistic procedure, she immediately qualifies that 'supporting evidence consists of locating and citing additional "facts", which are *commonly accepted as "truth"*' (Tuchman, 1972: 667, scare quotes and emphasis in original). Tuchman's idea of common acceptance itself, however, is not one necessarily involving factual evidence, as common acceptance of false beliefs is equally possible (of course on the assumption that falsity is an intelligible notion). Moreover, as Tuchman makes clear earlier, a reporter covering a series of charges hurled by politicians at one another 'cannot himself confirm the truth' (Tuchman, 1972: 665) of those charges, and he 'cannot', on Tuchman's account, 'prove that' a politician's 'assessment is "factual"' (Tuchman, 1972: 665). Whether the word 'cannot' in these remarks denotes an impossibility in principle or merely difficulties of access, it is clear that Tuchman is not referring here to evidence which entails facts (with or without scare quotes).

Another widely cited and highly influential sociologist who has produced a landmark newsroom ethnography is Herbert Gans. Consider his rather reserved opening statement on the question of reality:

Basic philosophical concerns about the existence of external reality and about whether it can be grasped by empirical methods are not at issue here, for most critics of the news agree with journalists and most social scientists that empirical inquiry about external reality is possible. Thus, I shall not debate the possibility of determining what journalists call facts. (Gans, 2004: 306)

Leaving aside that Gans bases the validity of the belief in reality on what critics of the news, journalists and social scientists 'agree' on (as opposed to, say, on what's reasonable or rational to believe), Gans indeed acknowledges that journalism works with 'empirically-gathered information' (2004: 311). However, he promptly warns that such empirically-gathered information may

not adjudicate factual claims until and unless ‘there is agreement on the concepts and methods’ (Gans, 2004: 311) – an ‘agreement’ (a la common acceptance above) which Gans believes to arise, *inter alia*, from ‘value judgments’ (Gans, 2004: 306).

The idea that agreement, values or common acceptance determine facts or the standards by which factual questions are settled is problematic, to say the least.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one shudders at the possibility that common acceptance of fabricated quotes would be regarded as evidence; or, alternatively, that an agreement between newswriters and the public that fabrication was a legitimate method of news-gathering, would be considered empirical.

While the possibility that there is no world outside of human sensation is irrefutable and although the world’s existence cannot be proven, there is also no rational reason to accept its non-existence. As some natural scientists have acknowledged, the existence of the world amounts to a ‘perfectly reasonable hypothesis’ (Sokal, 2008: 176), especially if one seeks to explain undesirable sensations which are unlikely to have been wished into one’s consciousness (Sokal, 2008). The systematic study of the consequences of this hypothesis – known as science – has been extremely fruitful in successfully explaining and predicting many sensations (which include both everyday experiences and carefully measured scientific observations).

More importantly for present purposes, insofar as media sociologists such as Tuchman and Gans are in the business of recording the goings-on inside news organizations, they are themselves engaged in empirical research. Were it not the case, they could produce their studies out of whole-cloth without bothering to spend hours and indeed months in newsrooms and in conversations with journalists. Presumably, neither Gans nor Tuchman would argue that the behaviors they ascribe to journalists are merely ‘commonly accepted as “truth”’, or that their ethnographic findings stem merely from an ‘agreement’ among academics to the effect that participant observations yield adequate descriptions of journalists’ behaviors. Rather, Gans’s and Tuchman’s descriptions are intended as literal and reliable portrayals of journalistic work. Thus, the questioning of reality in these works is self-refuting, intellectually unconvincing, and easily discreditable. And yet a systematic examination of a sample of over 300 citations of Molotch and Lester’s essay – arguably the clearest expression of anti-realism in communication research – using the Google Scholar citation mechanism, revealed only 16 instances of criticism of their work, of which only six challenged their denials of reality.

## **A Political Economic Account of Relativism’s Prominence**

The 66th president of the American Sociological Association, Lewis A. Coser, foreshadowed the political economic implications of anti-realism in the social sciences already in 1975. At the time, however, anti-realist views were not yet as dominant in the social sciences. Nonetheless, anti-realist views did populate the ethnomethodological circles to which Molotch and Lester happened to belong. Coser’s prescient – but, in my view, inadequately heeded – remarks deserve extensive quotation:

In general, it would seem to me, that we deal here with a massive cop-out, a determined refusal to undertake research that would indicate the extent to which our lives are affected by the socioeconomic context in which they are embedded. It amounts to an orgy of subjectivism, a self-indulgent enterprise [...] where the discovery of the ineffable qualities of the mind of analyst and analysand and their private construction of reality serves to obscure the tangible qualities of the world ‘out there.’ By limiting itself to trying to discover what is in the actors’ minds, it blocks the way to an investigation of those central aspects of their lives about which they know very little. By attempting to describe the manifest content of people’s experiences, ethnomethodologists neglect that central area of sociological analysis which deals with latent

structures. The analysis of ever more refined minutiae of reality construction, and the assertion that one cannot possibly understand larger social structures before all these minutiae have been exhaustively mapped, irresistibly brings to mind Dr. Johnson's pregnant observation that, 'You don't have to eat the whole ox to know that the meat is tough'. (Coser, 1975: 698)

Following Coser, I posit that Molotch and Lester's adoption of anti-realist ethnomethodological tenets had not been widely criticized for its denial of reality because of the benefits which accrue from this belief to many academics. As noted at the outset, communication scholars have a record of formulating ideas which are serviceable to business and state interests. Because honest and lucid social scientific work is likely to lead one to acknowledge the actual nature of power relations in society and their systematic consequences, such work must be rooted out. But it cannot be simply gagged, as this would fly in the face of such purported academic ideals as open-mindedness, critical thinking, and freedom of exploration. More refined instruments are needed, which would be able to sabotage honest academic work while preserving the intellectual community's desired self-image. To achieve this goal, a body of doctrine which can insulate the intellectual community from criticisms while appearing to be socially progressive, becomes necessary.

Needless to say, such doctrines are not explicitly and formally articulated by communication scholars in smoke-filled rooms, or through any overt conspiracy. Rather, they evolve organically and dialectically in response to what are deemed to be instinctively unpalatable ideas. Because communication scholars share aspirations of career promotion which often depend on personal acquaintances and recommendations, are under pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, file grant applications which are generally refereed by colleagues from the discipline (with the grants themselves often originating in business or government), and often depend on the cooperation of various media organizations and personnel for their research, they must be careful not to offend any of these stakeholders' fundamental claims to social prestige and public approval (all of this is typical of the larger intellectual and professional community, see Schmidt, 2001).

Academics' claims to social prestige and public approval, which rest on a posture of pluralism and liberalism, become difficult to sustain when the scholarly community's commitment to existing institutional structures is revealed through the publication of inconvenient facts and arguments. To preempt such facts and arguments, the path of least resistance may be a simple denial and marginalization. However, because academics are aware of individuals' capacity for independent reasoning – which might lead some to examine uncongenial ideas and, even more menacingly, find them agreeable – better results can be achieved through obfuscation.

One form of obfuscation that was mentioned above is the false attribution of claims to proponents of threatening views. But this form of obfuscation is easily rebutted by simply consulting the original texts and statements (as has been done here). Thus, a more effective form of obfuscation would be one which does not merely deny or falsify critical work, but sets the parameters of acceptable debate. Such parameters are not easily set, as any rule can be potentially broken or at the very least challenged. But if the parameters of debate can be made to appear as if they rest on some abstruse and intellectually formidable philosophical foundations, a failure to adhere to the community-sanctioned rules can be branded as philistinism and lack of sophistication. Molotch and Lester's denial of reality, alongside their focus on purposive individual practices, holds the promise of discounting any imaginable fact as fictitious, and appearing to do so while celebrating the creative capacity of individuals to act strategically despite existing power inequalities.<sup>9</sup>

Basing the rules of debate on an abstruse philosophy has secondary (and, for some, desirable) effects on the state of intellectual rigor in the field. Given the constant pressure to publish and appear to have new thoughts, lax standards of argumentation appropriately dressed up in the jargon

of the initiated and tacitly accepted across the board, save effort and make the path to publication appear more secure and dependent on obligatory nods to dominant paradigms.

To explain the unquestioning acceptance of Molotch and Lester's work by ascribing to their ideas a system-maintaining function may seem implausible at first glance. After all, they are ostensibly progressive authors who identify with social movements and criticize the elites. While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of these authors' convictions, their main philosophical insight has a predictable set of consequences. For one, as they explicitly point out, if one accepts that there is no reality, the empirical study of news bias becomes virtually inconceivable (as one cannot criticize the media for failing to do the impossible). Second, because, as noted above, *any* empirical research is inconceivable in the absence of reality, the authors introduce into their empirical discipline a glaring logical contradiction (to be consistent they would have either to eschew empirical research altogether or to admit the existence of reality). Third, the kind of empirical research which Molotch and Lester's philosophy allows for is one concerned with beliefs, dispositions, and media personnel's micro-practices, not one concerned with reality and facts which lie beyond them.

Note that each one of these philosophical implications is highly serviceable to pro-status quo communication scholars. In this context, it is worth recalling Schudson's unsubstantiated claim of the gradual diminution in media bias. This proposition is simultaneously and contradictorily served by the denial of even the possibility of bias and by a denial of reality which includes the relevant facts about the Central American elections. Moreover, the contradiction itself is legitimated by another widely accepted contradiction (already noted) that empirical research is consistent with the absence of reality.

Given such intellectual dogmas it becomes easy to dismiss carefully researched but ideologically uncongenial work without even a semblance of an argument, thereby giving free reign to arbitrary academic gate-keeping and an insurance policy to the effect that any negative commentary against radical ideas would go unchallenged, no matter how flimsy. The academic marginalization of the Propaganda Model seems to be well served by these intellectual dogmas.

In 2005 Schudson has finally distanced himself from overt denials of reality, but, as argued, it was mainly a rhetorical rather than a substantive distancing. Throughout the 1990s proponents of relativism in the social sciences were persuasively and accessibly rebutted by scientists (Gross and Levitt, 1994; Sokal and Bricmont, 1998). Without going into the details of these illuminating exchanges and debates, it is worth noting that by the early 2000s the most vehement proponents of relativism have begun to backpedal on their most extreme claims (Collins and Evans, 2002; Latour, 2004). If until the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s social scientists' denials of the world still had a respectable scholarly imprimatur, this appearance has now begun to crack. Still, relativistic views were apparently too valuable to be abandoned altogether, and so they had to be repackaged. There seems to have been just enough sophistry in the intellectual culture to conceal one's commitment to relativism while retaining its core tenets.

Schudson's (2005) treatment of Herman and Chomsky's work and the reaction to Schudson's essay seem to be a case in point. We have already noted Schudson's more recent willingness to distance himself from Molotch and Lester's open expressions of relativistic views, but did he also have a change of heart with regard to Herman and Chomsky's work? On the one hand, none of the objections discussed above appear in the 2005 version of the essay. On the other hand, this time around Schudson elects to rebut Herman and Chomsky in the following way:

A rigid view that sees the media working hand-in-glove with other large corporations to stifle dissent and promote a lethargic public acceptance of the existing distribution of power (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) is entirely inconsistent with what most journalists in democratic societies commonly believe they are

doing. It also fails to explain a great deal of news content, especially news critical of corporate power [...] or news of corporate scandals, conflicts, illegalities, and failures. (Schudson, 2005: 177)

This criticism is doubly noteworthy. For one, ‘news critical of corporate power [...] or news of corporate scandals, conflicts, illegalities, and failures’ happen to be the first issue mentioned in *Manufacturing Consent*:

It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent. This is especially true where the media actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 1)

Thus, the propaganda model not only does not fail to explain news critical of corporate power, but it is based on the assumption that this is indeed the case.

Second, ‘what most journalists in democratic societies commonly believe they are doing’, is an apparently glaring non-sequitur if it is intended as a rebuttal of Herman and Chomsky’s description of the institutional realities of corporate-owned news organizations. On a common-sense view, the realities of power distribution within the news organization are wholly independent of what journalists happen to believe they are doing.

Yet from an altogether different, and by now familiar, perspective it may indeed be an acceptable rebuttal to Herman and Chomsky. That is, on the assumption that what ‘journalists [...] commonly believe’ is all there is to the question of what ‘they are doing’. Put otherwise, some scholars may be sympathetic to the view that if journalists believe themselves rather than the corporation to be in control of their work, then these beliefs have some bearing on how much autonomy journalists actually enjoy. But is such reasoning acceptable among large swathes of the communication research community?

As it happens, there is prima facie evidence to suggest that Schudson’s argument had found resonance – or at least registered no opposition – among communication scholars who have cited and thus presumably read his work. Through a systematic reading of all accessible citations of Schudson’s 2005 article on Google Scholar, this author was able to find only two scholarly sources (by a single author) which took issue with Schudson’s article and with this specific argument, albeit on entirely different grounds (see Hearn-Branaman, 2011, 2014).

Some would no doubt object to the significance of this finding. For one, it is possible that some of the scholars who have cited Schudson’s work simply skimmed through it in search for corroborating scholarly views, without noticing certain argumentative nuances. It is also possible that some would view criticism of the kind just offered as impolite and unnecessarily pedantic given the overall insightfulness of the article. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that both explanations are correct, but let us also spell out their implications. The implications are these: proponents of such explanations are conceding, in effect, that scholars don’t engage in in-depth reading and/or that their concerns for politeness are selective. Indeed, Schudson’s summary dismissal of Herman and Chomsky’s work without any detectable scholarly justification did not seem to raise any concerns of impoliteness. Moreover, given the predominance of straw men in the critiques of Herman and Chomsky’s work, it is conceivable that many scholars were not inclined to read them carefully, and yet Herman and Chomsky’s work has been harshly criticized.

Regrettably, it appears as if Herman and Chomsky themselves have not dealt with the consequences of relativistic attitudes for media analysis. As it happens, *Manufacturing Consent* cites (on p. 19) two anti-realist scholars: Tuchman (1972), who has been mentioned above, and Fishman (1980), who has claimed that ‘it is not useful to think of news as either distorting or reflecting reality’ (Fishman, 1980: 12; see also Lau (2004) for a critique of Fishman’s anti-realist views).

Incidentally, Fishman's (1980) work is also referenced by McChesney (2008: 128) as another example of uncritical acceptance of institutional givens (see 'The Intellectual Foundations...' section above).

Although Fishman and Tuchman are cited for their empirical observations about excessive journalistic reliance on government and corporate sources, no comment is made about the anti-realist argumentative context in which those observations were embedded. I posit that such empirical observations were not unique to the cited authors, and that Herman and Chomsky's own previous work (e.g. Chomsky and Herman, 1979a, 1979b) could be used to sustain them. By citing these works, however, Herman and Chomsky have contributed to the impression that there are no fundamental disagreements about how news sourcing is to be understood between themselves and the anti-realist scholars they have cited.

Future work on scholarly dogmatism in communication research should undertake detailed examinations of specific books, chapters, and articles within the field, including more case studies and qualitative as well as scientometric analyses to determine the level of approval and prevalence enjoyed by ideas which lack strong intellectual foundations. If widely held ideas lack in strong intellectual foundations, their prevalence calls for social and perhaps political explanations. Additionally, more work needs to be done in explicating and critiquing long-held ideas and methodologies, and if need be, debunk their unnecessary and wasteful elements, as Coser had done in the above cited presidential address. It is worth recalling that the ultimate goal of social science is to understand the central forces shaping society, rather than to obscure them.

## Conclusion

The uncritical reception of anti-realism among communication scholars is not happenstance. Rather, as I have argued, it is an outgrowth of communication scholars' social and political commitment to existing institutional structures, and allows them to obscure this commitment. The present article has made this argument on the basis of the overwhelming antagonism and/or marginalization with which a radical political economic critique has been met, and on the basis of an in-depth analysis of one of the discipline's leading spokesman's evolving views with regard to anti-realism and radical political economic critiques. The analysis has demonstrated that the dismissal of radical political economic critiques has lacked in intellectual grounds and that this dismissal was argumentatively related to the adoption of anti-realist views. My thesis has also taken note of anecdotal evidence that citations of anti-realist works, as well as citation of work which contains groundless criticism of radical political economic critiques, quite generally appear without objections.

This does not mean, however, that my argument had been conclusively substantiated. Indeed, a critic could complain with some justification that in order to show conclusively that the rejection of radical political economic critiques was related to anti-realism, only a large sample of case studies showcasing such a relationship would meet the necessary burden of proof. If future research could gather adequate data to test my argument in a more robust empirical setting (e.g. if the relationship was measured over hundreds of articles and books which simultaneously and explicitly feature substantive commentary on both radical political economic critiques and anti-realist views) that would significantly push understanding forward. Unfortunately, however, reality – social reality included – does not normally present itself in neat little boxes, and scholars do not necessarily make explicit their entire system of beliefs in every paper, chapter or book. Thus, one often has to rely on indirect evidence, such as levels of citations and, importantly, levels of approving and disapproving citations. I believe these are useful measures in a study such as this one, which deals not only with widely held ideas but also with ideas whose marginalization has been documented by previous studies (and that appear in mainstream literature only infrequently).



Another possible objection to the argument that anti-realism legitimizes the marginalization of Herman and Chomsky's work may be that I have misidentified the decisive ideological factor behind this marginalization. It may be argued that Herman and Chomsky's work is marginalized not because mainstream communication scholars are anti-realists, but because they are Liberal-Pluralists, that is, deniers of the very reality of power inequalities in society and in the media more specifically. As Andrew Mullen has noted, Liberal-Pluralists hold that

there are different opinions, policy proposals, worldviews, etc. that the general public can choose from. Moreover, the most popular of these will be reflected in the laws and policies adopted by the political system. The liberal-pluralist view of how the media system works is based upon the notion that it constitutes the "fourth estate". Put simply, it is claimed that the media serve as a guardian of the public interest and as a watchdog on the exercise of power; the media thereby contribute to the system of checks and balances that comprise the modern democratic system. (2010: 674)

Thus, Herman and Chomsky may be marginalized because their findings, which document power inequalities in society and a state/corporate media bias, do not jibe with how leading communication scholars see the world. On this account, anti-realism may simply be an ancillary rhetorical device which is used by mainstream scholars to divert attention from the refutation of liberal-pluralism. This is a weighty empirical and analytical concern, as there is little doubt that the mainstream of communication scholars consists of liberal-pluralists.

However, communication scholars' retention of liberal-pluralist views in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary remains unaccounted for, without additional explanatory work. After all, even an orthodoxy cannot withstand a clear-cut refutation of its foundational beliefs without (at least) minimal adjustments (see Nitzan and Bichler, 2009, for a fascinating review of such adjustments within the discipline of economics). Arguably, it is precisely the persistence of anti-realist dogmas among communication scholars – enabling them to simply discount evidence of bias and inequality by redefining and relaxing the standards of empirical research (e.g. by neglecting logical inference and disregarding data) – which does the remaining explanatory work. Indeed, if evidence of systematic corporate bias can simply be ignored and if journalists' purported beliefs about their own professional autonomy can be cast as evidence par-excellence, then nothing threatens the liberal-pluralist worldview. Thus, the view of anti-realism as merely a rhetorical device aimed at salvaging a discredited liberal-pluralism is surely co-extensive with the argument offered here, but it overlooks the role of anti-realism as a pseudo-epistemology with an identifiable set of suppositions about the goals of research and about what counts as evidence.

Be it as it may, the argument – which as the title suggests ought to be viewed as a reflection – is surely worthy of debate. If it turns out that another explanation accounts in a more persuasive fashion for the prevalence of anti-realism in communication studies, that would be a welcome addition to our scholarly self-understanding. Contrariwise, if the argument turns out to be even partly correct, this would call for serious reconsideration of how scholarly work is done in the field, and for what purposes.

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## Notes

1. The term ‘relativist’ denotes here positions which deny the existence of reality and/or the possibility of knowing, representing or describing it, while simultaneously regarding people’s subjective beliefs and micro-practices as legitimate objects of sociological inquiry.
2. Obviously, Herman and Chomsky are not the only adherents of what may be loosely described as either critical or radical political economy of communication. By now, there is a sizable literature on the media which self-identifies as working from the political economy perspective (see Fuchs, 2012; Golding and Murdock, 1997; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 1996; Schiller, 2000; Wasko et al., 2011, among many others). However, the present article does not examine if this literature is similarly marginalized. Instead, I take Herring and Robinson’s (2003) theoretical account of Herman and Chomsky’s marginalization – communication scholars’ commitment to corporate and state interests – to be robust, and I do not provide much beyond anecdotal evidence in support of this account. It is precisely because the marginalization of Herman and Chomsky’s work is well-established (Mullen, 2010) that it is arguably a fruitful case study of the ideological dogmas behind the marginalization of radical political economic thought. I would hypothesize, however, that if some self-identified adherents of political economy enjoy a warmer reception in the mainstream of communication studies it may be the result of their compromises with power and their purposive efforts to mainstream themselves – a hypothesis to be tested by future research and a subject for self-reflection among critical scholars.
3. Schiller (1989), a rare exception, discusses one class of such dogmas but focuses mainly on their serviceability to business and state interests. My account acknowledges this serviceability but focuses more on the theorists’ own self-promotional interests and on a different, though arguably related, set of dogmas. Another exception are Nitzan and Bichler’s (2009) important comments (appearing in the epigraph), but they tackle a more outspoken form of anti-realism than the more subtle one discussed here and do so only in passing.
4. Although Windschuttle’s critique of anti-realism in media studies is fully justified in my view, it does not address three important issues: the incidence of anti-realism in sociological – not merely textual – studies of the media, realist critiques of corporate bias in the news, and the possibility that journalists’ industry experience could be a source of uncritical acceptance of institutional givens.
5. The term is used here in an ironic sense. By ‘moderate’ I mean scholars who do not pose fundamental challenges to the legitimacy of existing institutions (e.g. see nothing wrong in corporate ownership per se and accept the necessity of bureaucratic governing bodies which are devoid of direct democratic control).
6. Indeed, Schudson has given the exact number ‘half a dozen instances where they directly liken the American press to *Pravda*’ (1989: 269).
7. This is the work of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986) with its suggestive title *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. As physicist Allan Sokal has noted, this work contains statements such as “‘reality is the consequence rather than the cause’” of the so-called “‘social construction of facts’” (2008: 152).
8. This is not to say, however, that such views are not held by some contemporary philosophers and epistemologists (see Douglas, 2000; Fantl and McGrath, 2007; Longino, 1990; as well as others who have written on *inductive risk* and *pragmatic encroachment*). This literature argues that (at least in some cases) social values determine the standards of evidence by which one acquires factual knowledge. The favored (though in my view specious) demonstrations of this claim are examples from work in the applied sciences (e.g. cancer studies) in which error carries not only knowledge-related risks (i.e. failing to acquire factual knowledge) but also social and ethical risks (e.g. increasing the risk of cancer in society). For example, cancer studies may classify borderline or indeterminate samples of tissue (drawn from rats which have been exposed to environmentally pervasive chemicals) as cancerous, in order to minimize risks to public health. Yet this is arguably not an instance of scientists forming factual knowledge, but rather a decision about how to act responsibly *in the absence* of factual knowledge about specific tissue samples.
9. The latter point is a common feature of cultural studies which question the realities of corporate power (Nitzan and Bichler, 2010; Schiller, 1989).

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