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Twenty Years at the Margins: The Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model, 1988-2008

Introduction

2008 marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. This comment piece briefly assesses how the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) has been received within the field of media and communication studies.

Britain has a proud record of media and communication scholars adopting a critical/structuralist approach to media analysis, addressing key issues such as bias, ideology, ownership, power, etc. Such a framework infused two readers, *Mass Communication and Society* and *Culture, Society and the Media*, published in 1976 and 1982 respectively, and the *Media, Culture and Society* journal, launched in 1979. It also underpinned the work of the Glasgow University Media Group, which put out a number of publications in the 1980s. Therefore, it seems reasonable to surmise that the PM would have found a natural home within this political economy tradition. However, this was not to be the case.

Herman and Chomsky sought to explain the behaviour and performance of the mass media in the United States (US) by advancing and empirically testing a number of hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the propaganda system only works effectively where there is consensus amongst the elite, specifically the government, plus the leaders of the corporate and media sectors. Herman argued that where the elite are united in their concern about an issue, and where the general public is apathetic or ignorant, the media would effectively serve elite interests. A similar thesis was advanced by Ferguson, who argued that where the major investors in political parties agree on an issue, the parties will not compete on that issue, no matter how strongly the public might want an alternative. Conversely, Herman and Chomsky conceded that the propaganda system does not work as efficiently when there is dissensus; where the elite disagrees about a particular issue, such division will be reflected in the media coverage of that issue in a way that opens up space for dissent. In this situation, the media, and critical voices within and without it, can influence the policy process rather than just reflect elite interests. Indeed, the political contest model put forward by Wolfsfeld and the policy-media interaction model advanced by Robinson both suggest that the media may play an active rather than merely passive role in elite policy formation.

The second hypothesis is that in capitalist, liberal-democratic regimes, such as the US, where the mass media is under corporate rather than state control, media coverage is shaped by what is, in effect, a 'guided market system' underpinned by five filters – the operative principles of the PM. In their own words:

Money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public. The essential ingredients of our propaganda model, or set

of news 'filters', fall under the following headings: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by governments, business and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) 'anti-communism' as a national religion and control mechanism. These elements interact with and reinforce one another. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premise of discourse and interpretation, and the definitions of what is newsworthy in the first place (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p.2).

The third hypothesis relates to the way in which the PM will be received within academia and wider society. As Chomsky explained

The model also makes second-order predictions about how media performance will be discussed and evaluated. And it makes third-order predictions about the reactions to studies of media performance. The general prediction, at each level, is that what enters the mainstream will support the needs of established power (Chomsky, 1989, p.153).

Since its publication in 1988, the PM has received very little attention within the field of media and communication studies, the wider social sciences or society more generally, as Herman and Chomsky predicted. Those who did engage with the PM were overwhelmingly negative, again as predicted. Such criticisms, emanating from a variety of sources on the left and right of the political spectrum, included the notion that the PM presented a conspiratorial view of the media, that it overstated the power of the propaganda system and downplayed popular opposition to elite preferences, that it was deterministic, functionalist and simplistic, that it neglected of impact of journalistic professionalism, that it was overly ambitious, projecting a 'total' and 'finalising' perspective, and that, in the post-Cold War period, given the redundancy of anti-communism, it too is obsolete. Furthermore, one scholar questioned whether the PM supported or opposed liberal principles, whether those involved in the propaganda system were conscious of its operation and effects, and whether, by deploying notions such as 'brainwashing under freedom' and 'thought control', the PM was indeed concerned with media effects rather than just media behaviour and performance.

Since its publication, several scholars have presented evidence in support of the central hypotheses of the PM. However, as predicted, this work has received very little attention. Furthermore, although they did not utilise the PM, a number of other scholars in Britain and the US concurred that the mass media tended to manufacture consent for elite preferences, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. Again, this work was marginalised. While the PM has been applied within the Canadian and US contexts, and while a number of scholars have alluded to its explanatory potential in terms of the British media, there has been no attempt to empirically test the PM within the British context. Indeed, one critic questioned whether it could be applied in countries with very different media systems and political structures.

These criticisms, which were rebutted by Herman and Klæhn, are little more than obfuscation, for none of these critics, some of whom used to work within the political economy tradition, have actually addressed or engaged with the operative principles of the PM, its predications nor the vast amount of empirical, supportive data presented by Herman and Chomsky. Why is this? First, scholars neglect the PM, and the work of Herman and Chomsky more generally, because they are seen as 'outsiders' to the discipline; consequently they are not considered to be 'legitimate' analysts within the field of media and communication studies. Second, Chomsky in particular has been regularly smeared by his opponents as an apologist for totalitarian regimes and a 'self-hating Jew'. Consequently many scholars avoid such a seemingly 'controversial' figure. Third, following the 'cultural turn' in media and communication studies in the 1980s and 1990s, with its focus on culture, discourse and identity, there has been move away from empirical and political economy-based studies of the media, of which the PM is exemplary. Fourth, the PM challenges the mainstream consensus. That the PM should be ignored by liberals and those on the centre-left should come as no surprise; after all, the model, or more specifically its predictions and the wealth of empirical evidence that support these, effectively demolish their worldview of how the media and political systems operate. What is more surprising is how many academics on the left, who probably claim to be empirical social scientists, have also neglected the PM and its radical implications for the operation of the mass media in contemporary capitalist societies.

The practical implications of such marginalisation are lamentable. Media and communication students are often not exposed to the PM as it rarely features in mainstream textbooks and seldom appears in the curricula of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Likewise, media and communication scholars do not engage in debates about the PM in their journals or at their conferences. The result has been twenty years at the margins; a devastating indictment of the state of academia given that the PM is, as Chomsky argued, one of the most tested models in the social sciences.

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