

CHAPTER 5

Does the Propaganda Model Actually Theorise Propaganda?

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1. Overview

The Propaganda Model (PM), first published in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*² and describing how corporate media serve as conduits for business and government propaganda, has weathered many criticisms over the years. Derided by some as ‘simplistic’ or ‘conspiratorial’, shunned by the ‘respectable’ academy and, perhaps more often than not, simply ignored, the model has, however, stood the test of time and, at least to this writer, it seems that there is little in the way of substantial disagreement amongst many scholars with the basic claims put forward in the model. The way in which the model has been adopted by researchers has not been optimal, however, and this chapter puts forward the case for a significant expansion of the model and the way it is employed so as to provide a more thorough-going analysis of the strategies and organisations actually involved in the creation of propaganda: as such, I argue for an expansion to the model which would allow it to live up to its name. To be clear, this is not necessarily a criticism of

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Herman and Chomsky given that they always saw the Propaganda Model of the media as one part of a much broader set of structures and processes through which dominant ideologies are communicated and vested political and economic interest protected: but it is a criticism of the way in which the model has tended to draw attention to the corporate media at the expense of a more detailed consideration of the strategies and organisations that function to create a propagandised information environment in the first instance.

The chapter proceeds in three stages: section two briefly recaps the core claims of the Propaganda Model as well as summarising initial criticisms and then noting the extent to which the model is now accepted and indeed endorsed by many critical scholars. Section three then sets out the argument that, in significant ways, the model captures only a portion of the processes involved in the production of propaganda. In this way, perhaps ironically, the model shares the same shortcomings as other more mainstream models of media-state relations. Section four then sets out the processes which should be incorporated into a revised and expanded Propaganda Model. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of this suggested expansion with respect to assessing the democratic health of contemporary liberal democracies and identifies some areas for future empirical research.

2. From Outcast to Mainstream: A Short History of the Propaganda Model

The original model developed by Herman and Chomsky detailed the now well-known five filters (size, concentration and profit orientation of the mainstream media, their reliance upon advertising and official sources, flak and the ideology of anti-communism) which worked together in order to shape the news output of corporate US media.³ Early reactions to the Propaganda Model from the academy were largely dismissive, arguing variously that the model was inaccurate, simplistic or counter-productive⁴ whilst frequent 'off the record' conversations experienced by this writer suggested their work was polemical or unscholarly. Indeed, two academics reported that they had experienced suggestions to remove references to Chomsky's work write:

these have been made by those who say that they agree with Chomsky but were concerned to protect us from the costs of being associated with him. On one occasion, it was suggested that, even though a manuscript written by one of us indicated concurrence with Chomsky's analysis on a particular issue, references to Chomsky should remain in the manuscript only when disagreement with Chomsky was being registered. The point was made an argument would be dismissed merely for having Chomsky's name attached to it, whereas if it had a mainstream big name as the source, it would be applauded for its great wisdom.⁵

Such prejudice has led, over time, to a remarkable silencing of their work across significant swathes of mainstream academic research on media and politics. Herring and Robinson reviewed eight significant studies of media-state relations, all of which shared similar analyses of the relationship of mainstream media to power, but none of which referenced *Manufacturing Consent*.⁶ Woods identified a similar pattern across a corpus of introductory texts to International Relations.⁷ Since then, however, many important mainstream accounts of media-state relations have, to varying degrees, reflected or concurred with many of the basic claims made in the Propaganda Model⁸ whilst others have continued to draw attention to the importance of their work for understanding media-state relations⁹. It is perhaps possible then that there might now be some kind of generalised academic acknowledgement of the analysis they provide, at least for those who accept that there are powerful and significant constraints acting upon media autonomy such that their ability to speak truth to power and hold the powerful to account are not being met. In addition, other scholars are continuing the media critique epitomised by the Propaganda Model¹⁰ and earlier Marxist-inspired analyses of the media. So, in sum, the challenge and resistance to power represented in the work of Herman and Chomsky has then been far from futile.

3. Identifying Theoretical Limitations to the Propaganda Model and its Elite-driven Bedfellows

As mentioned above, the central claims of the Propaganda Model are largely compatible with the body of critical literature, the *elite-driven paradigm*, which theorises media-state relations and identifies the great extent to which corporate media are closely located to political and economic power. Lance Bennett's oft-cited *indexing hypothesis*,¹¹ Daniel Hallin's *media spheres*,¹² Robert Entman's *cascading activation model*,¹³ Gadi Wolfsfeld's *political contest model*¹⁴ and my own *policy-media interaction model*,¹⁵ all are compatible with the central claims set out in the Propaganda Model. All of these accounts focus on theorising, with sometimes relatively subtle differences, the forces that act on media in order to create their 'close proximity' to political and economic power. In particular, they all place great significance on the role of media reliance upon official sources when defining the news agenda (i.e. the sourcing filter described in the Propaganda Model). However, in doing so, they all share a particular weakness: they fail to go beyond this official source-media linkage into a deeper exploration of ways in which officials, and the governments and business interests that they represent, engage in the systematic manipulation of information. To put this another way, before the point is reached at which an official source passes information to the journalist, all of the elite-driven paradigm models provide minimal insight into the processes of 'information management' and propaganda production.

This is an important shortcoming, especially for a model with the title ‘propaganda.’ The PM asserts that a highly propagandised worldview is being communicated to media precisely because they are so dependent upon official sources and that this worldview serves elite interests. But the model provides little or no insights into how this distorted worldview is created in the first instance. In a sense, the PM and other elite-driven paradigm models are only presenting us with half the picture of what is going on. There are several reasons why this is a problem; some minor, some major. First, to the extent that the Propaganda Model focuses attention on the media, and why they come to fail, the attention and blame is focused upon journalists and editors. This might be fair enough for some, but it does take attention and blame away from the governments and corporations involved in actively manipulating and distorting information: it takes two to tango and one might reasonably expect governments and corporations to take an even greater share of the responsibility in this relationship. Second, in theoretical terms, there is a tension between the fifth filter (ideology) and the fact that there is also active production of propaganda. The ideology filter posits the existence of a fixed system of ideas which fix or shape understandings, closing off some ways of thinking about the world and enabling others. Ideology, as it is commonly understood and presented in the PM, is not a particularly active process and is normally assumed to function in a way that does not involve conscious and intentional actions:¹⁶ the ideology of anti-communism, for example, referred to a widely shared perspective that assumed communism was inherently bad, whilst capitalism was morally superior. Journalists, editors and officials simply shared this outlook, so, for example, when it came to the Vietnam War, all understood the ‘right’ way of interpreting the conflict and without having to think about it. But there this is more to it than that. Those ideologically driven anti-communist impulses did not spontaneously occur; they had to be constructed and promoted at some point, and that is where an understanding of propaganda can help make greater sense of the ideology filter. Propaganda understood as the active promotion of particular world views can be seen as, in the first instance, the establisher of particular ideological constructs. In the US, a large part of the propaganda which helped cement the ideology of anti-communism presumably emerged with the infamous ‘red scares’ of the 1950s and McCarthyism as well as exaggerated intelligence claims regarding the threat posed by the Soviet military. In sum, the point here is that bringing propaganda production into the frame helps us to understand better how ideological frameworks get to be constructed in the first instance.¹⁷

There are even more important reasons why we should take the ‘propaganda short-coming’ of the PM seriously. The scale of the euphemistically titled ‘public relations’ industry is vast and indeed represents one of the largest industries in the world, and with massive impacts. For example, the US federal government spent \$16 billion on ‘outside PR, ads’ between 2002 and 2012. In the recent past persuasion and manipulation of public perceptions has been conducted by the

tobacco industry about the dangers of smoking, causing 100 million deaths in the twentieth century,¹⁸ and also by the fossil fuel industry attempting to obfuscate understanding of climate change.¹⁹ At the same time, sophisticated strategies are involved in manipulating perceptions and behaviours and which, together, constitute a clear set of doctrines and practices. Propaganda production also involves co-ordination with think tanks, academia and NGOs. For all these reasons, one can reasonably assume that the production of propaganda is a process involving very significant resource allocation, intensive activity, and one which is extremely important. Indeed, the resources allocated and the intensiveness of the activity far outstrips those related to corporate media. For example, as recent Pew studies have shown and others have commented upon, the imbalance between journalists and PR workers is even greater now than before with the latter outnumbering the former three to one.²⁰ Suffice to say, if we want to fully understand how and why the media come to present such a distorted worldview, we need to examine all of these dimensions related to the production and dissemination of propaganda: And this means moving beyond a focus on corporate media and expanding analysis to include examination of propaganda strategies and sites of production. And it is to this task that we now turn.

4. Extending the Explanatory Reach of the Propaganda Model through an Examination of Propaganda Production

If we are then to fully understand the way in which media function as a propaganda arm for powerful interests, it is necessary to expand the existing model in ways which might do greater justice to the actual production of propaganda. What follows is no more than an approximate sketch of the kinds of issues which should be incorporated into an expanded version of the existing Propaganda Model. But taking the issues identified above, I want to discuss first the matter of the persuasion strategies employed as part of propaganda campaigns, and second the range of actors involved in propaganda production.

4.1 *'Strategies of Propaganda and Persuasion'*

The term propaganda is actually widely disputed. For some, propaganda is understood to refer to any kind of persuasion²¹ whilst for others it is understood to refer to only manipulative forms of persuasion.²² Clearly, in terms of how Chomsky employs the term propaganda, he is understanding it to involve manipulative forms of persuasion and it is certainly the case that most working definitions of propaganda employ some notion of manipulation. It is also important to note that actors involved in propaganda production are likely to hold a variety of self-perceptions about what they are engaged in: some will be

fully aware that their activity involves intentional manipulation of beliefs and behaviours; others might have already internalised a particular world view and believe that they are telling the truth; and for others it might be the case that attempts to manipulate opinions and behaviours is a necessary and acceptable part of contemporary society. The common feature across all of these self-perceptions is the organised, systematic and intentional manipulation of information in ways that either distorts peoples' perception of reality or pushes them to behave in ways they would not otherwise do.

But how does persuasion and influence become manipulative and what constitutes manipulation? Neither the literature on propaganda, nor the Propaganda Model as currently formulated, give much in the way of insight to this question. The existing and most widely adopted definition of propaganda involves demarcating propaganda into white, grey and black categories.²³ This is actually a rather crude and inadequate formulation because it falls into the trap of equating white propaganda, whereby one-sided but factually accurate claims are made in order to persuade, with truthful communication. However, as Bakir et al. explain,²⁴ stating only half the truth can itself be fundamentally deceptive and, therefore, manipulative. A more productive approach is to conceptualise clearly the ways in which communicative processes of persuasion and influence can become manipulative. For example, Herring and Robinson²⁵ developed a conceptual framework which mapped the key ways through which the propaganda strategy of *deception* works. Deception might occur through lies: statements of fact known to be untrue which are nonetheless communicated in order to deceive. However, although many associate propaganda with lying, and it is certainly the case that many people interpret Chomsky's position, and that of the PM, with this form of deception, it is also the case that 'lies have short legs'²⁶ and, moreover, are a high-risk political strategy. In other words, getting caught out in a lie is normally fatal in political terms. More common ways in which deception occurs is through strategies of omission and distortion. Omission involves selecting some facts, and ignoring others, in a way that makes your case more likely to persuade. This is more than a matter of simply trying to persuade someone based upon how you might see an issue. It is a matter of deliberate omission of information that might be critical to whether or not someone is likely to be persuaded. Another frequently employed tactic is to distort or exaggerate facts. As Herring and Robinson²⁷ describe, the now infamous deception over Iraq's alleged possession of WMD in the run-up to the Iraq War involved a fundamental distortion of intelligence estimates: through distortion of information an actual intelligence assessment that described Iraq as a potential future threat, perhaps five years down the line, was distorted to say that Iraq was currently capable of launching WMD within 45 minutes of an order.

It is also important to recognise that propaganda strategies involve more than the deceptive manipulation of information in the three ways described. It also frequently involves misdirection²⁸ which entails producing and disseminating

true information but which is intended to direct public attention away from problematic issues. Beyond the management and shaping of the information environment, propaganda can also involve action in the real world or, to be more precise, shaping material contexts through the use of incentives and, at times, influencing conduct via threats.²⁹ For example, sanctions against regimes involving the targeting of populations and governments in order to alter their behaviour are examples of incentivising strategies aimed at organising conduct. Again, strategies such as the ‘shock and awe’ campaign witnessed at the start of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, involving highly visible and dramatic bomb attacks on Iraqi government buildings right in the centre of Baghdad, are designed to communicate powerful coercive messages to populations largely revolving around a message to surrender and comply with invading forces!

Overall, analysing and understanding the precise strategies of persuasion and influence that are employed in any given case can help to provide a richer and deeper understanding of the ways in which information, which is then passed through the media and on to the public, comes to be profoundly distorted in the ways claimed by Herman and Chomsky. The concepts of incentivising and coercing propaganda messages,³⁰ add important additional layers to our understanding of the propaganda techniques used by powerful actors.

4.2 Sites of Propaganda Production

The production of propaganda involves more than government and corporation ‘spin doctors’ and ‘PR’ agents, it also involves a variety of entities, including think tanks, NGOs, and even academia. It also involves actors from within the so-called ‘deep state’ including the intelligence services.

For example, think tanks can be used as vehicles in order to generate information and, frequently, operate in ways which reflect the interests and agenda of their sponsors.³¹ Although not necessarily always part of contributing towards manipulated and propagandised representations of particular issues, sometimes they are. So, for example, *Spinwatch* recently produced a report on the Henry Jackson Society, a think tank founded in 2005 and presented as bipartisan. As they document in their report,³² this think tank, funded by an array of undisclosed donors, has been active in ‘promoting a strongly pro-Israel agenda, organizing anti-Islam activities ... (and) advocating a transatlantic military and security regime.’³³ Interestingly, and as revealed in a leaked document, HJS, also planned co-ordinated activities aimed at discrediting Noam Chomsky via influencing mainstream media journalists.³⁴ Clearly, shaping the information environment and manipulating opinions (aka propaganda) would appear to have been a key objective of this think tank.

NGOs have also been implicated, on occasion, in the unintentional circulation of propagandistic information. For example, during the Libyan war in 2011,

human rights-related claims against the Libyan government circulated prior to the intervention, including in an AI press briefing.³⁵

After the intervention, however, an AI investigation could not corroborate allegations of mass human rights violations by Gaddafi regime troops.³⁶ In the case of the 2011-present war in Syria, the White Helmets group are presented as an independent organisation set up to save civilians. However, one government document indicates that the organization has been funded as part of broader attempts to support ‘moderate opposition to provide services for their communities and to contest new space’, and to empower ‘legitimate local governance structures to deliver services [and giving] credibility to the moderate opposition.’³⁷ As such, the White Helmets would appear to be part of a broader US/UK regime change strategy which has supported the overthrow of the existing Syrian government. At the same time, the White Helmets have served an important public relations purpose by providing ‘an invaluable reporting and advocacy role’ and ‘confidence to statements made by UK and other international leaders made in condemnation of Soviet actions.’³⁸ Because the White Helmets only operate in areas held by opposition groups, they can only present a partial picture of events. The utility of this organization, intentional or not, for propaganda purposes is without question. Indeed, a film about the White Helmets was even awarded an Oscar in 2016.

Academia is not immune from propaganda activities and can itself become part of the broader propaganda apparatus. For example, Herring and Robinson³⁹ argued that, to a large extent, the filters identified in the Propaganda Model as acting upon the media are also relevant to academia. Reliance upon grants, wishing to curry favour with official sources, as well as ideological imperatives, all mean that academia is far less free from the influence of power than is often assumed by those outside the academy, and also many within academia.⁴⁰ For example, Simpson’s *Science of Coercion* draws upon a variety of sources, including FOIA documents, and carefully documents the relationship between the fledgling academic discipline of communication science/studies and US psychological operations (psy ops).⁴¹ He highlights powerfully the interdependence between the academy and the US government and makes a powerful case that, in a very fundamental sense, communication science/studies are shaped, to this day, by the imperatives of political power.

Finally, the intelligence services are key producers and disseminators of propaganda in contemporary liberal democracies. For example, long before the now notorious intelligence-based WMD allegations made against Iraq during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, British intelligence was involved in manipulating evidence in order to promote the impression that Iraq had an ongoing WMD programme. From 1991 onwards the MI6 Operation Rockingham was involved in cherry picking intelligence from the UN weapons inspections (set up after the Persian Gulf War) in order to, as a former chief UN weapons inspector put it, skew ‘UK intelligence about Iraqi WMD towards a preordained outcome that was more in line with British government policy that it was reflective of the truth.’⁴² Such activities were geared toward influencing the UN Security Council but also most likely designed to help maintain public

support for the UK sanctions regime against Iraq. Operation Mass Appeal, initiated in the late 1990s, was precisely geared towards influencing public opinion by exaggerating the threat posed by Iraqi WMD.⁴³ Finally, propaganda activities extend beyond attempts to influence publics via mainstream media and include popular culture propaganda. For example, Schou has documented the close involvement between the CIA and Hollywood.⁴⁴ The relationships here range from mutual exploitation, through co-optation, and on to more direct patterns of censorship. The overall net objective is to manipulate beliefs and attitudes in ways that are conducive to the interests of the US government.

In sum, a full analysis of propaganda requires identification and critical examination of the various sites of propaganda production which, in practice, extend well beyond the communications officials and PR offices of governments and major corporations to include think tanks, NGOs, academia and the intelligence services. In extending the Propaganda Model to include analysis of these sites of production, it is also essential to maintain a weather eye on the potential overlap between, and even integration of, these apparently discrete sites of propaganda production. For example, there is evidence that some journalists working in the media have been either intelligence service assets or, indeed, members of the intelligence services themselves.⁴⁵ At the same time academics have become involved with intelligence-military activities on many occasions; for example, anthropologists have become, controversially, involved in the human terrain system (HTS) project aimed at using 'local' knowledge in order to, in the broadest sense, win hearts and minds and organise conduct in countries that Western governments have invaded and occupied.⁴⁶ A similar phenomenon emerged with the involvement of psychologists in the US post 9/11 torture programme.⁴⁷ It is also worthwhile addressing the question of the extent to which networks connecting think tanks, NGOs, and perhaps even some individuals within academia, might be involved in propaganda activities. For example, in relation to the current Syrian conflict, in 2012, the then US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton authorised the 'training for more than a thousand (Syrian) activists, students, and independent journalists'⁴⁸ in order to promote her regime change preference. The question begged by the revelation from Clinton is how many of those apparently recruited are working in support of NGOs, for example the White Helmets discussed above, and have become either connected or involved with think tanks or perhaps even exist now within academia. In sum, these sites of propaganda should not be investigated only as discrete sites of propaganda production, but also, potentially, as part of broader propaganda networks.

5. Concluding Comments: Propaganda, the Exercise of Power, and the Health of Contemporary Liberal Democracy

We know much about the media and why it so frequently fails to speak truth to power, fails to relay accurate information on the most important issues of

our day, and frequently ends up relaying propaganda designed to manipulate beliefs and behaviour. Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model has played an important role in raising awareness of these failures amongst both academics and the public at large. The model and their work have been a major service to critical thinking and, ultimately, democracy. It is the experience of this author, with 20 years teaching in higher education, that many more students today are aware of the structural failings of mainstream media than was the case in the 1990s. Referencing and talking about the Propaganda Model seems to elicit fewer smirks and knee jerk reactions than was the case 20 years back. Progress *has* been made.

However, moving understanding and critical awareness forward means extending and widening the Propaganda Model, refocusing attention away from the well-documented failings of the mainstream media and on to those actors who are, ultimately, the source of propaganda. Some of this work involves the examination of propaganda tactics and strategies, or doctrines, which make up the tool kit of the propagandist. Some of these tactics involve processes of information manipulation whereby deception can occur through lying, distortion, omission and misdirection. But some are more physical and 'real world' involving incentivisation and coercion. Propaganda is about winning hearts and minds and also about organising conduct and this can involve shaping material contexts and action in the real world.⁴⁹ Beyond tactics and strategies, we also need to extend analysis to include the array of entities, from think tanks to the academy, which can become involved in propaganda activities and the way in which these might sometimes overlap and be interconnected.

Such an expansion of the Propaganda Model would help us to much better understand how the propaganda, which is relayed by mainstream media so readily, is produced and the ways in which the minds and behaviour of people in contemporary liberal democracies might come to be manipulated and conditioned. Shining a light on those involved in the actual creation of propaganda would also serve to increase public accountability of those actors and organisations who are involved in these activities, just as the original Propaganda Model has helped increase the accountability of corporate media. Finally, mapping these activities across multiple cases and through detailed empirical research will serve to elucidate hidden agendas, interests and networks, and the way in which propaganda is employed in order to exercise power in ostensibly accountable and democratic political systems. Establishing just how far this propaganda extends, and the extent to which there has been a 'major and permanent adjustment or displacement of reality',⁵⁰ will provide vital insights to the democratic health, or ill-health, of contemporary liberal democracies.

Seventeen years in to the twenty-first century, the liberal democracies of the West have experienced multiple wars initiated and led by the US, profound eco-

conomic crisis and a continued hesitation to confront some of the most pressing issues of our time such as global poverty and environmental crisis. As Chomsky himself has noted on many occasions in recent years, we are on a precipice, facing the potential even of extinction due to climate change or nuclear war.⁵¹ Propaganda has undoubtedly had much to do with facilitating this state of affairs, whether through persuading publics of non-existent WMD threats (in the case of Iraq), mobilising consent for a 'war on terror'⁵² or helping powerful vested interests such as the fossil fuel industry sow seeds of doubt about climate change.⁵³ We must fully understand, expose and critique propaganda in order to regain accountability and control over our course. Extending the Propaganda Model in order to do this is a pressing,⁵⁴ urgent, matter.

Notes and Bibliography

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- ² Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon; 1988).
- ³ The first filter identified the importance of the fact that US corporate media were owned by a relatively small number of extremely large and powerful corporations: in effect, ownership equates to control and means that news stories that challenged the interests of those corporations are far less likely to surface. The detailed process by which this works includes strategic interventions by owners, self-censorship by employees, and the internalisation of the values, ethos and worldview of a corporation by its employees. The second filter identified the importance of advertising: because mainstream media are so reliant upon advertising revenue in order to be profitable, they become constrained by the need to appeal to affluent audiences, the risk-averse nature of sponsoring corporations and the bottom line that stories running against the interests of any corporation that is sponsoring adverts might lead to that same corporation threatening to withdraw. The third filter identified the tendency of journalists to rely upon, and defer to, official sources when reporting stories. Whether due to time and money pressures pushing journalists towards reliance upon press releases, or the instinct to talk to those in powerful positions when trying to understand what is going on, studies of journalist-source relations consistently show that, when it comes to political news, journalists only relatively rarely move beyond government officials and elected representatives when sourcing their stories. The fourth filter, flak, notes the importance of disciplining attacks on journalists who do stray beyond the boundaries of 'acceptable' criticism. Whether from 'spin doctors' or the array of think tanks that now exist, journalists who published very critical stories can be subjected to smear

campaigns and excessive criticism which serve to induce caution when deciding what kind of stories to cover and write about. The fifth filter of the Propaganda Model, the ideology filter, describes the importance of anti-communist ideology which worked, at least during the Cold War, to create an ideological bond, or shared world view, between journalists and political elites. Because of this ideological bond, conflicts around the world were readily perceived in terms of 'the struggle against communism' and divided the world 'neatly' into 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. Of course, and as Herman has pointed out, 'anti-communism' should be understood as part of a much broader agenda regarding 'free market rhetoric, US economic access and massive states subsidies to private corporations' which opposed 'any challenge to elite interests and US economic penetration of any state be it of the left or the right'. As such, the ideology filter is still in play.

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