
Editorial

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October 2008 marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. Their Propaganda Model (PM), which attempted to explain the performance of the media in the United States (US), found that the media consistently served the interests of corporate and state power. Furthermore, they anticipated that the PM would be generally ignored within academia, which, all too often, also served the interests of corporate and state power.

The ‘Twenty Years at the Margins’ Conference

This special issue contains several articles that were presented and debated at the ‘Twenty Years at the Margins’ conference, which was held on 19 December 2008 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to mark this anniversary. The conference aimed to critically evaluate the continued relevance of the PM and to answer a number of important questions: what are the strengths and weaknesses of the PM, is the PM applicable outside of the US, does the PM need to be revised and updated for the twenty-first century, is the PM rendered obsolete by the emergence of the internet and other new media as sources of news, and why has the PM been generally ignored within the field of media and communication studies? A truly international event, with delegates from Britain, Germany, New Zealand and the US, this conference was the third to focus specifically on the contribution of Herman and Chomsky to media and communication studies – the other two being the one-day ‘Distorted Democracy’ conference in London in February 2004 and the three-day ‘20 Years of Propaganda’ conference at the University of Windsor in Canada in May 2007.

Herman and Chomsky were unable to attend the conference. Nevertheless, they responded to a number of questions, with the answers presented on their behalf. In terms of the keynote speakers, Alison Edgley (2000) talked about the wider contribution of Chomsky to the social sciences, focusing upon two aspects of his work: Chomsky’s observations about the role of the state under capitalism and his view of human nature. (Herman has also made a significant contribution to the social sciences: see Herman, 1981; Herman and Broadhead 1984; Herman and

O'Sullivan 1989.) Tom O'Malley (1997, 2009) spoke about the tradition of Marxist-radical media and communication studies in Britain and its reception of the PM. Berry and Theobald (2006) provided an account of the history of this tradition. David Miller (Miller and Dinan 2008) set his discussion of the PM within the wider context of the impact of propaganda on societies and argued that there was a pressing need to theorize the operation of propaganda-managed democracies, while Andrew Mullen (forthcoming) presented empirical evidence regarding the second-order prediction of the PM, concerning its reception, which confirmed Herman and Chomsky's hypothesis that the PM would be generally dismissed within academia.

The Marxist-Radical Tradition and the Propaganda Model

An informed electorate, with access to accurate and unbiased information and news, is widely accepted as an essential precondition for the effective functioning of a democratic society. The liberal-pluralist perspective on how the political system operates in such a society holds that there is a healthy 'marketplace of ideas' (Ginsberg, 1986). In other words, 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.

Going beyond the classical and modern elitism theories put forward by Pareto (1935), Mosca (1939), Burnham (1941), Michels (1949), C. Wright Mills (1956) and Schumpeter (1976), the Marxist-radical critique of the political system purports that it reflects the class-based nature of society and that the laws and policies which are enacted are those that serve to bring about and to maintain ruling class domination and exploitation. The Marxist-radical account of the media system posits that

... the media are ... part of an ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes; ultimate control is increasingly concentrated in monopoly capital; media professionals, while enjoying the illusion of autonomy, are socialized into and internalize the norms of the dominant culture; the media, taken as a whole, relate interpretive frameworks consonant with the interests of the dominant classes, and media audiences, while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative meaning systems that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favour of consistently oppositional definitions. (Gurevitch et al., 1982, 2)

This debate, concerning the role of the media in society, is the primary focus of the PM.

In the 1960s a number of scholars revisited classical Marxist thinking on ideology, in particular the notion that ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’ (Marx and Engels, 1970 [1845], 64), and they began to develop new concepts in an attempt to understand and explain the role of the media in modern democratic societies. The work of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Marcuse, 1968), which provided the foundations for the Marxist-radical tradition, effectively bolstered the ‘mass society’ paradigm that dominated the first phase of mass media effects research from the early 1920s to the late 1930s: that of powerful direct media effects and passive media audiences. Subsequent generations of Marxist and radical scholars, however, rejected the pessimistic stance of the Frankfurt School and its ‘mass society’ thesis. They also questioned the conclusions drawn from the empirical data generated during the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, the second phase of effects research, which seemed to indicate that exposure to the media had ‘minimal consequences’. Instead, and as part of the third phase of effects research, from the mid-1960s, they insisted that the media were powerful in their effects, albeit in ways which were contingent and mediated. Nevertheless, these scholars were far from unified as Curran et al. (1982, 23) recorded: ‘Marxist theorists vary in their accounts of the determination of the mass media and in their accounts of the nature and power of mass media ideologies.’ There were two key debates: the nature of the relationship between the (economic) base and the (socio-political) superstructure, and the question of ‘relative autonomy’ (of ideology, the media, the state, etc.). Curran et al. distinguished three main perspectives: structuralism (Althusser, 1969, 1971; Poulantzas, 1975), the political economy approach (Murdock, 1982) and cultural studies (Hall, 1980).

The political economy approach concentrated upon the issues of media ownership and control (Curran and Seaton, 1991; Murdock, 1982; Murdock and Golding, 1977) and was initially concerned with media effects. As Curran et al. explained, however:

... the workings of these controls are not easy to demonstrate – or to examine empirically. The evidence is quite often circumstantial and is derived from the ‘fit’ between the ideology implicit in the [media] message and the [economic and political] interests of those in control. (1982, 18)

This problematic encouraged many scholars, including Herman and Chomsky, to focus upon media *behaviour* rather than media *effects*, hence the PM. Nevertheless, more than twenty years after its publication confusion abounds on this crucial

distinction and it is, perhaps, easy to see why. Consider, for example, this excerpt from the Preface of *Manufacturing Consent*:

If ... the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about, and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard [liberal-pluralist] view of how the media system works is at serious odds with reality. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, xi)

Or this from the opening paragraph:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, inform and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. (ibid., p.1)

Indeed, the very title of the book, *Manufacturing Consent*, and their frequent reference throughout to the 'propaganda system', seems to suggest that the PM is concerned with effects. Although Chomsky and Herman have attended to the societal function of ideology and propaganda as effective means of population control elsewhere in their work (see Chomsky, 1989; Herman, 1999), the PM is solely concerned with media performance and it poses a direct challenge to the liberal-pluralist view of how the media work.

The PM proposed three hypotheses and was based upon five operative principles. The first hypothesis put forward by Herman and Chomsky was that, where there was consensus amongst the corporate and political elite on a particular issue, the media tended to reflect this in their coverage of that issue, to the exclusion of rival viewpoints. The elite, Herman and Chomsky stated, was composed of: 'the government, the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives and the assorted individuals and groups who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. xii). Herman asserted that 'where the elite are really concerned and unified, and/or where ordinary citizens are not aware of their own stake in an issue or are immobilized by effective propaganda, the media will serve elite interests uncompromisingly' (Herman, 1996). Conversely, Herman and Chomsky conceded that the 'propaganda system' did not work as efficiently where there was dissensus: 'the mass media are not a solid monolith on all issues. Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgements on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate' (1988, p. xii). Herman acknowledged that 'there are often differences within the elite which open up space for some debate and even occasional (but very rare) attacks on ... the

tactical means of achieving elite ends' (1996). Critically, however, the media do not stray from the bounds of 'thinkable thought'; Herman and Chomsky reasoned that 'views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors will be excluded from the mass media even when elite controversy over tactics rages fiercely' (1988, p. xii). The existence of elite consensus or dissensus is a matter of empirical investigation; Herman and Chomsky offered no ready-made rules on this matter.

The second hypothesis put forward by Herman and Chomsky was that, in liberal-democratic regimes such as the US. where the mass media functioned under corporate rather than state control, media coverage was shaped by what was, in effect, a 'guided market system' underpinned by five filters – the operative principles of the PM. Herman and Chomsky agreed that the use of propaganda was an integral and long-standing mechanism of population control employed by corporate and political elites in capitalist, liberal-democratic regimes. In totalitarian societies, the state controlled the general public's access to information and this was generally understood to constitute a propaganda system; in capitalist, liberal-democratic societies, by contrast, the notion that there was an open 'marketplace of ideas' created the misleading impression that the general public was free from manipulation. In reality, however, the corporate sector and their political allies have long conspired to ensure that some ideas are elevated and others are excluded from the 'marketplace' (Beder, 2006a; 2006b; Carey, 1995; Dinan and Miller, 2007; Ewen, 1996; Fones-Wolf, 1994; Hughes, 1994; Miller and Dinan, 2008).

In terms of the operative principles of the PM, the five filters, Herman and Chomsky suggested that:

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. (1988, 2)

The data presented by Herman and Chomsky in support of the PM consisted of a series of case studies based upon content analysis of newspaper coverage. These included studies of the coverage of the murdered Polish priest, Jerzy Popieluszko, and other religious victims in Latin America; elections in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua; the ‘KGB-Bulgarian plot’ to kill the Pope; and the wars in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The 2002 edition of *Manufacturing Consent* expanded the studies to include mainstream media usage of the term ‘genocide’ to describe events in East Timor, Iraq, Kosovo and Turkey; plus the coverage of elections in Cambodia, Kenya, Mexico, Russia, Turkey, Uruguay and Yugoslavia. Herman and Chomsky also claimed that, in addition to foreign policy matters, the PM could be applied to domestic policy issues such as the North American Free Trade Agreement; anti-globalization protests; the long-standing elite assault on the labour movement; and the chemical industry and its regulation. Herman and Chomsky (2002, p. xlii) concluded that the PM ‘fits well the media’s treatment of this range of issues’ and contended that, despite its general neglect, the PM remains one of the most tested models in the social sciences. Indeed, Chomsky proclaimed that:

... we’ve studied a great number of cases, from every methodological point of view that we’ve been able to think of – and they all support the Propaganda Model. And by now there are thousands of pages of similar material confirming the thesis in books and articles by other people too – in fact, I would hazard a guess that the Propaganda Model is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences. There has been no serious counter-discussion of it at all, actually, that I’m aware of. (Chomsky in Mitchell and Schoeffel, 2002, 18)

The third hypothesis put forward by Herman and Chomsky related to the way in which the PM would be received:

[It] makes predictions at various levels. There are first-order predictions about how the media function. The model also makes second-order predictions about how media performance will be discussed and evaluated.... The general prediction, at each level, is that what enters the mainstream will support the needs of established power. (Chomsky, 1989, 153)

More specifically:

One prediction of the model is that it will be effectively excluded from discussion.... However well-confirmed the model may be ... it is inadmissible, and ... should remain outside the spectrum of debate over the media.... Plainly it is either valid or invalid. If invalid, it may be dismissed; if valid it *will* be dismissed. (ibid., 11, emphasis in original)

Chomsky declared that ‘the first-order predictions of the Propaganda Model [regarding media performance] are systematically confirmed’ (ibid., 154) by the

empirical evidence, while Mullen (forthcoming) presented data confirming the second-order prediction.

Contributors

The first contribution to this special issue is by Herman and Chomsky, who answered a set of ten questions on the PM. These included questions about the likely policy issues around which elite consensus would exist and where the PM would operate most effectively; how the five filters were faring twenty years on; whether the criticisms levelled at the PM were justified; why had the PM been generally ignored; whether the PM was applicable in terms of other forms of media (internet, television, etc.); the debate about media effects and media performance; and the possible resistance to corporate domination of the mass media. Their basic message was that the PM is as relevant now as it was in 1988; indeed they argued that recent economic, political and technological developments – more specifically globalization, the ideological hegemony of ‘the market’ and the corporate colonization of the new media – have strengthened the explanatory power of the PM.

The second article is by Alison Edgley, who argued that the PM should be understood in the context of Chomsky’s wider contribution to the social sciences. (It should be noted, however, that the PM was, in the main, the product of Herman’s work rather than Chomsky’s.) Paradoxically, although Chomsky was described in a *New York Times* book review as ‘arguably the most important intellectual alive’ (Robinson, 1979) and although he is one of the most cited scholars (see Massachusetts Institute of Technology News Office, 1992; *Times Higher Education*, 2009), Chomsky is generally ignored within the social sciences. More accurately, while his linguistics work receives critical acclaim, the disciplines of economics, history, media and communication studies, politics and sociology do not, generally speaking, engage with his prodigious output in these areas. The latter point was taken up by Edgley who argued that the marginalization of the PM was symptomatic of a more general avoidance of Chomsky. Edgley further argued that, to understand the PM, there was a need to appreciate Chomsky’s position on the role of the state and human nature – two critical issues long debated within the social sciences. Edgley discussed how Chomsky rejected the classical Marxist accounts of the state and human nature in favour of an anarchist-libertarian socialist perspective. In terms of the state, Chomsky observed that the capitalist system and the state system are inextricably linked and co-dependent, and in terms of human nature, Chomsky rejected any form of determinism, preferring to emphasize the role of individual agency. Thus the political economy approach adopted by Herman and Chomsky is distinctive within the Marxist-radical tradition.

The third article is by Jeffery Klaehn (2005, 2006, forthcoming) who explored the methodology of the PM, highlighting other potentially complementary approaches to the study of media behaviour, before assessing the numerous critiques of the PM and the theoretical debates that have ensued.

The fourth article is by Des Freedman (2003a, 2003b, 2008). The starting point of the PM is the existence, or not, of elite consensus; Herman and Chomsky argued that, where there was consensus among the corporate and political elite on a particular issue, the media tended to reflect this in their coverage of that issue, to the exclusion of rival viewpoints. Freedman tested this hypothesis by looking at the case of the *Daily Mirror's* coverage before and during the 2003 Iraq invasion, questioning whether this media content, at a critical historical juncture, challenged or confirmed the PM.

The fifth article is by Peter Thompson, who applied the PM to the subject of the financial markets. In the wake of the 2008 credit crunch and the global recession that followed, one of the charges that could be levelled is the media's poor reporting of the operation of the financial sector and the numerous warnings that were issued about its complex financial instruments. Thompson argued that the PM and its filters are useful in helping us to understand financial news production. However, he insisted that the PM needed to be refined to take account of this complicated subject, where financial news and information not only reflect market realities but reflexively constitute those realities.

The sixth article is by Florian Zollmann, who focused upon the debate about journalistic professionalism. One of the charges levelled against the PM is that it was conspiratorial; that media content that favoured corporate and political elite interests implied some sort of journalistic collusion. Herman and Chomsky responded that favourable media coverage required no such conspiracy, for journalists had effectively internalized the values and outlook of the elite they purport to hold to account. Zollmann investigated the further claim made by critics, that journalistic professionalism militated against any collusion, concluding that media ownership effectively circumscribed journalistic behaviour – just as the PM hypothesized.

The seventh and eighth articles, by Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman and Matthew Alford respectively, take the PM into new and uncharted territory. Hearn-Branaman applied the PM to the case of China where the media system, like the economy more generally, is moving towards a more capitalistic mode. Hearn-Branaman therefore questioned whether the PM might be applicable in transitioning countries as well as established capitalist, liberal-democratic ones. Alford applied the PM to the case of Hollywood, suggesting that its film output tends to reflect the interests of the corporate and political elite and that the five

filters of the PM can help us to understand the Hollywood entertainment industry and its operation.

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