

# MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

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### **Thirty Years of the Propaganda Model: Resilient Universal Filters or Local Legend?**

Todd Nesbitt

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## THIRTY YEARS OF THE PROPAGANDA MODEL: RESILIENT UNIVERSAL FILTERS OR LOCAL LEGEND?

TODD NESBITT

MacLeod, A. (Ed). (2019). *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*. London and New York: Routledge.

Scrolling quickly through publisher sales emails, a title concerning propaganda and new information and communication technologies is a sure attention-getter for critical media studies scholars – or at least for those who have not found a title which satisfies their expectations in comparing and contrasting contemporary (digital) state propaganda with pre-convergence forms. The subtitle ('manufacturing consent') for some echoes Gramsci, for some Bernays, and for others Herman and Chomsky. Importantly, familiarity is there, and it resounds.

Further inspection reveals an edited volume to mark three decades since the publication of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's classic *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. This is not the first time authors have attempted to re-contextualize the famous propaganda model (see, among others, Goss, 2013, or Mullen, 2010), and clearly will not be the last. Having said that, it has also not gone without critical

rejection, not least in terms of its international application (see e.g., Corner, 2003). This is also documented in the first chapter of the book, in an interview with Chomsky (pp. 12–13).

It is easy to be sceptical of the motivations of volumes such as this. Few would argue that edited volumes are a world apart from monographs in terms of workload. Additionally, any anniversary edition related to a classic will warrant attention regardless of the quality, thus doubts arise as to the authenticity of the buzz around such books, and the motivation of the publisher in this regard. Thus, it is perhaps not without reservations that one elects to invest in this book. Further, why a review of this book, for this journal? A volume published in an entirely different political system, focused on a completely different cultural and media environment? The motivation was simple, and admittedly, not entirely original. The question: To what extent can a model, born in the cold war, in a distinctly American context, have value for critical media scholars in Central and Eastern Europe, three decades after publication?

In *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), Herman and Chomsky's contribution to the literature of the political economy of the media consisted of an institutional critique of the functioning of the elite news media in the United States. The 'propaganda' aspect of the propaganda model can be misleading at first, since propaganda is usually associated with the construction of persuasive text with a deliberate agenda, whereas Herman and Chomsky examine the process of news creation. Specifically, they focused

on the agenda-setting role of the elite US press in contributing to, and resulting in, hegemonic societal relations. The authors do this through presenting five “filters” that the news media pass through on their way to publication (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The central argument of *Propaganda in the Information Age* put forth by the author in the introduction is “... the propaganda model is still an indispensable method of understanding not just how corporate American, but global, media function, and that the central theory of the propaganda model is perhaps more relevant today than it was in 1988” (p. 8). As mentioned earlier, this “global” is of primary concern in this review.

The first two sentences of the book are impossible not to mention: “The media is not your friend. The media is a weapon of the elite in the battle for your mind” (p. 1). One is hard pressed to think of a more emphatic and battle-ready beginning to an academic book. After a couple of decades of increasingly market-focused and careful approaches to media issues, it is indeed a refreshing change. Much of the introduction remains in this tone, with the author setting the stage for further chapters by reviewing the five filters.

The main ten chapters of the book do not consist only of applications of the propaganda model. Two of the chapters are interviews (one with Chomsky himself, and one with Mathew Alford, the author of *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*, 2010), and one chapter brings an essay on working for elite news organizations. The remaining seven chapters apply all or parts of the

model, analyse it, or test it as a standard as to how news organizations work.

Including the introduction and the conclusion, in half of the chapters of the book, the editor of the volume’s voice is heard. An assumedly newish member of the esteemed Glasgow Media Group, Alan McLeod is mostly known for his book *Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting* (2018). In that volume Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model is also employed as a primary tool of analysis of media coverage, and McLeod was indeed lauded for the use of it in a 21st century context, which, as stated earlier, forms part of the central argument of this volume (Zweig, 2018).

The pessimist, expecting an easy edited volume on a classic topic, may be surprised at the extent to which some chapters bring themes related to the model into perspective. In chapter two, Florian Zollman expertly reviews and synthesizes updates to the model from various scholars over the past decade and a half, and suggests additional filters not covered by the original model, which in 2019 seem simply curious to be missing (e.g. gender and race). We also see here, for the first time in the book, an attempt to consider the model in national contexts, albeit briefly, including the troublesome (due to the original cold war context) fifth filter of ideology (namely anti-communism).

McLeod carries this point further in chapters three and four. After effectively updating the model to reflect contemporary media realities, he examines the assumption of the loss of relevance of the ideological filter due to the collapse

of Soviet communism. He reviews several suggestions put forward in the past (e.g. Herman and Chomsky – the benefits of neoliberal globalization, Pedro – anti-terrorism, or Goss – us/them), before extensively exploring the replacement of the anti-communist filter with an anti-Russian filter. Multiple precise and descriptive examples provide a very convincing and enlightening argument.

One of the highlights of the book comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from Oliver Boyd-Barret. In a chapter focusing on the third filter, which is reliance on information provided by official sources, he focuses on “deflection propaganda”, or “...action or aspects of a person or situation with the intention to distract the audience” (p. 84). Specifically, he provides examples of “deflective source”, or “making the source of a piece of information appear more credible than it is” (p. 85). Beyond a number of classic examples at the outset, he masterfully dissects western propaganda in Syria in the context of this filter.

As for the interviews, each of the two are effective in bringing up issues related to the model. In chapter one, Chomsky is given the opportunity to reflect on the lack of attention the book received after publication, and, as it would be expected, how he sees potential changes to the model overtime (he sees it as maintaining relevance). The aspects of the model evident in the entertainment industry are discussed with Matthew Alford in chapter six, and feature a fairly broad scope, including propaganda connections in video games, the role of product placement, and national product placement. In chapter ten, the testimonials

of the former Financial Times journalist Matt Kennard (the author of *The Racket: Rogue Reporter vs. the Masters of the Universe*, 2015) serve to give support to the “elite journalist thesis”, and the extent to which self-censorship is prevalent.

The ten chapters are tied together in a conclusion with a somewhat predictable, yet hardly redundant, title “New media, same old rules” (p. 164). As with any serious concluding chapter, it serves to comment on contemporary trends, summarise each author’s contribution to the whole, and solidify the overall argument. MacLeod emphasises one of the most prominent elements in the political economy of the contemporary global media, i.e. the growth of digital media empires and their societal impact, and extrapolates this to the international decline of public confidence in the news media (pp. 164–165). He then briefly summarises the preceding chapters, neatly weaving in contemporary examples, and refers to various aspects of the original volume, in order to further accentuate the prominence of the model.

The purpose of any good paradigm or theory is to allow in-depth examination and discussion. As mentioned earlier, the book’s editor sets out in his central thesis that the Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model is more important than ever, and applicable to various national contexts. It is arguable that perhaps this is slightly overemphasised, as the national contexts in the volume consist of only two – India and Kenya. Further, the application of the model, at least in comparison with earlier chapters, seems minimal. This is not to say that a study of Kenyan or Indian affairs is not essential,

rather the opposite is the case, but the use of the model in these case studies gives the impression of being tangential.

One also is inclined to assess if the model – originally focused on the US environment – is indeed relevant and easily applicable to others. For decades, if not since the very origin of the study of international/global media contexts, this has been an unavoidable issue which many often refrain from, but eventually have to admit: There is no understanding the global without an explicit understanding of the local, and any attempts to suggest otherwise are simply not reliable. It is always possible to extend frames, and justify generalisations, but in the end, this is self-serving, and does no one justice.

On the other hand, the never-ending international fascination and reliance on American politics and media demands an international understanding of the US media environment. Without it, it is nearly impossible to understand the system. The propaganda model, with McLeod's proposed anti-Russian fifth filter (pp. 65–83), seems to be an excellent way, for example, to explain to wide-eyed students the exceedingly theatrical nature of the US media, as they rabidly attack Donald Trump, particularly in an age when the study of propaganda in the context of (news) media studies has suffered, and yet is in such serious need of emphasis (Zollmann, 2019).

As a communication studies student in the early 1990s in Canada, *Manufacturing Consent* was an essential purchase. It is often noted that Chomsky enjoys (relatively) enormous popularity in Canada (compared to the US), but students were

not only buying the book simply because it was a typical staple on reading lists of course syllabi. It was also the book you carried around on campus to show you knew something that others did not (remember the days when you carried books around to make a statement?), and that you were hip to the man. This of course did not mean you sat around reading it – those in the know will testify that at times the text can be dense. Thirty years later, the title's shock value in this respect is likely gone, just as are gone the days when carrying a book or record around was a political statement. Regardless, arguments over the value of the model only serve to prove that it is worthwhile considering, and MacLeod's volume is proof of that.

I am guessing that some local publishers in the Central and Eastern European countries have at some point considered translating the original. *Propaganda in the Information Age* does an effective job of a) tracing and explaining the model from a variety of perspectives; b) showing modern examples of the filters in action; and c) extending the discussion of the model applicability outside of the USA. In that respect, as an introduction to a classic model, with contemporary contexts, and attempts at international applications, McLeod's volume just may serve central European students better than the original.

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