

Running Head: Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media

Book Review: Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media

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Reviewer Note

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Introduction

The book – a 1988 study by Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky into the US mass media – describes how the media is influenced and used by the powerful elite in society. It details a propaganda model that shows how information and news passes through different filters before reaching the audience and readers.

The authors state that it is not right to say that the West has a free press carrying a moral responsibility to only work for truth and justice and hold the powerful accountable. They meticulously discuss the facts and evidence and explain how the propaganda model is at work in society and is influencing the flow of news and information in the support of the elite who control the media one way or the other. They elaborate with further examples on international level how political communication is at work globally.

The Propaganda Model

Though media is considered to perform the roles of informing, educating and entertaining the people, the fact remains that they need to rely on sort of propaganda at times in a society of concentrated wealth and conflicts among different classes (p. 42).

The propaganda model, proposed by Chomsky and Herman, consists of five filtration methods that influence the media content: 1) the size and other matters related to the ownership of media organizations, 2) advertising as the main source of income for media, 3) the media dependence on different information sources such as government and others, 4) flak agencies, negative responses, fund stoppage or threats of legal cases that serve as means to discipline media to limit them to the permitted spectrum of debate, and 5) “anti-communism” fear as a control mechanism and as a national religion.

By means of such strict filtrations, the criteria for the newsworthy stories and discussion are limited to a scope that is favourable to the interests of those who fund the media like businesses and advertising and the elite class who rule a country.

The stifling of working-class press:

The book sheds light on various punitive taxes and regulations imposed on various press firms in the 19th century. In the early 20th century, industrialisation of the press led to the major family-owned institutions that had capacity to finance the expansions of their news organizations and they forced the smaller organizations out of the market scene.

After the World War-II, social democratic press such as Daily Herald, News Chronicle, etc in the UK had comparatively loyal and adequate readership; yet in the 1960s, these papers were gagged into extinction by drastically reducing their advertising revenue. Instead, the pro-establishment papers such as The Times, Daily Telegraph, etc were given advertisement and strengthened.

‘Worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ coverage:

The authors also debate the media’s handling of the victims, who are divided into “worthy” and “unworthy”. By worthy victims, they mean how the US media have always concentrated on the victims in an enemy country and ignored or belittled the voices of those being victimised in countries friendly to the US (p. 66).

The book compares the US media coverage of the murder of a Polish priest in an enemy Communist state with a number of assassinations of key figures in two American allies El Salvador and Guatemala. And it becomes clear that the former case, ie the Polish priest’s

murders is treated by the US media as [news]worthy and empathetic coverage whilst the latter, ie victimizations in El Salvador and Guatemala, are deemed unworthy and not given coverage as it occurred in countries that were America's allies.

The authors see similar kinds of contradictions in the media coverage of 1980s Latin America. They give the examples of El Salvador and Guatemala and say that where the United States wished status quo in any country, it used the propaganda model to portray the elections to be an effort for democracy. And the US in such cases even favoured the authoritarian actions by its allies on their civilians, including assassinations, aggression and censorship.

In contrast, the US would not support elections in a country if won by a group that does not favour the America. Here, the authors present the example of rulers in Nicaragua where the US did not have an influence; in this case, as per the Propaganda Model, the US through its media portrayed the polls as undemocratic in which "the electorate were coerced into balloting."

Indochina wars:

The Propaganda Model was intensely used in the wars of Indochina, which comprises the areas now called Vietnam and Cambodia.

According to the authors, there was silence in the American media when the US bombed Cambodia in 1969. This destroyed the lives of countless peasants who used to make a living from their land. The US media covered the "atrocities" in the Pol Pot era as Communists were ruling the area, but the many victims of the bomb attacks by the United States before the Communist takeover went unnoticed by the American press and not highlighted properly.

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In the case of Vietnam War, certain liberal media firms criticised the military mission and turned the public opinion against the war. However, certain conservative elites declared that such media organizations were betraying the US military's struggle and war for the so-called emancipation of South Vietnamese against the aggression of the Viet Cong, a political party that later fought the US and South Vietnam government and won the Vietnam War.

Through an anatomy of media in their time, Herman and Chomsky explained that the media coverage was as per the Propaganda Model, as it favoured the US government's agenda, distorted the truths, and did not focus on the realities and the sufferings of the South Vietnamese.

The media coverage did not provide any context of the war, which started because of America failed to follow the 1954 Geneva Accords, Kennedy deployed the troops, and the carpet bombing strategy which brought destruction to Laos and the South Vietnam region which the US claimed to be emancipating. Also, the authors elaborate that the US forces killed people in large numbers in the My Lai massacre, during their "pacification" process but these got little coverage in their mass media.

However, in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive, the business tycoons and Washington administration started to disapprove of the war themselves, and the media then also followed suit because there was a dominant view of pessimism about the war. Herman and Chomsky also cite the former Soviet Union's attack on Afghanistan when the US showed the anti-communist bias and termed that "immoral intervention" by a [enemy] state.

Conclusion and critique

Though Propaganda Model was presented in 1988, it holds significance even today. Overall, the idea of "anti-communist" in the model has been somehow replaced by the "War on

Terror” and Islamophobia in the current era. But if one looks at Russia, this country is still shown to be a “villain” by the US on the international scene from time to time. Also, there are instances in which China, being a big economy of the world today, has been portrayed by the US media in a bad light.

Present is the age of digital media where traditional media has been on the decline, and social media and citizen journalism is on the rise. Chomsky has stated something about the Internet implications on the Propaganda Model as he believed that besides the access to information, one needs to have a framework of understanding as well. Overall, the book has, in an appropriate way, exposed the fallible mass media and the way information is manipulated to shape social agendas.

If we see the current situation in Pakistan, we can witness how information is distorted and the propaganda is used in favour of the ruling parties or establishment. The media also has to toe the lines of the authorities in order to avoid facing restrictions and cuts in advertisements. Even at international level, different countries are using the “worthy” and “unworthy” victims’ premise of the Propaganda Model.

That being said, however, we cannot reject the mass media’s positive roles. Though media is influenced by propaganda, it also plays the roles of information, education and entertainment. It goes without saying that different factors indeed influence the media content, such as advertisers, government, owners of media themselves, flak, and sourcing, etc. but still media are the fourth pillar of the state and have a key role in society’s development.

Media has certain positive functions that contribute to the well-being of society overall. For instance, I see in the media “appeals” of underprivileged people for assistance, medical

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treatment or other needs, which are even responded to by the affluent people in society. Hence, such functions of media are positive and necessary for the wellbeing of society. However, overall we cannot reject the Propaganda Model as the media even today faces different “filters” through which the media content passes before reaching public.

Also, in the present age, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have also become another filter or factor influencing the coverage of the other traditional media (newspapers, TV and radio). At times we see that TV, radios and newspapers start covering an issue after the same issue has been highlighted by the social media immensely. Thus social media has become a tool that pressures the traditional media organizations and diverts their attention to the issues that needs coverage.

Moreover, the model was presented in the 1980s and it truly depicted the conditions of that era in the US. But one aspect we see in this model is that the “anti-communist” perspective that may be true in certain areas, may not be applicable in another area. Maybe this perspective is applicable in our region or some Muslim countries and the US where communism may be portrayed negatively, but this may be replaced by the “Islamophobia” in certain western nations. The same way a nation in any part of the world dislikes communism, there may be other places where Islam is disliked in the shape of Islamophobia. In the same way, certain countries may liken the United States to a villain state and their state media may portray the worldly superpower in a bad light. Hence we can say this this part (or filter) of the model may be differently applicable and may vary from country to country and region to region, as per the interests of those in power.

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