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How can Herman and
Chomsky's Ideas Function in
a Post-communist World?



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HOW CAN HERMAN AND CHOMSKY'S IDEAS
FUNCTION IN A POST-COMMUNIST WORLD?

Abstract

This essay discusses the opportunity for Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, as outlined in their book, *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), to be altered to remain relevant in a post-communist world. The model previously described five filters, which influence the US media, causing them to stray somewhat from their role as the fourth estate, and preventing them from upholding the ideals of democracy. These filters included ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communism. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat of communism diminished and a new threat emerged. Since September 11, the war on terrorism has become a focus in the US media, creating a new hysteria. In Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, anti-communism can be replaced with terrorism to prolong its functionality in a post-communist world.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of democracy in post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a shift in US propaganda (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013). Media is essential in democratic nations to inform and educate citizens on political happenings, give publicity to political parties, and to facilitate public discourse (McNair, 2011). Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which was developed through their identification of problems with the functioning of democracy in the US, suggests that the role of the media is impeded by powerful elites with the means to manipulate the news to suit interests of their own. In the past, the US media has manufactured an ideology of anti-communism (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) but upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat of communism for America diminished and a new threat emerged. Since September 11 (9/11) the so-called war on terrorism has become a focus in the US media, creating new hysteria (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013). The following essay is an inquiry into how Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model can be adapted to function in a post-communist world. To argue this, the role of the media in a democracy is explained, before an exploration of the ideas of Herman and Chomsky presented in *Manufacturing Consent* is followed by an analysis of the presentation of terrorism in the US media.

In an ideal democracy, the media should play the role of the fourth estate – a freely functioning system that represents diversity, encompasses active participation from citizens and monitors the activity of the first three estates: the legislature, executive and judiciary. It should function to objectively inform citizens of what is happening around them, educate citizens in the meaning of significant facts, and provide a platform for political discourse that facilitates public opinion, representing both the entirety of government and public political opinion. The purpose of this is to provide citizens with the necessary resources to vote rationally (McNair, 2011). Herman and Chomsky (2002), however, question whether the US media is a freely functioning system that can allow expression of opinion from any source. Their propaganda model suggests that there are filters within the media that prevent it from doing so (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Herman and Chomsky contend that the US democratic system is flawed because media are subordinated to external power. Their propaganda model argues that money and power can be used to filter out the news and set a specific agenda (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Filtering, for this purpose, is defined as the processing of items to reject those that are unwanted (Stevenson, 2010). Therefore, the news content received by the public is filtered to leave out certain information and manufactured to serve the interests of established power (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). McNair (2011) states: "To the extent that citizens are subject to manipulation, rather than exposed to information, democracy loses its authenticity and becomes something rather more sinister" (p. 24). Herman and Chomsky (2002) believe that media function to generate support for elite policies, rather than to empower people to make informed political decisions. The propaganda model encompasses five metaphorical filters they say influence the filtering of the news: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communism.

Privatisation has resulted from the increasing worldwide trend of mass media (Newton, 2006) and creates the first filter of the propaganda model – ownership. This filter describes the influence of profit orientation of the colossal corporations who own dominant media channels on the media they distribute (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Rupert Murdoch, president and CEO of News Corporation said, “When you are the monopoly supplier, you are inclined to dictate” (Jhally, 1998). Owners of mass media channels are able to be selective in the representation of political parties and set the political climate in the news. This is achieved by the implementation of policies imposed on their media outlets. Favourable representation is given to political parties that serve their interests, and they are less likely to be critical of economic or political policies that directly benefit them (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Consequently, there is an unequal representation of political information in the news.

Profit-orientated ownership generates a reliance on ‘advertising’, the next filter of the propaganda model. Advertising is the prevalent source of profit made by media organisations, and thus, advertisers must not be offended. Media must endeavour to maintain a favourable marketing platform for advertisers by serving their interests. Media organisations are committed to ensuring that the content of their news does not hinder the sales of the products sold by the advertisers using them (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Lewis said, in *The Myth of the Liberal Media* (1998), that Fiat Chrysler Automobiles sent out letters to the magazines they advertised in insisting that they send their articles to them in advance so that they could screen them to ensure ‘suitability’. If Chrysler felt the articles weren’t suitable, they would withdraw their ads (Jhally, 1998). In 2015, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles was estimated the eighth biggest advertisers in the US (Statista, 2016) making them a valuable client for media organisations. Thereupon, it was imperative that these magazines ensured their material was carefully constructed so as not to be ‘unsuitable’ for Chrysler. It is due to such subsequent corporate censorship that the media are unable to provide unbiased, independent news (Jhally, 1998).

The media are reliant on sources of information to form the content of news, thus the third filter of the propaganda model Herman and Chomsky call ‘sourcing’. Dependence on sources of, which can provide a continuous stream of information, forces media outlets to serve the interests of those sources. Political actors, police departments and business corporations provide a continuous supply of information that is deemed newsworthy and, hence, it features heavily in the news. Consequentially, other sources of information are marginalised as they feature less in the news (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

‘Flak’ is the term used for the fourth filter in the propaganda model to describe negative responses to a media statement or programme. Flak usually results when news stories challenge the government or corporations (Jhally, 1998), in the form of complaints including lawsuits, petitions, threats and other punishment. To avoid such punishment, news organisations must take care not to challenge dominant elites, and must restrict the risk that these elites will be critical of information presented in the news (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

The ideology of 'anti-communism' was constructed through the instrumentalisation of the US media and is the fifth filter in the propaganda model. For most citizens, the media is the only source of information they have about the world outside the United States. According to Herman and Chomsky (2002), the US media portrayed communism as the ultimate evil, enhancing political control and enabling a push of American foreign policy in a conservative direction. This politically constructed ideology has aided the US government in turning citizens against an enemy to justify fascist activity abroad. It has also contributed to the fragmentation of the left and labour movements, as it has been used to discredit even the slightest of socialistic ideas, labelling them 'pro-communist' (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Herman and Chomsky's ideas were first formulated during the Cold War, throughout which the US was indirectly at war with the communist Soviet Union, and thus communism was considered a threat. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, marking the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of their Red Army (Reese, 2000), the threat of communism faded and a new regime threatened (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013).

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model can be adapted to function in a post-communist world. Since the events that took place in September 2001, there has been a new threat promoted to the US, thus the need for a sixth filter, 'terrorism.' Like the purpose of Herman and Chomsky's anti-communism filter, the idea of terrorism is used to create a fearful populace against the enemy, which contributes to governmental control (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013). Skoll & Korstanje (2013) said, "Political fear works as a mechanism of self-indoctrination and paves the way towards a total control. Terrorism is only an excuse encoding a much broader and deep-seated issue" (p. 355). The US media has played a significant role in creating an ideology of anti-Islam in the US to gain political control (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013).

The manufactured ideology of anti-Islam through the media has been so successful that the word 'terrorism' itself has new meaning in the United States (Snow & Taylor, 2006). A. P. Schmid, a UN advisor, studied a variety of different definitions and used commonalities among them to produce a definition in 1983:

Terrorism is an anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative of symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience[s]), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (Cited in Powell, 2011, p. 70)

The *American Heritage Dictionary*, however, defines ‘terrorism’ as something quite different. “The use of violence or the threat of violence, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political goals” is the definition used here (“Terrorism,” 2016). The latter definition suggests a targeting of civilians whereas the former clearly states that the direct targets are not the main targets. The newly constructed meaning of the word has been exceedingly powerful in creating distinctive stereotypical opinions about Muslim people. These ideologies are created through filtering information in the media (Powell, 2011).

Influences from the government and an obedient media helped this ideology flourish in the US. According to Kumar (2006), the government gained increased control over the mainstream media under the presidency of George W. Bush after 9/11. Propaganda was used to justify his actions in his pursuit to have the United States go to war with Iraq (Kumar, 2006). This government created the notion of ‘Us versus Them’ or ‘the US versus Islam’ using psychological manipulation. Bush used the fear created by 9/11 and linked it to Iraq by juxtaposing the words ‘9/11’ and ‘Iraq’ in his rhetoric (Reese, 2007). Thereafter, his administration was able to endorse the unfounded idea that Iraq had ‘weapons of mass destruction’ or nuclear weapons. These scaremongering tactics helped create a political climate supportive of the war in Iraq, despite that nation having no involvement in the 9/11 attacks (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale, 2005). Furthermore, the US domestic media were submissive to President Bush’s administration following 9/11. They were forthcoming in presenting news that reproduced almost uncritically the agenda of the administrator, regardless of any misinformation it contained (Snow & Taylor, 2006; Kumar, 2006). It has since been recognised that the information provided by the Bush administration was indeed often faulty or entirely false. In the midst of that government’s manufacturing of consent, an ideology wherein Islam and terrorism were closely related was formed (Kumar, 2006).

The success of this constructed ideology could owe to the fact that, prior to 9/11, the average US citizen had minimal knowledge about Islam (Powell, 2011). Herman and Chomsky said that for most people, the media is the only source of information they have about the happenings of the outside world (Jhally, 1998), thus numerous citizens were vulnerable consumers of media ‘information’ on this subject. Ali et al. (2011) said, “Media in many ways are responsible for the creation of mental pictures” (p. 87). The US media indulged in the drama of the ‘War on Terror’ and little other information about Islam was offered in the news. Islam was represented with bias, being associated only with oil control, war and terrorism. Information that was necessary for the citizenry to create an accurate mental picture of Islam was filtered out of the news (Powell, 2011).

It is apparent that the US media do not uphold the ideals of democracy, straying from their role as the fourth estate (Snow & Taylor, 2006). As demonstrated in the discussion above, Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model can be adapted to function in a post-communist world. The fifth filter, anti-communism, could be replaced with terrorism as news continues to be manufactured to serve interests other

than those of the public. Karl Marx said, “The class which has the means of material production has control at the same time over the means of mental production” (Marx & Engels, 1970) and it seems that this claim is validated. Filters such as ownership, advertising, source reliance, flak, previously anti-communism and now, terrorism restrict the media from being free and independent, thus it can be considered that Herman and Chomsky’s ideas have held up very well over nearly three decades.

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Samantha Smith is a 2017 graduate of Unitec's Bachelor of Communications where she majored in public relations. Samantha now works as an account executive in Auckland, working with large corporates, predominantly in the food and beverage sector. This is the first time Samantha has had her work published, and she is proud to have had the opportunity to contribute to *Pūrātoke*.

Course information

Dr Philip Cass's COMM7532 – International Communication – is a compulsory level 7 course for those studying the Bachelor of Communications and majoring in public relations at Unitec Institute of Technology. It seeks to enable students to examine global systems of communication and information flows, and the contribution of these systems to effective international communication management. The course looks at international communication theory, learning how the informed management of global information may enhance effective international relationships and international organisational communication practices within developed and developing countries. Topics within the course include globalisation, factors influencing international perspectives, definition, the history and significance of international communication and information, international communication theory, economics and trade, culture, language and human rights, politics and propaganda, the role of technology, law and regulation of international communication, and implications for diplomacy. This essay was submitted in semester 2 of 2016.