

# A quick guide to the 'propaganda model'

by Dan Josefsson

In their book *Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (Pantheon, 1988, USA) Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman claim that propaganda is not primarily something used in dictatorships to make people believe what the power-holders want. In dictatorships, the two researchers say, the elite stays in power through violence and acts of reprisal, and propaganda is not a determining factor. Instead, it is the power-holders in democracies who most need propaganda.

In a democracy it is theoretically possible for the majority of the population through their votes to bring about changes which do not favour those with most power and resources. Therefore, propaganda serves the important purpose of inducing the population not to use its power.

In the 412-page book, the two researchers present the so called propaganda model, which is a detailed theory on the process of turning critical journalists into propagandists who safeguard the interests of the elite - often without knowing it themselves.

Chomsky and Herman name five filters which effectively remove news that could threaten the current societal order and thereby the interests of the elite in the USA. These filters are equally applicable to Swedish conditions.

The propaganda model has caused some journalists to accuse Chomsky and Herman of believing in conspiracy. These journalists have argued that there are no secret rooms where the editorial boards decide what the journalists may and may not cover in their reports. According to them, the journalists decide themselves what to write. But anyone who actually reads *Manufacturing Consent* soon realises that Chomsky and Herman have never claimed that the elite would need to conspire behind closed doors in order to stop unwelcome news. The propaganda model works very well without this.

The five filters of the Propaganda Model:

## 1. Concentration of ownership and profit orientation of the mass media

The media are run as businesses with a primary motive to create profit for their owners. Hence, they can never seriously criticise the power of the market or threaten large capital owners - that would mean threatening their own owners.

## 2. The advertising licence to do business

Since most media are dependent on advertising, ideas which seriously threaten the consumption society can never be spread through these media. The advertisers' choices thus influence media prosperity and survival. The ad-based media are also given a price-marketing-quality edge, which allows them to further encroach on and weaken their ad-free rivals.

## 3. The dependence on sources

Since news is a tradable good, which must be produced fast at as low a price as possible, news journalists are dependent on co-operative sources that can quickly provide them with information. This leads to the development of symbiotic relationships with powerful institutions in the market and in politics. The journalist who exposes weaknesses risks losing his or her contacts, which makes it difficult for him/her to do a good job.

## 4. 'Flak' and the enforcers

Journalists who report in a way which threatens economic or political power holders in society can also become the target of threatening and costly counter-attacks. For instance, a journalist in Sweden who writes critically about nuclear power can count on angry phone calls from people employed in the nuclear power lobby. Even if the journalist him/herself can deal with this, it may induce a hesitant editor-in-chief to clamp down on reporting that elicits criticism. Flak can also mean outright reprisals against journalists. [Note: 'Flak' is the word for anti-aircraft gunfire in a war.]

## 5. Uncritical belief in market liberalism/ anti-communism as control mechanism

In the USA, it was possible for many years to use the fear for communism to also suppress ideas which were not related to communism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, anti-communism has partly been replaced by a blind belief in the free market as the ultimate organising principle for society, and this in turn guides the choice of news. In Sweden, during

the past few years we see the same pattern evolving. Economic journalists are unable to see the deficiencies and risks inherent in the global capitalist system of today. Hence, their articles become propaganda for a system of which most readers are probably more or less critical.

In the book, the following is said among other things regarding the working conditions of journalists:

*"There are also real advantages in conformity beyond the rewards and privilege that it yields. If one chooses to denounce Qaddafi, or the Sandinistas, or the PLO, or the Soviet Union, no credible evidence is required. The same is true if one repeats conventional doctrines about our own society and its behavior - say, that the US government is dedicated to our traditional noble commitment to democracy and human rights. But a critical analysis of American institutions, the way they function domestically and their international operations, must meet far higher standards; in fact, standards are often imposed that can barely be met in the natural sciences. One has to work hard, to produce evidence that is credible, to construct serious arguments, to present extensive documentation - all tasks that are superfluous as long as one remains within the presuppositional framework of the doctrinal consensus. It is small wonder that few are willing to undertake the effort, quite apart from the rewards that accrue to conformity and the costs of honest dissidence.*

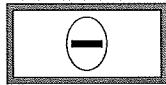
*There are other considerations that tend to induce obedience. A journalist or commentator who does not want to have to work too hard can survive, even gain respectability, by publishing information (official or leaks) from standard sources; these opportunities may well be denied to those who are not content to relay the constructions of state propaganda as fact. The technical structure of the media virtually compels adherence to conventional thoughts; nothing else can be expressed between two commercials, or in seven hundred words, without the appearance of absurdity that is difficult to avoid when one is challenging familiar doctrine with no opportunity to develop facts or argument."*

I believe many journalists around the world will recognise the situation described above. The challenge remains for all of us. □

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# 5 Media Filters:

Hermann and Chomsky's Critique of Media Propaganda



## Ownership

The dominant media are firmly embedded in the market system. They are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people or other companies. Alternatives such as co-operative ownership tend to fare badly. Any notion that free market competition supports free-ranging pluralism of interests is confounded by the available statistics. There tends to be an inexorable trend towards monopoly.



## Advertising

The media are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment. As McLuhan says: "The ads are always good news." In order to balance the ads, the hot medium needs to carry a lot of bad news. This analysis goes some way to explaining the difficulties of politicians trying to peddle a positive message, and the rise of the spin-doctor.



## Sources

United States reportage of foreign affairs leads to a consistent exclusion of facts unacceptable to US officials and a consistent bias supporting official US positions." A high percentage of US copy originates from official sources. "One survey of 2,850 stories in the N.Y. Times and Washington Post found that almost 80 per cent of the stories in both publications were based on the official pronouncements of public officials."



## Flak

This filter is little more than the negative face of the three filters listed above. "Government and large non-media business firms are also best positioned (and sufficiently wealthy) to be able to pressure the media with threats of withdrawal of advertising or TV licenses, libel suits, and other direct and indirect modes of attack."



## Ideology

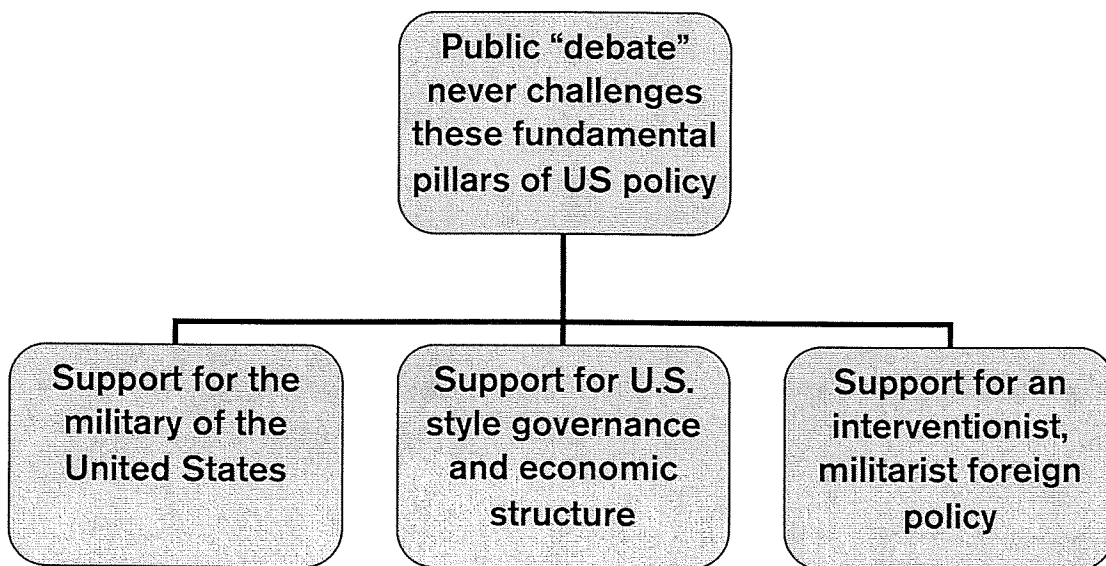
The media are constrained by the dominant ideology, which heavily featured anti-Communism before and during the Cold War era, and was mobilised often to prevent the media from criticising attacks on small states labelled communist. Herman allows that this filter is possibly weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union and global socialism, but this is easily offset by the greater ideological force of the belief in the "miracle of the market."

## FRAMING THE DEBATE: CHOMSKY'S MODEL OF MEDIA PROPAGANDA UNIT

Traditional Conception of the Media is that it functions as a **watchdog**, looking over the actions of the government for the public. The government needs to be kept in check through accurate information and full accounting.

Critics of the media argue that the media is in fact, acting like a **guard dog**, protecting the house of the establishment from alternative/non-mainstream ideas and ways of thinking. Instead of acting as a critical observer of the government, the media acts like a filter, limiting the discussion to mainstream ideas.

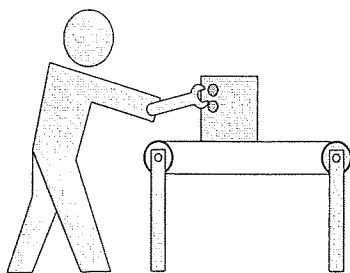
### THE FRAMING FUNCTION OF THE MEDIA



#### Potential Answers to Chomsky's Model

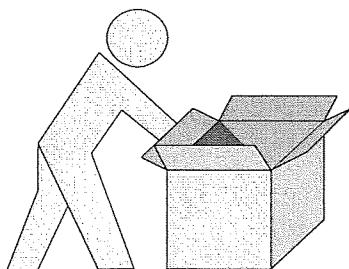
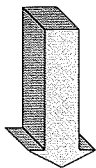
- It is a natural human tendency to marginalize extreme ideas.
- Not all societal influence/reporting is propaganda; some may be true
- The tendency of the United States is towards the center-right (American Exceptionalism)
- Don't blame the media/government for the failure of the left to convince the public
- Perhaps the emergence of New Media will render these theories mute
  - Internet, Talk Radio, Decentralized Communication

# MODEL OF GOVERNMENT SHAPING OF THE NEWS



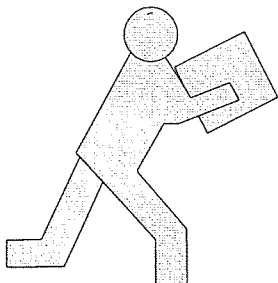
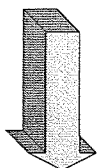
The Government "Manufactures" the News

The Government crafts the news, by selective omission and outright lying. The media is given an incomplete story, delivered by "high ranking government officials" to reporters who have been bought off by their access to power. The reporters are in a bind; if they fail to acquiesce to those in power their access to the limited and selective information is cut off.



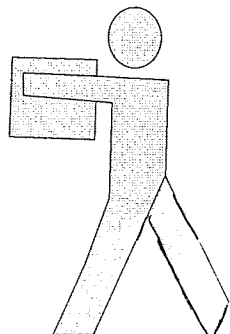
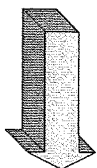
The Media/Govt. Package the News

The news is framed in context of three un-shaking principles: support for the US military, belief in the American system of governance and economic structure, and support for an interventionist foreign policy. Packaging also simplifies the issues in the news and "frames" the acceptable discourse on the issue. Opinions outside the frame are marginalized.



The Media Delivers the News

The delivery of the news furthers the packaging. Complex issues are broken down into two sides, when there are obviously multiple views, many that are discarded. The news is presented in simple, easily understood packages that minimize questions and complexity. In the delivery of the news, the acceptable parameters of the debate are further codified.



The Public Receives the News

The public receives the information, assuming that the democratic process has worked. The filtered, packaged, and sometimes wholly inaccurate news is accepted—and the public assumes that it has both 1) become better informed, and 2) better able to make decisions in a democratic society.