

Propaganda in the Information Age

Still Manufacturing Consent

Edited by Alan Macleod



PROPAGANDA IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Propaganda in the Information Age is a collaborative volume which updates Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model for the twenty-first-century media landscape and makes the case for the continuing relevance of their original ideas. It includes an exclusive interview with Noam Chomsky himself.

2018 marks 30 years since the publication of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's groundbreaking book *Manufacturing Consent*, which lifted the veil over how the mass media operate. The book's model presented five filters which all potentially newsworthy events must pass through before they reach our TV screens, smartphones or newspapers. In *Propaganda in the Information Age*, many of the world's leading media scholars, analysts and journalists use this model to explore the modern media world, covering some of the most pressing contemporary topics such as fake news, Cambridge Analytica, the Syrian Civil War and Russiagate. The collection also acknowledges that in an increasingly globalized world, our media is increasingly globalized as well, with chapters exploring both Indian and African media.

For students of Media Studies, Journalism, Communication and Sociology, *Propaganda in the Information Age* offers a fascinating introduction to the propaganda model and how it can be applied to our understanding not only of how media functions in corporate America, but across the world in the twenty-first century.

Alan MacLeod is a member of the Glasgow Media Group and completed his PhD in 2017. His first book, *Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting* was published in 2018. His research interests include propaganda, media theory, social media and Latin American politics.

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of Edward S. Herman
(1925–2017)**

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INTRODUCTION

Propaganda in the information age

Alan MacLeod

The media is not your friend. The media is a weapon of the elite in the battle for your mind. They are not plucky truth-tellers but, for the most part, are enormously powerful corporations propagandizing us for their own interests and agendas. They do not challenge power; they *are* power, the voice of the powerful. The mass media is not trying to provide the public with factual information, but rather to gaslight and propagandize them into subservience and support for elite positions, most of which are against our own interests.

The media is largely owned and paid for by the elite and run in their interests. Today just five gigantic corporations, Comcast, Disney, News Corporation, AT&T and National Amusements, control the vast majority of American media, and similar monopolies exist worldwide. We all understand that state-dominated media in a dictatorship is propaganda. Yet we are told that corporate-owned media under capitalism constitutes a free press, despite the fact that in both cases the entities that control society also control the media. The elite have long seen the public as a “bewildered herd” of “ignorant” and “meddlesome” outsiders, in the father of modern journalism, Walter Lippmann’s words (cited in Chomsky, 2003: 4). These outsiders need to be placated with necessary illusions in order to keep them from challenging the material interests of the elite. The media is crucial in providing these illusions.

Media are tremendously important in shaping our understanding of the world around us. As Ben Bagdikian (1992: 26) wrote, the mass media are “The authority at any given moment for what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is fantasy, what is important and what is trivial. There is no greater force in shaping the public mind.” Our world is largely *mediated* through the images and words of the media. For instance, the majority of Americans do not have a passport (and nearly half of all foreign trips are to Mexico alone) (Amos, 2018). Therefore, their understanding of foreign countries is heavily dependent on the media they consume. In 2003, the United States was the only country in the world in which the public feared Saddam Hussein, something not even Kuwaitis felt (Chomsky, cited in Tempest, 2003). This perception of Hussein as a threat could not have been sustained without a pliant press.

The Australian psychologist Alex Carey (1997: 18) claimed that the twentieth century had been characterized by three developments of transcendent importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power *against* democracy. Today, in the twenty-first century, we are living through the consequences of those developments. When we think of the term “propaganda” it is usually associated with oppressive, authoritarian enemy states like North Korea. Yet Carey (1997: 21) argues that propaganda is, in fact, more advanced and refined in more democratic societies where the use of force to control the population is much less common and acceptable. If you cannot

control people by force then you must control them through other methods. However, it is crucial that it not be perceived as propaganda. Indeed, the greatest achievement of modern propaganda is in persuading us of its non-existence. Propaganda is all around us, we simply use other names for it: advertising, marketing, branding, public relations. We see some 5,000 advertisements daily (Johnson, 2006). Defending ourselves against this unrelenting barrage is perhaps the most important step we can take in order to grow and think independently and critically.

Two people who have done more than perhaps anyone else to expose propaganda to the light of critical scrutiny are Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. In 1988, Herman, an economist from the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania and Chomsky, a linguist from MIT in Boston, laid bare the media's societal function and what factors influence what becomes news in their seminal book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Herman, like Chomsky, was a veteran anti-war activist and public intellectual who wrote voraciously until his death in 2017. The book was primarily his creation and it is to him that this book is dedicated. Chomsky was and is a force of nature, an intellectual giant and one of the most famous Americans (particularly outside the United States), penning well over 100 books, and is the most cited living author in both the humanities and sciences. The *New York Times* grudgingly called him "the most important intellectual alive." Together, they laid out the most concise, cogent and influential explanation as to the function of the media, and why many stories never make it to the news while others are constantly featured.

Robert McChesney, the widely respected Professor of Communications at the University of Illinois, described Herman and Chomsky's *magnum opus*:

The genius of *Manufacturing Consent* was that it opened an entirely new way of understanding the US news media ... for more than one generation of students and young people trying to make sense of it. It introduced them to a new way of viewing the world from a critical perspective, and understanding the importance, possibility, and necessity of social change. There is no doubt that it is the most widely read and influential work on how to understand the US news media.

(Herman, 2018)

According to Herman and Chomsky, the societal purpose of the media is to manufacture consent for elite policies and decisions. The authors lay out what they call a *propaganda model* of the mainstream American news media. Eschewing liberal and conservative critiques on the media, which often argue about individual bias of reporters, Herman and Chomsky present a structural critique of the media, in the neo-Marxist tradition of thinkers like Antonio Gramsci.

The five filters

The propaganda model states that there are five filters that all potentially newsworthy events must pass through before they reach your TV screen, smartphone or newspaper. Many potential stories will be blocked by one or more of the filters while many others will be changed, "leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2). These five filters are:

1. the size, concentration and elite ownership and for-profit motive of the media;
2. reliance on advertising as their primary source of income;
3. reliance on information provided by government, big business and other official "experts" funded by the powerful;
4. flak as a disciplining mechanism; and
5. a national religion of anti-communism, which functions as an instrument of discipline and

control.

Raw stories are processed through these five filters before they reach us, and the filters determine which stories become news and which are discarded.

Media concentration is a worldwide phenomenon, leading to fewer and fewer outlets and a narrowing of the range of opinions expressed. Media owners like Rupert Murdoch are well known to demand their outlets follow their own political outlooks. Likewise, media cannot bite the hand that feeds them and their reliance on big business as the principal source of income means stories questioning corporate power, capitalism and consumerism are systematically discouraged. By relying on official sources like politicians, think tanks and PR companies, sources that make sure their point of view is always represented, what they say becomes a story and news is written in a light that is favourable to them and their interests. Flak, negative responses to media with the intention to chide or intimidate, can take the form of boycotts, lawsuits, smear campaigns, letter-writing campaigns and more and is a powerful control mechanism, making sure the media report stories in a certain way (or do not report them at all). Flak tends to come primarily from organized and powerful groups. Herman and Chomsky note that communism was seen as the ultimate enemy in the United States, and the anti-communist filter was used against anyone advocating policies that threatened elite wealth and power, both at home and abroad. The tactic had the effect of splitting the left and putting liberals and progressives permanently on the defensive, causing them to behave like reactionaries to prove their loyalty, lest they be tarred with the communist brush (2002: 29).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Herman and Chomsky suggested the fifth filter should be replaced by the steadfast belief in the “miracle of the market” (2002: 17–18). Modern developments with the third filter are discussed in [Chapter 5](#) and the fourth in [Chapter 4](#). For a more in depth discussion of the five filters, see [Chapter 3](#).

Worthy vs. unworthy victims and legitimizing vs. meaningless elections

Because the US media system serves the interests of the elite, the propaganda model predicts that the media will consistently draw attention to victims of or dissidents in enemy states, treating them favourably, while ignoring or even attacking victims of the US government or its client states. Likewise, the model predicts that elections in states the United States approves of will be treated as legitimate by the media, while those in enemy states will be undermined, attacked as unfree, farcical or meaningless, regardless of the empirical reality of the conditions of the vote.

In order to test the model, Herman and Chomsky produced a series of case studies. They compared the media coverage of a single murdered priest, Jerzy Popieluszko, in an enemy state (communist Poland) to over 100 religious martyrs, including American citizens, murdered in Central American client states over a period of two decades. They found that not only did the Polish priest’s coverage dwarf that of the “unworthy” victims, but the media’s reaction was one of indignation, shock and cries for a response. In contrast to the “worthy” Polish victim, those killed in Central America, often by groups funded, trained and supported by the American government, were overwhelmingly ignored. When reported at all, it was in a matter-of-fact tone with very few details.

They also compared the coverage of the elections in Nicaragua to those in Guatemala and El

Salvador. They characterize the elections in Guatemala and El Salvador, two client states of the United States, as held under “conditions of severe, ongoing state terror” (2002: 88), contrasting it with the relatively free and fair ones in Nicaragua (an official enemy at the time). They found the US media sympathetic to the first two elections while treating the Nicaraguan ones as a sham, exactly as the model predicted.

The pre-selection of journalists

Manufacturing Consent argues that journalists are not encouraged to be independent. On the contrary, they are picked for their obedience to authority and their credulousness. As Herman and Chomsky (2002: preface) explain:

Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power.

Journalists increasingly come from an elite background themselves and are indoctrinated at the *right* schools where they are taught to credulously report what those in power tell them, rather than to question power. In the build-up to the Iraq invasion of 2003, journalists were extraordinarily obedient in reporting the lies they were told about Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Those that did not, and questioned their government, like Chris Hedges and Phil Donahue, were few enough to be purged. As Lance Bennett (2001: 182) remarked, “the most important biases in the news occur not when journalists abandon their professional standards but when they cling most responsibly to them.”

The propaganda model does allow for vigorous debate, but crucially only within a narrow, acceptable beltway of ideas, a beltway that reflects debates among sections of the elite. Ideas that challenge the wealth and power of the elite and the capitalist system itself are entirely marginalized. Thus, debates about gun control or gay marriage are acceptable but raising the minimum wage or questioning the US military or its foreign wars are forbidden, even if supported by large majorities of the population.

The impact of the model

According to the authors, the propaganda model is one of the best-confirmed theories in all the social sciences. Nevertheless, they predicted that their model would remain outside the bounds of the expressible. As Chomsky (1999: 23) notes:

The propaganda model is either valid or invalid. If invalid, it may be dismissed; if valid it *will* be dismissed. As in the case of eighteenth-century doctrine on seditious libel, truth is no defense; rather, it heightens the enormity of the crime of calling authority into disrepute.

Just as Chomsky predicted, the book that lays bare the media’s true agenda and how it functions has been largely ignored by the elite. When it has been addressed, Herman (2018) notes that many of the critiques display a “barely concealed anger,” Michael Schudson (2011: 31–2) of the elite Columbia Journalism School described the book as “misleading and mischievous,” claiming that journalists believe in “fair and objective reporting” and “represent both sides fairly.” Fairer

critiques of the model have described it as overly deterministic (Ashraf *et al.*, 2016; Shemelis, 2016).

The model has been marginalized in academia (Zollmann, 2015), which Chomsky (Taibbi, 2018) maintains shares a similar culture to journalism. Jensen (2010) claims many journalism school professors have never read *Manufacturing Consent*, while others “do their best to denigrate it” and face flak from right-wing groups for “politicizing” the classroom by teaching it. Herring and Robinson (2003) claim that Chomsky’s work in general is ignored and marginalized, even by those who agree with his conclusions but are concerned about the negative career repercussions of being associated with somebody who challenges power so openly. They claim they have been told by peers and academic editors to remove all references to his work from their manuscripts or to reference him only when they disagreed with him. Likewise, while Chomsky is something of an academic star, consistently interviewed on the most important international TV stations, he is virtually entirely absent from mainstream US media. He is not concerned with his ostracism; on the contrary, it is a reassuring sign he is continuing to challenge power.

In his study of *Manufacturing Consent*’s marginalization, Mullen (2010) found relatively few references to the work in academic journals, even in those devoted to critical media studies. Furthermore, the references were usually simply inclusions in the bibliography and no discussion. Likewise, he found that few media and communication textbooks actively engaged with the propaganda model, with even the ones that did giving it only a few lines or paragraphs’ attention.

The mainstream media it so eloquently critiques has also steadfastly ignored the model. Between 1988 and 2004, the *Guardian*, Britain’s most liberal mainstream broadsheet, referenced it only once, in passing, with only ten mentions of it in the entirety of the British press (MediaLens, 2004). Likewise, the only relevant results on the [NyTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com) archive for “propaganda model Chomsky” are a negative 1988 review of *Manufacturing Consent* by Walter Leferber and a response letter by Edward Herman to the editor.

Is this dismissal of the book because the model is invalid or unimportant? This is certainly not the case. *Manufacturing Consent* has been enormously influential and has become the crucial text in understanding the agenda and function of the media, and it went on to become an unlikely bestseller. Robert McChesney described it as “arguably the most important work in news media criticism ever written” (Herman, 2018). Cult journalist Matt Taibbi (2017) said it had become a “bible” of media criticism for an entire generation of dissident thinkers, lamenting that there was no sequel; “now more than ever, we could use another *Manufacturing Consent*.” We are pleased to announce that there is one.

The popularity and incisiveness of the book inspired many films, including a feature-length documentary of the same name that opened Herman and Chomsky’s ideas up to an even greater audience. It became the most successful documentary in Canadian history, winning a host of awards and has been seen by countless millions. The documentary scores an impressive 8.2 out of ten on [imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com), after 4,000 reviews, and boasts an 86 per cent rating on [RottenTomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com), with 94 per cent of viewers liking it.

In the twenty-first century a new generation of scholars has critically engaged and expanded upon Herman and Chomsky’s original work. For example, Boyd-Barrett (2004) proposed a sixth filter, that of government and intelligence services penetration or “buying out” of the media, noting a long history of covert penetration of the press. Pedro (2011) attempted to refine the model, suggesting a set of sub-filters for each main filter. There has also been an attempt to

expand the model to the cinema, with Alford (2009) exploring its role in Hollywood movies and Rasul (2015) highlighting Bollywood's role in pursuing the agenda of the Indian government. For a fuller summary of recent literature on the propaganda model, see [Chapter 2](#).

While Herman and Chomsky's model described the mainstream American press, the applicability of the model to other countries was clear to many from the beginning. While there are factors in other developed countries, such as stronger public broadcasting and large labour-based political movements that allow for a wider range of views in the media, strong similarities with the mainstream US media landscape remain. For one, concentrated media ownership around the world mirrors the United States, while the dependence on corporate advertising for revenue and on official sources for information and data make the propaganda model highly relevant to the rest of the world. Furthermore, the internationalization of media due to the Internet and the worldwide advance of neoliberal free-market economics mean media around the world is increasingly resembling and operating under the same constraints as American media.

Bergman (2014) argued the case for a Dutch propaganda model, noting that the Netherlands has been a close ally of the United States while its economy is similarly dominated by huge corporations. Klaehn (2002) used the model to study the Canadian media's coverage of the conflict in East Timor and found it did not challenge the Canadian government's positions or interests. MacLeod (2018) and Robertson (2004) have proved the case for its applicability to the British media while Khan (2013) used the five filters to explain the performance of the Indian media. Even further afield, Maweu (2017) applied Herman and Chomsky's filters to the Kenyan media. Therefore, as the US model is increasingly being adopted it can also prove highly useful and relevant to those interested in international media. [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#) explore the fact that in a globalized world, we also have a globalized media.

The propaganda model in the information age

And yet so much has changed since the publication of *Manufacturing Consent* in 1988. We are witnessing the precipitous and quite possibly terminal decline of the newspaper industry. US weekday newspaper circulation has more than halved since the book was released (Pew, 2018), and the number of newsroom staff has similarly fallen (Pew, 2016). Across the developed world it is a similar story. Europe has seen a 20 per cent decline in daily newspaper circulation over the past five years; Oceania 31 per cent (World Press Trends Database, 2017). The once dominant television is in serious decline too, and 2018 will likely be the first year more Americans get their news online than from TV. Old media is increasingly the domain of the elderly too, with the average age of TV viewers in the United States and United Kingdom now over 60. One study found that, out of 200 careers surveyed, newspaper reporting was the fifth-worst job in terms of making a living, broadcast journalism the ninth (McChesney, 2013: 176).

This decline has been hastened by the meteoric rise of the Internet and social media, a development of transcendent importance in the history of communication. Today, a vast array of information and news from an almost limitless number of sources is instantly available at our fingertips. Furthermore, the Internet and social media has allowed anyone with a smartphone (the majority of people in the developed world (Rainie and Perrin, 2017)) to theoretically be a producer of news or commentary, to challenge the system and build audiences for their own independent blogs, channels, podcasts or websites. Huge new platforms like Twitter and YouTube have arisen which help many communicate to a worldwide audience.

Furthermore, public trust in media has evaporated. After a succession of scandals and recent contentious political events where the media openly showed their bias, journalists are among the least trusted people in society, ranking below estate agents and bankers in the United Kingdom and United States (Ipsos Mori, 2017; McCarthy, 2018). As Marcela Pizarro, journalist at *The Listening Post*, the media critique show on *Al-Jazeera English* summed up:

What *Manufacturing Consent* did is to launch into a searing critique of how mainstream media outlets often act as mouthpieces for political power. Today, much of these arguments remain relevant at a time when media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy businessmen. But in the past 30 years, with the birth of digital technologies, the news industry has also undergone a series of revolutionary changes which have complicated the media ecosystem. Today, the multiplicity of voices, opinions and output have rendered a more top-down analysis of media power slightly anachronistic.

Can a book written during the Cold War still be an effective tool in understanding the complexities of the global media system? Is it applicable to media in the information age? It is these questions this book answers. We argue, though not without critique, that 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 as it was in 1988.

In [Chapter 1](#), *Manufacturing Consent* co-author Noam Chomsky discusses the history and reaction to the book, the changes in the media landscape and the incredible power accumulated by new media monopolies like Amazon and Google, and shares his thoughts on current issues in modern media, including Russiagate, Syria and fake news in the era of Trump.

In [Chapter 2](#), Florian Zollmann takes us through the new research on the propaganda model, research that deals with the new media landscape, assessing the performance of the model in explaining media behaviour today. He also explores the media's systematic discrimination based on class, race and gender, arguing that these should be seen as filters affecting media performance.

[Chapter 3](#) addresses the strength and relevance of each of the five filters today, arguing that most, if not all, of them shape news production more forcefully than previously, due to the changing nature of the profession, where journalists are under more structural pressure and have less creative freedom than ever before.

The following three chapters deal with modern issues in propaganda. [Chapter 4](#) deals with the rise to prevalence of Russia as a *bête noire* in Western, particularly American, politics. It argues that the anti-communist fifth filter has been revived as an anti-Russian filter, where organizations, political figures and media who do not fall into the acceptable beltway of opinion or question the liberal obsession with investigating Moscow are tarred as "Putin's puppets" and "Russian agents" in a form of liberal McCarthyism. In [Chapter 5](#), Oliver Boyd-Barrett discusses the creation of supposedly independent and legitimate sources in order to sway the media coverage of foreign reporting in hotspots like Syria. [Chapter 6](#) examines the applicability of the propaganda model to Hollywood movies and explores the US military and CIA's enormous effort to propagandize the public through influencing television, film and computer games, a fact largely unknown to the public.

The next three chapters detail the propaganda model in an international context. We live in a far more globalized world than in the 1980s, and our media has evolved to reflect this. [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#) address the Indian media. First, Ruhi Khan explores the structural factors affecting the reporting of the IL&FS scandal, then Azmat Rasul discusses the increasingly close relationship

between the Indian state and Bollywood cinema. In [Chapter 9](#) Jacinta Mwendu Maweu examines how new media technologies were used to hijack democracy in the 2017 elections in Kenya, manufacturing consent for President Kenyatta. Kenyatta employed controversial firm Cambridge Analytica to run “just about everything” about his campaign and party. It then mounted a massive fake news campaign to mislead the public into supporting him and rejecting his challenger, Raila Odinga.

There has been very little work on the propaganda model from a journalist’s perspective. In [Chapter 10](#), Matt Kennard presents a first-hand account of what working in journalism under the propaganda model is like, exploring the pre-selection of “right-thinking” journalists, the groupthink in the newsroom and editorial censorship.

Together, these chapters explore the propaganda model’s continued relevance in the digital era.

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1

STILL MANUFACTURING CONSENT

An interview with Noam Chomsky

Alan MacLeod and Noam Chomsky

This interview took place on March 13th, 2018. Noam Chomsky and Alan MacLeod discussed the origins of Manufacturing Consent, the propaganda model today, Google and Facebook, Donald Trump and Russia, fake news and Syria.

Alan MacLeod (AM): I would first like to ask you about how *Manufacturing Consent* came about. How did you know Edward Herman? What was the division of labour with the book? What parts did you write and what parts did he write?

Noam Chomsky (NC): Ed wrote the basic framework, the institutional analysis, the corporate structure, the relations to government programmes and the fundamental institutional structure of the media – that was basically him. He also did parts on some of the specific studies like on the coverage comparison of a hundred religious martyrs in Latin America with one Polish priest. He did the comparison of the elections, which was partly drawn from a book that he had already done on demonstration elections. I did all the parts on Vietnam and on the Freedom House attack on the media. Of course, we interacted on all the chapters, but the main division of labour was that.

AM: And what was the reaction to it when it came out? Was it celebrated? Ignored? Attacked?

NC: The reaction was quite interesting. Mostly the journalists and the media did not like it at all, of course. And, interestingly, they did not like the defence of the integrity of journalism. The last part, which investigated Peter Braestrup's (1977) major, two-volume Freedom House attack on the media for having been treacherous, for having lost the Vietnam War, and so on (which turned out to be a total fraud). I was probably the only person who read the actual document, both of the two volumes. One, the attack on the media, [the other] the documentary basis. Hardly any correlation between them! It was just literally total fraud! And what the results showed was that the journalists were courageous, honourable, they had integrity, they did their work seriously, but, of course, all within the framework of US government ideology. Like all the coverage of the war, like, say, David Halberstam. It was honest, serious, but, almost without exception within the framework of the assumption that the United States is making a mistake by trying to save democracy in South Vietnam from communist aggression. That is the picture. The idea that the United States was carrying out a major war crime by invading another country and destroying the indigenous resistance – the facts were there but not the framework of discussion.

And they did not like that. Journalists would much prefer to be regarded as aggressive, independent, thinking for themselves and if they were treacherous, well, OK, maybe they went overboard attacking the US government – that they much preferred. So as far as the journalists themselves were concerned, aside from a few exceptions, they did not like that picture of journalism as being honest, courageous and with integrity.

There were very few reviews of the book but there was one critical discussion that I wrote about later by Nicholas Lehman (1989), a well-known scholar of journalism who wrote a review in which he disparaged it, saying, “This doesn’t mean anything.” For example, he discussed the chapter comparing the assassinations of a hundred religious martyrs in Central America, including an Archbishop, American nuns and leading Latin American intellectuals (where there was virtually no coverage) with the coverage of the assassination of one Polish priest where the assassins were immediately apprehended, tried, sentenced to jail (where there was vast reportage). This was one of our many examples of the way in which *worthy victims* are treated as compared with *unworthy victims*. He said “well this doesn’t mean anything, it is just because the media focused on one thing at a time, and they happened to be focusing on Poland not El Salvador.” So, out of curiosity I went to the *New York Times* index and it turned out there was more coverage of El Salvador than of Poland during that period. But it does not matter because this is a world of *alternative facts*. The media commentary is mostly propaganda and ideology. There were a few other critiques rather like that ... but in the mainstream it was basically ignored.

The first book that Ed and I wrote together, *Counterrevolutionary Violence*, was published by a small publisher that was doing quite well. They published 20,000 copies of it and were ready to distribute it. The publisher was owned by a big conglomerate, Warner Brothers, now part of Time Warner. One of the Warner executives saw the advertising for the book, and did not like it. He asked to see the book and when he saw it he went berserk and ordered them to stop distributing it immediately. The publisher at first did not agree. They said they would publish a critical volume with contrary views, but that was not enough to prevent it from being published. In the course of the discussion he just put the whole publisher out of business, destroying all their stock, not only our book, but all their books. We brought this to the attention to some civil libertarians at the American Civil Liberties Union. They did not see any problem. It is not government censorship; it is just a corporation deciding to destroy a publisher to prevent them distributing a book.

We immediately started working on an expansion of the book: *The Political Economy of Human Rights*. The reaction to that was quite interesting. Many things were discussed but there were two major chapters where we compared two huge atrocities going on at the same time in the same place, in South East Asia. One in Cambodia under Pol Pot, the other in East Timor after the Indonesian invasion. They were very similar. Per capita the East Timor atrocities were worse as they killed a larger portion of the population, but they were comparable. The fundamental difference between them was that in one case you could blame it on an official enemy and there was absolutely nothing to do about it – nobody had a proposal as to how to stop it. In the other case, we were responsible. The United States and its allies were crucially responsible. The US blocked action at the United Nations, provided the arms for Indonesia – the more the atrocities increased the more the arms flowed, and there was everything you could do about it – you could just call it off. The reaction was not a word on our chapter about East Timor – that disappeared. But there was a huge attack on our discussion of Cambodia. There was a huge literature on this

trying to show that we were apologists for Pol Pot. The reason for this was that we went through the media and said “we don’t know what the facts are, we can’t know, but we will compare the facts available with what came out of the media filter” and it was grotesque: there was lying at a level that would have astonished Stalin. So we went through that record. That led to total hysteria. Look it up, you will find a ton of literature about it. We recently published a new edition of the book and we didn’t change a comma because there was nothing wrong with it. But that is the kind of reaction you get with *Manufacturing Consent*.

AM: It’s now been almost 30 years since its publication and the media landscape has, in many ways, changed greatly since 1988. I think perhaps the largest difference is the arrival of the Internet and social media. One 2016 study showed that half of all British people get their news online now, with online news having overtaken television in its reach, and having far superseded it among those under 45 years old. Twenty-five per cent of the UK receives its news primarily through social media like Facebook or Twitter (Nielsen, 2016). In the United States, two-thirds of the adult population get news through social media, and that figure is growing at nearly 10 per cent a year. Even the majority of over-50s use social media for news (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017). Could you speak about the Internet and social media, its usage and the evolving media landscape with regard to the propaganda model?

NC: I don’t think the Internet and social media changes the propaganda model at all. The propaganda model was about the major media institutions and they remain, with all the social media and everything else, the primary source of news, information and commentary. The news that appears in social media is drawn from them. So, if you look at the news on Facebook it comes straight from the major media. They don’t do their own investigations. As far as the major media are concerned, there is no fundamental difference. In fact, in some ways they are a little more independent than they were back in the 1980s, partly because of changes in the society, which have opened things up to an extent. But fundamentally they are the same. In fact, Ed and I did a second edition of *Manufacturing Consent* about 16 years ago (2002) and we talked about the Internet and whether to write anything about it and we decided just to leave it alone.

As far as social media are concerned, they are interesting in themselves. There has been a certain amount of study of them. What they have done is create bubbles. If you read the *New York Times*, which, incidentally, young people did not read much in the 1980s either, but if you read the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or even if you watch television news, you get a certain range of opinion, not very broad – it goes from centre to far-right, but at least there is some discussion and occasionally you get a critical voice here and there. On social media that has declined. People tend to go to things that just reinforce their own opinions, so you end up with bubbles. And it is all across the spectrum. The people on what is called the left see the left media, the people on the right see the right media. And the level of material is, of course, much more shallow. The mainstream media, as we wrote in *Manufacturing Consent*, are a very significant source of news and information and provide very valuable material. The first thing I do every day is read the *New York Times* as it is the most comprehensive journal. You have to critically analyse what you read and understand the framework, what is left out and so forth, but that is not quantum physics, it is not hard to do. But it is a source of news. On social media you do not find that. There are exceptions; there are Internet journals that are very good, for example, *The Intercept*, but most of it (Internet and social media) is pretty shallow and has led to a decline in understanding of the world in many ways.

AM: And, of course, there is the increasingly close relationship between these massive online

monopolies and the US state. For instance, Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Washington Post* and Amazon, received a \$600 million contract with the CIA. Meanwhile, Google has something of a revolving door with the State Department and shares enormous amounts of data about us with it and are constantly listening to us through products like Siri and Alexa. Its former CEO, Eric Schmidt's book about technological imperialism came heartily endorsed by Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger, Madeline Albright, Tony Blair and the former head of the NSA, who called Google "part of the defence industrial base." Julian Assange (2014) has called some of Google's projects "Orwellian horrors."

NC: To a certain extent that is true. They do things that are connected with state power but I think Google and Facebook and the other few conglomerates that monopolize the system are basically connected with advertisers. They are part of the business world. So they are essentially selling you to advertisers just as the major old media do. They are also selling audiences to advertisers, but in a different way. Google and Facebook are doing it by monitoring everything about you so that somehow advertisers will be able to make more money approaching you. And that is very dangerous. And some of the things that are done and are not reported are quite interesting. So take the last German elections, for example. There was a lot of talk about potential Russian interference, that the Russians would undermine the election and so on. It turns out there was interference in the election. It was not Russian. It was from the United States. A media company that works for nice guys like Trump, Le Pen and Netanyahu got together with Facebook and the Facebook office of Berlin provided them with extensive details of the kind they have on German voters so then the media company could microtarget ads to specific voters to try to influence them to vote in a certain way. For whom? For Alternative für Deutschland, the neo-fascist party! Which probably is a factor in their surprisingly high vote. This was reported in the business press so you can read about it in *Bloomberg Businessweek* (Silver, 2017). But try to find a report in the mainstream press. It is not the kind of electoral manipulation we like to talk about. That is typical of the kind of things we discussed in *Manufacturing Consent*. So, yes, there is interference in elections, this is a good example. But the main thing is the way in which people are individually tracked to monitor the environment in which they live so as to control them for the benefit of advertisers and business.

You may have read that there are recent studies showing that automobile manufacturers are now so flooded with data from drivers of cars that they have not yet worked out a way on how to get a business model to allow advertisers to follow you every moment of your life. There are already apps that you can get where they give you some free device and in return you agree to have advertisements posted on the car dashboard the whole time you are driving. So if you are approaching an area where there is a certain restaurant, there will be an ad for that restaurant, things like that. This is really insidious and it can be used in very dangerous ways and sooner or later will be I am sure.

AM: Are companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon too big to exist privately and in their current form?

NC: Any kind of near monopoly as these companies are is extremely dangerous. They have enormous power and outreach. I do not think that any organization at all should have that kind of power. Their ability to collect information and to devise means of controlling what you see and do is very dangerous. Even at the level of you looking up on a search engine, Google deciding what you are going to see first, second and so on is quite dangerous. And they can be quite insidious like what happened in the German election.

AM: In [Chapter 4](#), I suggest that the anti-communist filter that you wrote about in the 1980s as one of the five crucial filters that affect news is being drawn upon to create a new “anti-Russian” filter, where journalists and political figures who do not toe the establishment line on war and foreign policy will be chided as “Russian agents” or “Putin’s puppets.” You mentioned *The Intercept*, its co-founder Glenn Greenwald is an archetypal example of this. Another would be Jeremy Corbyn. [Note: the day after this interview took place, the Sun, Britain’s largest newspaper by circulation, ran with the frontpage headline “Putin’s puppet: Corbyn refuses to blast Russia on spy attack” as the leader of the Labour Party did not unreservedly endorse sanctions on Russia.] What is your opinion about the #Russiagate allegations and the general political climate with regards to Russia?

NC: As you probably know, in the United Kingdom right now there are moves to remove people’s access to RT, which is another television outlet. When I am overseas I look at that and BBC and they give a lot of information and news from different perspectives. But you have to protect people in the UK from an alternative point of view. In the United States it is not a problem because practically nobody has heard of RT. And *Al-Jazeera*, for example, had to cancel its efforts to reach an American audience because practically no station would allow them to appear. So there is no state censorship, it is just *Counterrevolutionary Violence* business censorship again.

Let’s take the Russia business. Let’s say all the claims are true. Suppose Russia tried to interfere in the American elections. That ought to make people laugh hysterically. There is *huge* interference in American elections. It comes from the corporate sector. They practically buy the elections. In fact, there is extensive work in mainstream academic political science that demonstrates very convincingly that you can predict the electability, hence largely the votes, of people in Congress on major issues, just by looking at their campaign funding (see Ferguson, 1995; Ferguson *et al.*, 2016). That is one factor, let alone lobbying and everything else. That is *massive* interference in elections. About 70 per cent of the population of the United States is not even represented, meaning that their own representatives pay no attention to their views and follow the views of the major funders. This is manipulation on an enormous level! Whatever the Russians might have done is not even a toothpick on a mountain compared to that, quite apart from the fact that the United States not only intervenes in elections (including in Russia) but overthrows governments. The whole thing is a bad joke and a sign of the collapse of the Democratic Party as a serious institution. They are focusing on this marginal phenomenon as a way to discredit Trump and almost totally ignoring the really devastating things carried out by the Trump administration.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (Johnson, 2017) did a study a little while ago of interviews with Trump by the major media since his election. It turns out that climate change was not mentioned. That is the most serious thing that he is doing! It should be a major headline every day that, alone in the world, the most powerful country in human history is not only refusing to participate in the efforts to deal with an existential crisis, but, in fact, is acting to exacerbate the crisis, pouring funds and money into more use of fossil fuels. Try and find an example in history of any political organization that was dedicated with passion to trying to destroy the prospect for organized human life. Even the Nazis were not doing that! And that is the Republican Party under Trump. It is the most dangerous organization in human history for this reason alone. It is not asked about, not discussed. It is hard to find words to describe it. Instead of that and plenty of other things that they are doing, what the media is trying to do is

find some Russian interference in the election. It is hard to know what to say about it!

AM: Of course, these actions are not happening in a vacuum. There is a huge geopolitical backdrop where Western and Russian forces are conducting a silent war in places like Ukraine and Syria. Could I get you to comment on the coverage of the Syria situation and ask how we critique our own media without undermining genuine aspirations of Syrians struggling for a better society?

NC: I think the media should cover Syria accurately and seriously, as a number of journalists – Patrick Cockburn, Robert Fisk, Charles Glass, Jonathan Randall – do. Those journalists cover it very accurately, that’s what they should be doing. Incidentally you will notice that I mentioned journalists who write in England, not the United States. Serious coverage is much harder to find here. There is some but not much. So the media should cover what is happening. As far as critical discussion is concerned, what Assad has been doing with Russian support is vicious and criminal. Right now what is happening in Eastern Ghouta is a major atrocity. But as Patrick Cockburn (2018) pointed out recently in the *Independent*, what is happening in Afrin is about the same.

AM: Happening where, sorry?

NC: Afrin. Turkish forces and their allies are carrying out the attack in a mostly Kurdish area. Patrick Cockburn has covered it but almost nobody else. The fact that you ask is itself revealing. The Turkish invasion of Syria is quite serious and it is threatening to destroy the Kurdish independent areas. It is not a joke. But it is barely covered, apart from people like Patrick Cockburn and Charlie Glass that cover it, but not many.

AM: I wanted to ask about clickbait and fake news as well. In the context of decreased revenues, we have seen an increase in inflammatory and often simply false reporting. Even organizations that do not rely on the traditional financing structure like the BBC have told their staff to “emulate *Buzzfeed*” (Burrell, 2015). What is your opinion on fake news today, its uses and abuses?

NC: The use of just invented news, *Breitbart*, for example, is not new, but it used to be on supermarket shelves. You would see the *National Enquirer* that would tell you Obama had an affair with whomever. That is fake news. But now it has spread quite widely, but not really in the major media. I think they do pretty much what they did before. It is true that advertising revenues had declined for a time but they increased with Trump. The television media in particular are delighted with the Trump phenomenon – you cannot turn on the television set without seeing something about Trump. And it is bringing in many more viewers. One of the CEOs of CBS said during the presidential campaign that “for us, economically, Trump’s place in this election is a good thing,” that he has “never seen anything like it” and it is “going to be a very good year for us” (Fang, 2016). I happened to be overseas when the election took place and I watched the BBC for several days. It was 100 per cent Trump! Nothing else in the world! Actually, the election was important, but it was important for quite different reasons that were not reported. For example, November 8th, the day of the election, was an extremely important day in history. The World Meteorological Organization was meeting in Morocco and trying to put some teeth in the Paris negotiations. It had presented a dire picture of the impact of climate change on the world. As soon as the election results came in the meeting basically stopped and the question was “can we even continue when the most powerful country in human history is deciding to destroy our efforts?” That was the major news of the day, not the fact that some half-mad billionaire with huge media support managed to win an election. But it was not even

mentioned. A couple of weeks later I found some mentions in the back pages.

As far as the election itself was concerned, the most striking feature was the Sanders campaign. The Sanders campaign was the first time in over a century of American political history that a candidate was able to get to where he did. Sanders probably would have been nominated if it had not been for the machinations of the Obama-Clinton party managers. But he did this with no name recognition, no funding from wealth or corporate power and no media support or recognition – that is astonishing! That has never happened in American political history. In the United States, elections are basically bought as I mentioned previously. This was a really striking phenomenon but was barely mentioned in the media. By now, he is by far the most popular political figure in the country but you hardly see a mention of him anywhere. He and his movement are doing lots of things but they cannot get any reporting on it. Those are the really important things and the BBC is the same, it is “Trump did this,” “Trump did that.”

What Trump actually *is* doing is pretty clever. It is a dual programme underway; Trump carries out one ridiculous antic after another. The media focus on it, the fact-checkers start and a couple of days later they say “well this and that fact were wrong” but by then everyone has forgotten about it and he is on to some new antics. Meanwhile, while media attention is focused on the megalomaniac conman who is working to attract their attention, the really savage wing of the Republican country, the Paul Ryan wing, is busy dismantling every element of government that might help the general population and dedicating themselves to their *real* constituency: the super wealthy and corporate power. That is happening in the background while everyone is focusing on Trump’s latest antics. It is a good system and is working very well. Meanwhile, he is maintaining his base who are under the illusion that somehow he is going to bring back jobs or that he is standing up for America. It is working quite well and the media and the Democrats are in particular responsible for allowing it to continue.

AM: As many old media companies struggle to maintain advertising incomes due to increased competition from online marketing companies like Google AdSense, does this make the second filter of the propaganda model weaker, or, perversely, stronger, as media are more desperate than ever to appease their remaining sponsors (see [Chapter 3](#) for a longer discussion)? Furthermore, journalism appears to be becoming a less professionalized field, with fewer and fewer full-time staff journalists employed by newspapers and TV and more freelancers and citizen journalists. In this context, what is journalism’s future?

NC: Media coverage is shrinking but the part that is there is still professionalized. There are very good, professional correspondents in the field, analysts and so on, but there are much fewer of them. Take Boston, where I have lived for many years. The *Boston Globe* was a major, leading newspaper. It had international bureaus; it did the best coverage of Central America during Reagan’s wars. Now there are a few things apart from local news in it and the rest is what they pick up from wire services. It is essentially hardly a newspaper anymore. That kind of thing is happening around the country but it is not deprofessionalization, it is just a decline in the model of the media that had functioned. In part it is being undermined by social media. If people can turn on the computer and get a couple of headlines then go on with their lives, it is a lot easier than reading a newspaper and trying to figure out what is happening. So there is a general cheapening of the culture that is affecting the media. But I see no evidence that the media are more influenced in their news coverage and analysis by advertisers than was the case before. It may be so but I do not have any evidence for it.

AM: Are the five explanatory filters more than an arbitrary list of possible causes for the

declawing of media? Are they all even “filters,” given that at least one of them, flak, requires conscious activity (more like an injection of poison than a filter) and is the fifth more a very broad idea about ideology?

NC: The fifth one, the anti-communist filter, was too narrow. In our (2002) edition of *Manufacturing Consent* we expanded it to invented threats to try to control opinion and discussion. Iran is a good example; the war on terror is another. It is not just anti-communism. Aside from that I do not understand what is arbitrary. We looked at the institutional structures of the [mainstream] media. What are they? They are major corporations that are often parts of bigger, mega corporations. They have a product that they sell to a market. The product is readers of newspapers or viewers on television and the market is advertisers. So they are corporate institutions that sell readers to advertisers. They are all closely linked to government. There is a lot of flow in and out of personnel with a lot of influence. And we asked a simple question that anyone who believes in free markets would ask at once. Do the structure of the producer of the market and the links to other power structures: does that affect the media content? That is the propaganda model. There is nothing arbitrary about it. That is just elementary. And if you believe in free markets that is exactly what you would look at.

AM: It is 30 years since *Manufacturing Consent* was published. In 2018, what would you have added or subtracted to the book if you were writing it today. Or do you think the PM still holds very strongly?

NC: The model is about the same today as it was in the 1980s. I would just use new examples. Take, say, Iran. There is a lot to say about that. There is a lot of concern about the potential threat of Iranian nuclear weapons. A couple of questions arise: suppose Iran was developing nuclear weapons. Who would be threatened? Actually, we have an analysis of this by a US intelligence report to Congress on the nature of the strategic issues of the world (Burgess, 2010; Department of Defense, 2010). This is before the P5+1 agreement. What they point out is that if Iran is developing nuclear weapons, which we do not know, the reason would be as part of their *deterrent* strategy. As they point out, Iran has very low military expenditure even by the standards of the region, and, of course, by the standards of the West. Their strategic doctrine is defensive; they want to defend themselves from any attack. And if they are developing nuclear weapons it would be part of their deterrent strategy.

Who is that a threat to? It is very simple: it is a threat to the rogue states that want to rampage in the region without any deterrent. There are two of them. They are called the United States and Israel. It is a threat to them if anyone has a deterrent. That is the potential “threat” of Iran. Is there a way of dealing with that potential threat? There is one very simple way: move to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone in the area. Is there a barrier to that? Not from Iran. Iran has been calling for that for years. Not the Arab states, they have been pressing for it almost forever. In fact, they initiated the effort. Not the rest of the world, which is strongly in favour of it.

There is one barrier. It is called the United States. The United States over a long period of time has refused to allow this to proceed, most recently Obama in 2015. The United States and Britain have a special commitment to this. Here is what ought to be the headlines on Iran. The United States and Britain have a particular commitment to a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region. When the United States and Britain invaded Iraq they had to concoct some sort of pretext. What they did was refer to a 1991 Security Council resolution that called on Saddam Hussein to stop his production of weapons of mass destruction. That very same Security Council resolution calls on “all parties,” meaning the United States and Britain, to move towards establishing a nuclear

weapons-free zone in the region. So the United States and Britain have a special commitment to move towards the one measure that could end any possible threat that anyone believes Iran poses. Why aren't they doing it? There is a simple reason. They have to prevent any inspection or control of Israel's nuclear facilities. That is the story. Do you see it discussed? No. And I would give many other examples in a new edition.

AM: And in terms of the future of journalism what do you think? Is it bleak?

NC: Well, there is an audience that is interesting. Let's go back to the Sanders campaign that I mentioned earlier. The fact is that Sanders is by far the most popular political figure in the country. Journalism could try to respond to that. It could try to reach the people who are really interested in doing something about the hard problems of the world and engage with them. There are plenty of such people. But the media are not reaching them. They can and they should. That would be the future of really independent media. Take something like *I. F. Stone's Weekly*. One person working on his own was able to reach a large number of people. Furthermore, it was magnified by the fact that the professional, mainstream media pretended he did not exist but the journalists were reading his stuff all the time and cannibalizing it. That could be done by the media themselves.

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2

A PROPAGANDA MODEL FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Structure-agency dynamics and the intersection of class, gender and race

Florian Zollmann

Introduction

The following chapter provides a reassessment of the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model (henceforth PM). Scholars using the PM have largely focused on elite news media reporting of war, foreign policy and conflict using a structuralist lens based on the political-economy tradition. Furthermore, much of the research on the PM has relied on broadcast-era concepts and theoretical understandings. To rectify some of its shortfalls, this chapter aims to revise and expand the PM in the light of the twenty-first-century media environment. The chapter will review and synthesize research from various fields of studies to demonstrate the continued relevance of the PM's main variables. Additionally, I will argue that filtering processes not only relate to corporate-market constraints but also to factors such as technology, agency, gender and race. The chapter will provide a timely update of the PM. Whilst some scholars have argued that we are currently entering an era of fragmented media, my analysis suggests that the PM is more relevant today than ever before.

The origins of the propaganda model

The first chapter of Herman and Chomsky's (2008) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* introduces the structural foundations of the PM. Chomsky credits Herman as the lead author of this introductory part (see [Chapter 1](#)). It is not well-known, on the other hand, that in 1986 Herman published an outline of the PM as a critique of the so-called liberal gatekeeper tradition. Gatekeeper researchers analysed how organisational constraints such as working routines, time pressures, economic incentives, hierarchies and attitudes in the newsroom influenced journalistic selection and production choices (see Shoemaker, 1991). Gatekeeper researchers provided significant findings on how commercial and political pressures impacted on journalistic news production processes forging homogeneity and conformity in the newsroom (see e.g. Breed, 1955; Gans, 1980). Yet, Herman argued, gatekeeper researchers failed to provide a "systematic analysis of government management of the media and joint

ventures by media and government, or by media and other power groups like business and its various components” (1986: 174). Gatekeeper research, Herman (1986: 173) further wrote, fixated on micro issues at the expense of looking at “the main drift, the net social outcome” of news media coverage.

When establishing the analytical categories of the PM, Herman (1986, 1999: 57) expanded on the insights of gatekeeper research by way of theorizing the wider political-economic environment of the news media. His reasoning could be described as follows: news organizations in liberal democracies are more-or-less embedded in the institutions of contemporary state-capitalism. News media performance should thus be regarded as a dependent variable of state-capitalist institutions including markets, ownership, corporate organization, advertising funding, government/pressure-group regulation and ideology (see Zollmann, 2017a: 42). As Herman (2000: 101) argued, these structural factors constitute “the only possible root of the systematic patterns of media behaviour and performance.” In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (2008) theorized news media performance as a function of these state-capitalist forces which they described as news filters (see also Herman 1986, 1999: 57). It is important to highlight these issues not only to remind of Herman’s significant contribution but also to demonstrate that the PM constitutes a firm extension of an earlier research paradigm.

Another pertinent approach to the study of news media performance that was equally derived from the gatekeeper tradition constitutes W. Lance Bennett’s (1990) “indexing” norm. Bennett built on Leon V. Sigal’s (1973) foundational gatekeeper study that highlighted the news media’s heavy reliance on official sources (see Livingston and Bennett, 2003: 365). The indexing norm assumes concordance between official government and news media discourses as a consequence of journalists’ proximity to official news beats and resulting sourcing practices (see Bennett, 1990). Indexing has been widely researched and can be associated with the works of prominent scholars such as Daniel Hallin, Robert Entman, Steven Livingston, Gadi Wolfsfeld, Jonathan Mermin, John Zaller and Dennis Chiu, amongst others (see Herring and Robinson, 2003; Zollmann, 2009). According to Eric Herring and Piers Robinson (2003: 557), the indexing norm is “effectively the sourcing filter of the propaganda model” which maintains that, “journalists fall back on the vast volume of public relations material disseminated by government in order to generate a steady and rapid supply of stories.” Whilst both approaches share this similarity, indexing hardly engages in a deeper institutional analysis of the news media and brushes over the main structural factors accounted for by the PM. Yet, indexing has been used far more widely in mainstream scholarship as opposed to the PM (Herring and Robinson, 2003; Zollmann, 2009). Herring and Robinson (2003: 563) consequently speak of a “truncated agenda of the mainstream” evident in its “lack of interest in the implications for news coverage of the concept at the heart of corporate capitalism, namely, profit, and the primary means of securing it, namely, advertising.”

What all of this tells us is that the PM constitutes a valid analytical framework well in line with major approaches in the discipline. Additionally, it theorizes several black spots as we find them in the orthodox gatekeeper and indexing research traditions. At a point in time when corporate control over the news media has been centralizing rather than weakening (see [Chapter 3](#); McChesney, 2013: 190), the PM should thus remain an important tool for critical scholarly inquiry.

Confirming the five news filters

Studies published in recent years demonstrate that the news filters established by Herman and Chomsky in 1988 remain in place today, albeit with some modifications (see, for example, [Chapter 3](#); Klaehn, 2002; Pedro, 2011a, 2011b; Zollmann, 2017a, 2017b). This section will therefore provide a brief analysis to highlight the continued relevance of the PM's filters in the contemporary media environment.

1. *Size/ownership*: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, major news media are integrated in a handful of mega-corporations. Audience concentration is increasing on local, national and international levels. Whilst access to the media is fragmented – meaning that recipients approach news via a variety of traditional and social media channels – the actual consumed content is largely produced and distributed by a small set of legacy brands (Curran, 2012; McChesney, 2013; Media Reform Coalition, 2015; Newman *et al.*, 2016). There have certainly been some changes as the Internet technically enables the establishment of so-called online only news providers. However, this has not led to substantial challenges of traditional ownership structures. For instance, novel news providers that have been able to attract larger audience shares, such as the left-leaning news publication *The Intercept* or the right-wing online platform *Breitbart News*, are tied to wealthy sponsors (see Rall, 2014; Storey, 2018). Overall, corporate legacy news organisations still constitute the main producers of original journalistic content. Novel online-only news providers are only able to reach larger audiences if they attract support from wealthy owners. Size and ownership as categories for news media enquiry should thus matter as much today as they did during the broadcasting-era.
2. *Advertising funding*: News media are still heavily reliant on advertising revenue. According to projections by Statista.com (2018), in 2017, slightly more than half of all newspaper revenue worldwide derived from advertising. The Pew Research Center estimated that in 2014 more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of all domestic news revenue in the United States stemmed from advertising (Holcomb and Mitchell, 2014). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 states, “the majority of online news consumption still happens through free websites, largely supported by advertising” (Newman *et al.*, 2018: 26). At the same time, the advertising pot has been substantially decreasing since the ad-industry has shifted investment from news to Internet advertising, with Facebook and Google as the main beneficiaries (see Barthel, 2018; Curran, 2012: 20). For instance, between 2006 and 2016, US newspapers lost about 63 per cent of their advertising revenue, falling from \$49 billion to \$18 billion (Barthel, 2017). Nonetheless, some US newspapers, like the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Chicago Tribune*, have been able to significantly increase their digital subscriptions (Barthel, 2017). Similarly, news organisations in Scandinavian countries with traditions of reader-based subscriptions, such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, have quite successfully been utilizing paywall strategies based on standing orders (Newman *et al.*, 2018: 22–3). It could be argued, then, that the leeway of advertising sponsors over the news media has decreased relative to the amount of advertising spent. On the other hand, most news organizations have not been able to compensate for advertising losses through alternative revenue streams. The main avoidance strategy has been to downsize or close newsrooms (Curran, 2012: 20–1), leading to a decline in journalism (McChesney, 2013). As a consequence, today's news organisations operate in a highly competitive funding landscape that forces them to act with even greater sensitivity towards

their remaining advertising sponsors.

3. *Sourcing*: Web 2.0 applications like Twitter provide a diverse and easily accessible source pool for journalists (Broersma and Graham, 2013). Mobile applications and cameras simplify the production and distribution of content. This allows for a rapid access to and transmission of sources and events across borders possibly diversifying the news (Scott, 2017). Yet, at this stage, the potential of Internet and mobile technology has been undermined by market realities. The economic pressures outlined in the above sections incentivize the recycling of information at the expense of journalistic primary research. In fact, staff and resource reductions have changed the field of journalism: it is now a common practice in the industry to assemble news stories from pre-packaged material rather than originally sourced inquiries (see Davies, 2009). Moreover, there has been a vast increase in what Herring and Robinson (2014–2015: 557) termed “organized political persuasion” and what traditionally was labelled as propaganda. Additionally, local news beats have seriously declined (see Media Reform Coalition, 2015). Official sources and public relations can, thus, still be regarded as major news subsidies. To that effect, studies on mainstream media reporting of international conflict, domestic politics and economic issues have broadly confirmed the continued dominance of official sources and perspectives in the news (see Bennett *et al.*, 2007; Berry, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2010; Zollmann, 2017a). For instance, a study assessing on- and offline news sourcing patterns in America, Europe, Asia and Oceania found that officials and experts made up the bulk of sources: 70 per cent online, 64 per cent in the press and 60 per cent on television (Curran *et al.*, 2013: 886). James Curran *et al.* (2013) write that, “the main body of online news is even more closely tied to the voices of authority than ‘legacy’ media.”
4. *Flak*: Herman and Chomsky (2008) highlighted flak as a negative response to reporting practices forcing the media or public intellectuals to abide by a certain agenda. In the broadcast-era, flak was mainly communicated through letters, phone calls and personal conversations. The threat of libel lawsuits and legal inquiries were equally part of flak. Web 2.0 has, at least to some degree, enhanced the ability of larger publics to engage in flak. Today, readers and citizen journalists can easily feedback to news media reports by way of using online platforms, blogs and comment functions – a process which has been described as gatewatching (Bruns, 2011). Gatewatching potentially provides a corrective administered by citizens and engaged publics. It has yet to be seen, however, if gatewatching can have a progressive impact on the news media. The ability to engage in effective flak campaigns is crucially linked to resources: time, money and contacts are important ingredients of successful flak. Letters and comments by ordinary people have only mild effects on a news organization. In contrast, a concerted stream of letters, op-eds and personal messages instructed by a Fortune 500 corporation, government or think tank will likely generate higher impact. Moreover, actions such as libel suits require expensive counsel and can hardly be afforded by ordinary members of the public. That is why a PM assumes the powerful in society to be most successful in flak. In recent years, Western governments have been conducting major flak activities to counter official leaks and to keep dissenting voices in line (Zollmann, 2015). The web-platform Wikileaks and its lead editor Julian Assange have been threatened with possible charges under the US-Espionage Act of 1917. The US government has compelled other companies to abstain from publishing material circulated by WikiLeaks or otherwise support the organization (Zollmann, 2015). Similarly, a public smear campaign targeted Edward Snowden and the journalists who published his

revelations of classified documents that led to the NSA scandal (Zollmann, 2015). Western governments have also intensified proceedings against potential whistle-blowers and journalists who might publish leaked material. For instance, the Obama administration's Department of Justice administered an unprecedented attack against whistle-blowers, including retroactive spying on prominent journalists to obtain the identity of their sources (Greenwald, 2014: 214). In 2018, writers who questioned the official British government narrative on the Syrian Civil War were smeared in a range of media outlets and on Twitter (Hayward, 2018). Similarly, the current controversy surrounding "fake news" and Russian propaganda has been used to stifle news websites that provide alternative perspectives on the Internet (see [Chapter 4](#)). What all these campaigns have in common is that they, just as a PM predicts, close down debate and prevent the public from accessing relevant information about crucial policies.

5. *Ideology*: The PM theorized "anti-communist" ideology as a template used by journalists to frame issues and events in a certain way. "Anti-communist" indoctrination had been a pervasive feature of Western liberal democracies, applied in their educational and cultural institutions (see Carey, 1995). News media discourses could, thus, connect to and activate already pre-existing sentiments. For instance, ideology framed independent countries located in strategically important regions as aggressors who aimed at spreading "communism." Due to the negative association with communism, the news media would be able to uncritically endorse interventionist policies in far-away countries such as in Vietnam (see Entman, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Similarly, social-democratic policies like universal healthcare provision or trade union activism were classified as "communist" or "socialist." Such negative association pushed issues that resonated with larger publics outside of the range of legitimate news media debate (see Carey, 1995; Hallin, 1989). Today, we can see a re-activation of "anti-communist" ideology by way of how the news media has exaggerated "Russiagate" and the "Putin scare" (for a full exploration of this subject, see [Chapter 4](#)).

Since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union in 1991, several alternative ideologies have further come to the forefront. A belief in the beneficial character of "free markets" (Herman, 2000: 109) underpins reporting on societal and economic issues. Despite the devastating consequences of day-to-day market transactions (euphemistically described as externalities), markets are identified with democracy and framed in positive terms. In the realm of international affairs, the "war on terrorism" as well as "humanitarian intervention" have become the main rationales for Western militarism (see Robinson, 2004: 107; Zollmann, 2017a). Additionally, Western foreign policy is assumed to be guided by "basic benevolence" (Curtis, 2003: 380). Contemporary ideology disguises the effects of militarism, economic malfeasance and exploitation in noble terminology, such as to promote "democracy, peace, human rights, and development" (Curtis, 2003: 380). Ideology still acts as a major news filter.

Revising the filters

According to Herman and Chomsky (2008: 2), the five filters differentiate the "basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns"; they determine newsworthy events and lock the parameters of discourse. Yet, the PM's filters outline general categories that can be updated and refined. As Herman pointed out, the PM is modelled on "broad-brush strokes" and

“this leaves lots of room for other tracks and sub-tracks in areas we deal with” (Herman and Klaehn, 2008). Moreover, several scholars have suggested useful changes to the PM’s filters to account for novel or neglected developments. In this section, I will revise the PM’s news filters in the light of serious critiques of the PM as well as empirical research. This will enable researchers to apply the PM in manifold contexts.

Country contexts and shifts in the strength of individual filters

The characteristics of each of the PM’s filters may vary depending on different time-space contexts. For example, in countries with a commercial media system, the first and second news filters are particularly important. In this context, market constraints should be further theorized as powerful forces underwriting the sourcing or flak strategies by the state and business sectors. In contrast, the ownership filter should account for a stronger state element in societies with distinct public service providers like the UK or Germany but also in authoritarian countries like Russia or China where the government plays a more direct role in terms of media ownership and policy (see Hearn-Branaman, 2009). Furthermore, depending on the degree of journalistic professionalization as well as partisanship of the press in a given society, the third filter might apply differently. In countries with high professionalization like the United States, media-source relations are especially pronounced and more closely follow the indexing norm. Countries with a wider political spectrum or stronger civil society sector might allow for greater source variations (see Sparks, 2007). The extra-institutional structures of the PM, such as flak and ideology, may also differ according to country specifics: Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman (2009: 132) suggests that flak is hardly produced on an industrial scale in China where he finds “little concerted domestic interest in creating flak in the way defined in the PM.” Hearn-Branaman (2009) sees more “collective efforts of those who are most internet-savvy” in generating citizens’ flak in China. Whilst these citizens may not constitute a hegemonic force, as they usually stay in line with the official parameters of discourse set by the Communist Party, the China example points to different manifestations of flak (2009: 132–3).

Similarly, the ideological filter of the PM has to be theorized with reference to the specific features of a society. For instance, “the war on terrorism” or “basic benevolence” are devices that are likely applicable in a variety of country contexts including the United States, EU, Russia or China. Other devices, such as “anti-communist” ideology are more pronounced in Western contexts that share a state-capitalist heritage.

Technology as a secondary “filter”

Some scholars have proposed to regard technology as a sixth filter of the PM (Pedro, 2011b: 1919–20). Technology, it is argued, opens up possibilities and sets limitations on media organizations and this could influence the practice, style, selection, distribution and consumption of the news (Pedro, 2011b). In the analogue broadcasting era, for instance, news had to be produced for distinct media such as television, radio or print. Twenty-first-century digital technology enables the integration of formerly separated media technologies (i.e. multimedia). Multimedia has changed the production and consumption of news in many ways and this could warrant an extension of the PM. In this particular context, Sunitha Chitrapu (2017) has suggested to add algorithms as a novel filter to the PM. In the realm of Web 2.0, algorithms are understood

as “certain sets of rules and preferences” which determine the order of news feeds or search engine ranks (2017: 2). Algorithms are set by social media organizations that are increasingly used to access news and information online. “What is deemed unworthy of attention by algorithms,” Chitrapu (2017: 15) writes, “will not make it to public view.”

The importance of algorithms has arguably increased in recent years with the consolidation of social media markets by near-monopoly providers like Google, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. However, the crucial problem is not algorithms per se, but the fact that algorithms are configured by a small set of corporations. How algorithms shape news production and consumption processes is, then, a function of economic factors and could be addressed via political regulation. This means, by implication, that algorithms and technology should be regarded in the context of the structural problems already highlighted by the PM.

A main approach of the political economy tradition has been to analyse how technology has been enveloped by societal forces. Political economy scholars have scrutinized the ways in which the deliberative potential of new media applications has been undermined by state-corporate power (see Murdock and Golding, 1973). News media may indeed become more open due to the emergence of new technology as well as societal, political or cultural changes. As long as the dominant institutional features of the media remain intact, however, progressive changes will be usurped by the PM’s filters (see Zollmann, 2009). Herman and Chomsky (2008: 2) postulated that the PM’s filters interact and reinforce one another. Technology will not be able to override this process. As Joan Pedro (2011b: 1920) writes:

Although the study of alternative uses for technology and the way that these affect the characteristics of media content may be extremely important, when analysing which interests are served by the mass media, technology should be considered a secondary filter of the model, operating within the context of the original filters.

Agency and professional norms of journalism

The PM’s filters have deductive strength and are well supported by the literature. But because of the focus on structure, scholars applying the PM have largely neglected to account for agency (see Boyd-Barrett, 2010). As Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2004: 448) highlights:

Some filters of the propaganda model ... constitute a significant challenge of observability: they tend to fall within the compass of what may be described as the “blackbox” within whose darkness occur some of the operational transactions ... of Herman and Chomsky’s political-economic determinants.

We know from research on so-called “event-driven” news that during sudden crises media reporting tends to be more open and diverse. Whilst such reporting patterns may be related to event specifics or the government’s failure to impose its frames on the news, they also stem from journalistic working practices and routines (Bennett *et al.*, 2007; Livingston and Bennett, 2003). Research on “event-driven” news effectively investigates occasions when journalists are able to bypass the PM’s news filters. For example, news media reporting on the government response to the devastation that Hurricane Katrina brought to New Orleans in 2005 transgressed elite definitions of the event. Simon Cottle (2008: 64) summarised reporting of Katrina as follows:

Criticisms of city officials, failed evacuation plans, inadequate relief efforts and the seeming abandonment of some of the poorest people in American society to their fate as well as the militarized response to the aftermath all became voiced in the news media.

Such critical variations in news media reporting can hardly be accounted for by the PM.

Research into how structure-agency dynamics play out in newsrooms – the blackbox highlighted by Boyd-Barrett – should thus be conducted. This would enable to more thoroughly assess the validity of the filters but also to explain the conditions under which more independent reporting is possible (see also Robinson *et al.*, 2010).

Agency and elite networks

Whilst agency may allow for more independent news media reporting, many studies have demonstrated the macro-level alignment of news media and elite discourses (see Zollmann, 2017a). In terms of agency, I have pointed out elsewhere how the PM's filters incentivize journalists to act in accord with the interests of those who control and manage them (Zollmann, 2017b). Hence, examples of what I termed as “agency-driven coverage,” when agents manipulated the news, indicated consistency between state-corporate and agent agendas (Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Keeble, 1997; Zollmann, 2017b). On the other hand, journalists who were able to drive deviant agendas in the news have been marginal exceptions (Keeble, 2010: 53). Yet significantly, much more research into structure-agency dynamics is needed to explore the micro-level relationships between journalists and other actors in the context of news filtering processes.

To that effect, the German scholar Uwe Krüger (2013) conducted a pioneering study looking at the nexus of political, economic and journalistic power. Krüger investigated how leading German journalists were, beyond their genuine journalistic activities, in many ways allied with political and economic elites (2013: 256). Using network analysis, he (2013) showed that senior editors of key German news media organisations had multiple connections with elites via engagements in think tanks, foundations, policy discussion groups and private conferences. According to Krüger (2013: 256–7):

The central finding of the network analysis was the integration of four senior foreign policy journalists of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Welt* and *Zeit* in foreign- and security policy structures with links to the German government, NATO and the USA.¹

Whilst these connections could be seen as an expression of journalists' attempts to obtain high-ranking source material and information, Krüger (2013: 257) also found alarming concomitants: a framing analysis of commentaries and editorials demonstrated a correlation between the NATO- and US-aligned networks and the explanatory models provided by the four journalists (Krüger, 2013). For example, the journalists argued for a stronger German military engagement in Afghanistan (Krüger, 2013). This policy was desired by NATO and the USA, yet predominantly rejected by the German population (Krüger, 2013). The negative attitude of the populace was partly vilified by the journalists who recommended that the government should increase its efforts to persuade the nation (Krüger, 2013). Krüger concluded that the commentaries entailed elements of propaganda and that an engagement with dissenting voices and criticism did not take place (2013).

Krüger's findings also contribute to understanding the existence of what Benjamin Page describes as “elite-mass gaps” (1996: 118). Elite-mass gaps manifest when the news media discourse marginalizes issues favoured by the population. According to Page (1996: 118–19):

“On some issues these gaps are so great that public discourse, as articulated by officials, experts and journalists, may be quite distant from the values and concerns of ordinary citizens.”

It has been difficult, however, to identify empirically the underlying causal factors of elite-mass gaps. Krüger's (2013) study demonstrates how journalists had evidently supported an elite discourse on the German military engagement in Afghanistan which significantly deviated from public opinion. His findings thus crucially highlight how journalists' participation in formal and informal elite networks facilitates ideological effects such as elite-mass gaps.

Agency and media-intelligence collusion

Another agency problem unaccounted for by the PM constitutes what Boyd-Barrett (2004: 435–6) coined the “buying out” of journalists by intelligence organizations, government authorities or special interests. Collusion between intelligence services and Western news media has been documented, albeit often on the basis of anecdotal evidence. Yet, a range of studies has synthesized the available evidence and also assessed the declassified documentary record (see Keeble, 1997, 2017).

The CIA directed a major propaganda campaign during the Cold War to influence culture production in Western Europe. The hub of this programme was the front organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, operating a head office in Paris overseen by CIA agent Michael Josselson (from 1950 until 1967) (Saunders, 1999: 1–2, 86–7). Frances Stoner Saunders (1999: 1) summarised the scope of these activities in the introduction of her historical investigation of the cultural “Cold War”:

At its peak, the Congress for Cultural Freedom had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and feature service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances.

The mission of the Congress was to “nudge the intelligentsia of Western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of the ‘American way’” (Saunders, 1999). To underpin its propaganda activities, the CIA had outlined a systematic “psychological warfare” strategy (Saunders, 1999: 4). Saunders cites from the 1950 National Security Council Directive, which defined this campaign of persuasion as:

The planned use by a nation of propaganda and activities other than combat which communicate ideas and information intended to influence the opinions, attitudes, emotions and behaviour of foreign groups in ways that will support the achievement of national aims.

(Saunders, 1999: 4)

The CIA also operated a domestic programme. Boyd-Barrett (2004: 436) points to the mid-1970s Senate (Church Committee) and House (Pike Committee) investigations, both of which exposed liaison between the media and the CIA in the United States. “Journalistic collaboration with the CIA ranged from intelligence gathering to serving as go-betweens with spies. Nearly every major US news organization had been penetrated, usually with the cooperation of top management,” writes Boyd-Barrett (2004).

In 1977, investigative journalist Carl Bernstein exposed the relationship between the media and the CIA in a cover story for *Rolling Stone* based on official documents. According to Bernstein (1977), “more than 400 American journalists” had “in the past twenty-five years ... secretly carried out assignments for the Central Intelligence Agency.” Bernstein also pointed out that many news correspondents helped the CIA to recruit foreign nationals who were used as information channels (1977). Due to their access to other countries and long-lasting relationships

with sources, he wrote, “the job of the foreign correspondent [was] ideal for such work” (1977). He characterized the relationship between journalists and the CIA as “cooperation, accommodation and overlap” (1977).

A declassified 1991 report by the CIA’s “Task Force on Greater CIA Openness” (PAO 91–0586, 1991: 6) refers to aspects of another media programme managed by the Agency’s Public Affairs Office (PAO). The document (PAO 91–0586, 1991) boasts about the PAO having “relationships with reporters from every major wire service, newspaper, news weekly, and television network in the nation” (see also Boyd-Barrett, 2004: 436–7). This, the report states, has helped to “turn some ‘intelligence failure’ stories into ‘intelligence success’ stories” (PAO 91–0586, 1991: 6). The report also points to the interactions between the media and the CIA (PAO 91–0586, 1991): “In many instances, we have persuaded reporters to postpone, change, hold, or even scrap stories that could have adversely affected national security interests or jeopardized sources and methods.”

These examples signify the importance of media-intelligence relations for filtering processes in the news. As Richard Lance Keeble (2017: 35) argues, “while it might be difficult to identify precisely the impact of the spooks ... on mainstream politics and media, from the limited evidence it looks to be enormous.” Hence, applications of the PM should also engage with the contemporary intelligence-media interface.

Expanding the foundations of the PM: the intersection of class, gender and race

Having outlined which aspects of PM's news filters could be refined for a more nuanced application of the model, I will now turn to its foundations in order to discuss areas that have been neglected. As will be demonstrated, crucial research on issues relating to gender and race can fruitfully be integrated with the PM.

The PM first and foremost constitutes a "class-based and class bias model" (Herman and Klaehn, 2008). As Herman and Chomsky (2008: 1) further explain: the PM centres on the "inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices." Moreover, they argue it is the news media's function to

amuse, entertain, and inform, and to 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.

(Herman and Chomsky, 2008; *emphasis added*)

The PM assumes news media to facilitate the agendas of wealthy elites at the expense of the broader public interest and the working class. PM scholars have particularly been concerned with class-based analyses that situate media bias in the context of economic imbalances. In fact, we are currently entering an era of almost unprecedented income inequality. Data suggests that in the leading European and North American democracies, the top 10 per cent of the population held between 42 and 71 per cent of all wealth in 2010 (Domhoff, 2017). A projection by the British House of Commons Library indicates that if current trends were to continue, then the top 1 per cent in society will hold 64 per cent of the world's wealth by 2030 (Savage, 2018). Clearly, class conflict has intensified since the publication of *Manufacturing Consent* and there is, thus, a continued need for a class-based model.

Yet, dissecting the structure of society, there are other inequalities of power not yet accounted for by the PM. Elsewhere, Herman (1999: 14) wrote, "the media gatekeepers are members of the economic elite, with associated class biases." As a consequence, he (1999) further argued, "other interest groups, some with enormous constituencies but without substantial capital ... have to depend on the elite gatekeepers for access to the general public." Herman regards the significant capital investments required to enter the media market as the main barrier to the public sphere. Whilst this is true for a range of societal groups, it ignores the fact that gender and race also constitute structural entry barriers. Power is not only a function of wealth (i.e. class) but also of gender and race. As will be shown further below, media gatekeepers are members of a *male- and white-dominated elite* and this has consequences for news access and outcomes. Before we come to this point, it might be worth looking at the intersectional aspects of our class system.

An intersectional analysis of the occupational structure in the United States highlights that the combination of male and white privilege has increasingly forced black women into the bottom class of society (Branch, 2007). According to Enobong Hannah Branch (2007: 247), research has demonstrated that in the United States, black women have historically been "uniquely disadvantaged as it pertains to economic position more so than either black men or white women." She (2007: 250) summarizes this process as follows:

race and gender are intricately related to occupational position via the labour queue, as is the associated work reward-

income. Differing grades of pay are allocated to individuals dependent on their location on the either/or dichotomy of privilege associated with race and gender. As a result, women are paid less than men and blacks are paid less than whites, even when occupying the same occupational positions.

Branch (2007: 252) describes this as a process of occupational segregation that “maintains the status of women and racial/ethnic minorities as secondary workers.” This has the effect that women and racial/ethnic minorities are “at the bottom of the authority hierarchy, low in wages, dead-end and frequently insecure” (Glenn, cited in Branch, 2007: 252). Consequently, gender and race differences translate into “differences of economic class within the occupational structure” (Branch, 2007: 248).

Taking these issues into account, it can be assumed that an actor’s ability to access the media depends on her/his position on the intersecting class-gender-race axis. In other words: gender and race biases are, in the same fashion as class bias, integrated into the media system by way of institutional filters. In fact, for black and ethnic minority working-class women it might be most difficult to access the media in the sense outlined by Herman. This means, by implication, that additional structural filtering elements pertaining to gender and race have to be theorized for the PM. I will discuss these filters in the following two sections.

Sexism as a news filter

Whilst a larger number of women than men graduate from journalism and media degrees and then enter the profession at about the same rate as men, “they do not go as far or as fast or take up the same beats as men and leave the industry earlier” (Ross *et al.*, 2016: 824). This access bias is further reflected in a report of the Global Media Monitoring Project published by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), which researched gender and the media in 114 countries. According to the study, only 20 per cent of the overall number of workers in the formal labour force of the news industry are women, “while 67 percent of the unemployed and stay-at-home parents are women” (WACC, 2015: 9). Moreover, only 37 per cent of television, newspaper and radio stories are reported by women, a statistic which has not significantly changed during the last ten years (WACC, 2015). In regard to story subjects, only 31 per cent of stories on politics are reported by women (WACC, 2015: 10). There is relative parity in terms of who presents the news: in 41 per cent of radio and 57 per cent of television newscasts the presenters are women (WACC, 2015: 9). Yet, there is a significant “overrepresentation of younger women as anchors” and a significant underrepresentation of women in the ages between 50 and 64, whilst women aged 65 years disappear as anchors (WACC, 2015). “Younger presenters on screen are predominantly female, but the scales tip dramatically at 50 years old when men begin to dominate the news-anchoring scene,” the WACC (2015) report states.

Gender bias further accentuate when we look at the actual news content. There is a huge gap in terms of who is featured in the news: “In 2015, women make up only 24 percent of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news, exactly as they did in 2010,” says the WACC (2015: 8) report. Again, this gap widens when we look at news stories on government and politics, in which only 16 per cent of the people who appear in stories are women (WACC, 2015). Similarly, the selection of sources and experts in the news is weighted towards dominant gender and masculinity norms: the most-often used occupational category for male opinion providers who are quoted in the news is “politicians” (WACC, 2015: 9). Female

opinion providers, on the other hand, are more often portrayed as “parents/homemakers,” “residents/villagers” or “students” (WACC, 2015). Moreover, 16 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men are depicted as victims (WACC, 2015). “What this means is that what passes for news is mostly defined and produced by men and is mostly about men and men’s actions,” write Karen Ross *et al.* (2016: 824), whereas “where women do intervene in the news agenda is in their roles as wives, mothers and victims, and occasionally as politicians and professionals.”

A male-dominated culture is enforced via hierarchical socialisation in newsrooms and this process can be accompanied by coercion in the form of intimidation, violence and sexual harassment. This emerges from a report jointly conducted by the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) who surveyed 977 female media workers across the globe in 2013 and 2014 (INSI/IWMF, 2014). Almost two-thirds of the respondents to the survey said they had experienced “some form of intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work” and this ranged “in severity from name-calling to death threats” (INSI/IWMF, 2014: 5). Significantly, the report finds, “the majority of threats, intimidation and abuse directed toward respondents occurred in the work place and was perpetrated most often by male bosses, supervisors and co-workers” (INSI/IWMF, 2014). In fact, the respondents classified one of the most often reported acts as “abuse of power or authority” (INSI/IWMF, 2014: 7).

Additionally, about one-fifth of respondents said they had faced physical violence in relation to their work (INSI/IWMF, 2014). Whilst the majority of these acts had reportedly occurred “in the field” (45.5 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, “in the streets” (26 per cent), some offences had also taken place “in the office” (18 per cent) (INSI/IWMF, 2014: 8). 14.3 per cent of the participants said they had faced sexual violence in the context of their work (INSI/IWMF, 2014). Of these cases, 38.7 per cent happened “in the field” and 24.5 per cent “in the office” (INSI/IWMF, 2014). Furthermore, almost half of the respondents (47.9 per cent) indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment whilst the most common location attributed to this offence was “in the office” (42.2 per cent) (INSI/IWMF, 2014: 9). The report reflects on its findings as follows:

While threats, abuse and violence are part of many journalists’ experiences, a number of these types of incidents take on a gender or sexual component when directed at women. The perpetrators of violence, threats and abusive behaviour toward women journalists range from government authorities and criminal gangs to their co-workers, bosses, sources and subjects.

(INSI/IWMF, 2014: 4)

Ross (2017: 7) consequently argues that the news media suffers from sexist structures that are “globally significant and globally endemic”: “When considering the roles and status that women *do* achieve [original emphasis],” Ross writes, “it is clear that their involvement in the decision-making tiers of media organizations has been and continues to be extremely modest.” Additionally, Ross (2017) finds, women face “poorer promotion prospects and a male-ordered culture which is often sexist and discriminatory.” Clearly, female journalists, perspectives and viewpoints are systematically filtered out of the news media system.

Racism as a news “filter”

Most journalists working in Europe or the Americas are white and there are virtually no non-white editors (Van Dijk, 2012: 20). It is very rare to find black or other non-white persons in

leadership positions of news organizations (Van Dijk, 2012: 20–1). For example, in 2000, no African American had held the position of chief executive officer in a major mainstream media corporation (Entman and Rojecki, 2000: preface). Teun van Dijk (2012: 20) consequently argues that “news production is generally a form of in-group production, even in increasingly multicultural societies.”

A 2016 survey of 700 news professionals in the UK by City University London found that “almost all ethnic groups and religions are significantly under-represented” in the industry (Williams, 2016). The report provides the following data: 94 per cent of journalists are white, compared to 87 per cent of the UK’s working population and 70 per cent of the population in London, where 36 per cent of the journalists work (Williams, 2016). It also found that only 0.4 per cent of UK journalists are Muslim and just 0.2 per cent are black, although 5 per cent of the British population is Muslim and 3 per cent is black (Williams, 2016).

The absence of minority journalists from mainstream newsrooms is largely independent of a news organization’s national and political affiliation as well as its target audience (see Van Dijk, 2012: 21). As a consequence, news production “will be biased by a white perspective” and by “racist prejudices,” according to Van Dijk (2012: 21), who highlights the effects of news selection choices: reporting is void of detailed expert-knowledge on ethnic communities and their experiences, white journalists have no community-source contacts and their reporting consequently lacks anti-racist sources and opinions, sources from white backgrounds are seen as more reliable whereas ethnic groups are regarded as less newsworthy, and differences of or alleged threats in relation to minority groups are disproportionately emphasized (Van Dijk, 2012).

News discourses on minority groups can thus generally be classified as “*problem news* [original emphasis]” (Van Dijk, 2012: 22). For instance, in the European context, news depicts non-EU immigrants as a threat to the Western welfare-system, employment sector or culture (Van Dijk, 2012). Second, news tends to negatively associate ethnic minorities with housing and integration problems suggesting that they take jobs or living space away from the domestic population and are unwilling to abide by Western customs and norms (Van Dijk, 2012: 23). And third, ethnic minorities and immigrants will often be reported in the context of violence and crime (Van Dijk, 2012). Such stories may relate to “illegal” immigration but also to special forms of “ethnicized” crimes, which are attributed to immigrants although they are similarly carried out by nationals (Van Dijk, 2012).

Much research has focused on US media representation of minorities (see Entman and Rojecki, 2000). Since the publication of the 1968 Kerner Report and the 1977 report by the US Commission on Human Rights, both of which criticized the media’s stereotypical representation of Black African Americans and other minority groups, there has been improvement on the surface level (Entman and Rojecki, 2000: 6; Mastro and Greenberg, 2000: 690–1). For instance, empirical research demonstrates that the quantitative visibility of African Americans in the media has substantially increased, reaching parity in some areas such as prime time television comedies and dramas. Other minority groups like Latinos have steadily been underreported in US media, whereas Native or Asian Americans have largely remained “invisible” (Mastro and Greenberg, 2000: 691–9).

It would be fair to say that all minority groups including African Americans continue to be disadvantaged in the media. For example, Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki’s 1997 study of evening newscasts in the three major US networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, suggests a skewed

racial representation across categories (2000: 62–3). Whilst about 75.5 per cent of the newscasts focused solely on whites, only 6.3 per cent of news items – 2.9 per cent blacks, 1.3 per cent Latino and 2.1 Asian – exclusively focused on actions by members of non-white groups (Entman and Rojecki, 2000). By comparison, US census data for 1997 suggests that African Americans comprised 12 per cent, Latinos 11 per cent and Asians 4 per cent of the US population (Mastro and Greenberg, 2000: 699; see also Entman and Rojecki, 2000: 63).

Entman and Rojecki also came to important qualitative findings about representations of African Americans: members of this group tend to be boxed into “stereotyped roles associated with crime and sports” and are “less frequently depicted ... in political or governmental roles” (2000: 66). Furthermore, the news makes African Americans to “appear more threatening, less sympathetic than Whites” (Entman and Rojecki, 2000: 94) and constructs them “as a distinct source of disruption” (Entman and Rojecki, 2000: 67). To that effect, Entman and Rojecki (2000: 81) suggest “racial representation on television actually does not appear to match crime statistics, with local news over-representing Black perpetrators, underrepresenting Black victims, and over-representing White victims.” Whilst the media also convey “images of harmony and similarity,” Entman and Rojecki (2000: 6) conclude, “impressions that Blacks and Whites occupy different moral universes, that Blacks are somehow fundamentally different from Whites” prevail.

These findings lend support to van Dijk’s (2012: 21) conclusion that, “the very expectations and criteria of journalists are ethnically biased by negative social representations about the Others.” An interplay of professional, cultural and economic factors and their impact on news media production may explain these outcomes (see Entman and Rojecki, 2000: 71–7). In any case, there are racist filtering processes at work at the expense of substantial publics.

The propaganda model’s main prediction in the light of class, gender and race

In the previous sections of this chapter, I discussed the continued relevance of the PM’s filters and further refined and expanded them in the light of research. In this section, I will set the PM’s central prediction about news media content pattern in the context of the newly proposed sexism and racism filters (for a discussion of PM’s main predictions see Zollmann, 2017a: 42–6).

The PM postulates that *the news media will legitimize the established social order in a system-reinforcing fashion* (Zollmann, 2017a: 42). This prediction has well been confirmed by research in terms of the economic sphere: the news media has consistently endorsed state-corporate capitalist interests and institutions at the expense of the working class. Alternative economic models, which might de-stabilize the interests of major capitalist investors, have been marginalized (Curran and Seaton, 2003: 103; Ferguson, 1995). Similarly, in terms of foreign policy, the news media has facilitated policies in line with the bi-partisan elite consensus in Washington (Zollmann, 2017a). Down to the present day, the news media has been aligned with elite discourses selling military interventions in distant countries such as in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere (Zollmann, 2017a).

But what about gender and race regimes? The news media has equally legitimized the dominant social arrangements pertaining to gender and race. The gender scholar Ross (2017: 3), who has documented the media representations of women for more than 25 years, summarizes media performance as follows:

The perpetuation of a hegemonic worldview of male dominance is regularly witnessed in both fictional and factual programming strands, and the ways in which women (particularly, but also other disadvantaged groups) are represented in the media send important messages to the public about women's place, women's role, and women's lives. If it has become a common place to argue that news media regularly and routinely perform an affirmatory function in reinforcing dominant norms and values to the public, it still bears repeating.

Similarly, in the realm of race, van Dijk (2012: 17) writes, "the mass media are currently the most influential source of racist bias, prejudice, and racism." Entman and Rojecki (2000: 72) provide the following context:

Just like the largest portion of the audience, the mostly White males who manage media organizations are themselves steeped in the tacit assumptions of a dominant culture that retains vestiges of prejudice. Assumptions of essential racial difference and hierarchy lurk within the culture, and their presence sets up a vicious circle of reinforcement between suppliers and consumers.

Scholars using the PM have focused too much on representations of war and foreign policy on the basis of a political-economy lens (the class filter) and should aim to further account for other societal categories. In fact, intersectional scholarship has stressed how societal oppression in the spheres of class, gender and race are connected and reinforce each other. To provide one example: Western imperialism, an issue of high importance for scholars using the PM, has always been based on a combination of "racist, economic and heteronormative dynamics" (Peterson, 2007: 14). Thus, V. Spike Peterson (2007: 14) points out how techniques of ideological manipulation during imperial war relate to intersectionality:

What surface repeatedly are characterizations of the colonized as feminine: weak, passive, irrational, disorderly, unpredictable, lacking self-control, economically and politically incompetent. European power-wielders (not only men or all men) could then justify military interventions by casting themselves in favourable masculinist terms: as uniquely rational, sexually and morally respectable, and more advanced economically and politically ... Through this lens, military interventions were perhaps a regrettable but nonetheless a necessary component of "enlightening" and "civilizing" primitive, unruly (feminized) "others." Europeans thus positioned their alleged rationality "against savagery (natives), emotionality (women), and sexuality (racialized others)."

(Eisenstein cited in Peterson, 2007: 14)

A critical PM approach should certainly account for such intersecting classist, gendered and racist policies and their ideological obfuscations. That is why an integration of sexism and racism as news filters is crucial.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the continued relevance of the Herman–Chomsky PM in the twenty-first century. Whilst digitalization has substantially altered the news media on the one hand, the industry's institutional arrangements have remained in place on the other. Access to the news media is still regulated by markets and thus requires significant purchasing power and capital investments. Advertising sponsorship still constitutes the main revenue source of the media. Professional journalistic ideology and underlying market pressure continue to incentivize the sourcing of powerful societal actors. Ideology has shifted from Cold War to "free market" and other schemas. Flak is widely used by powerful actors who put pressure on the news media and public intellectuals to abide by the dominant agenda. Hence, the PM's news filters should still be applied as analytical categories to understand news selection and production processes. Additionally, I have suggested to refine and expand the PM to account for context-specifics.

Different political and media systems warrant changes and additions to the individual news filters. There is clearly a need to conduct more research in order to incorporate agency-structure dynamics: in some circumstances, agency may allow for more open reporting when journalists bypass news filters. In other cases, journalistic participation in elite networks or collusion with intelligence services may reinforce the PM's filters. And finally, I have suggested to add sexism and racism as news filters to the PM. A class-based model aimed at critically assessing news media performance should certainly account for gender and race.

Note

- 1 This quotation was translated from German to English language by this author.

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3

ASSESSING THE STRENGTH OF THE FIVE FILTERS TODAY

Alan MacLeod

Force cannot be used in democratic societies to the extent it is in dictatorships, and instead the consent of the population must be gained. It is for this reason that Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002) argued that propaganda is, in fact, much more refined and advanced in the West than in countries like the USSR. In their highly influential work of 1988, the authors challenged the idea that the mass media were impartial messengers of truth and instead argued that the role of the media in society was to serve the ends of the dominant elite in society by engineering consent among the population for elite interests, outlooks and attitudes. The authors posited that the media plays a key role in propagandizing the public into supporting elite interests and that news is systematically distorted to reflect the interests of state and corporate power through five key “filters.” These filters are:

1. the size, elite ownership, concentration and for-profit motive of the media;
2. reliance on advertising from big business as a primary income;
3. reliance on official government sources and “experts” from big business to provide them with free content;
4. flak, negative responses to media with the intention of chiding or intimidating media into changing their reporting;
5. anti-communist hysteria as a form of secular religion and disciplining mechanism (2002: 2).

These five filters are the cornerstone of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model. And yet, over the last 30 years the media landscape has undergone an enormous revolution. The arrival of the Internet and social media has fundamentally changed how we receive news, old hierarchies have been challenged, trust in media, the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge, has disintegrated and vast new mediums of communication have arisen. It has opened up opportunities for people to become their own printing press, for diversity of opinion and the democratization of knowledge. Can the five filters truly be applicable to today’s media landscape? Even some who subscribe to the model believe the arrival of the Internet, social media, smartphones and citizen journalism have made it somewhat archaic.

For example, author and media critic Sheldon Rampton (2007) argued that the filters’ power has been reduced considerably in the information age. He noted that the huge financial market entry barrier to starting a media company Herman and Chomsky highlighted is completely taken away, as websites cost a pittance to set up. Furthermore, while old media competed to serve

discerning advertisers, Internet-based advertising is based on keywords and, in practice, virtually any website will contain matches for some advertisers' keywords. Therefore, the second filter does not impose much pressure on sites. Third, the rise of citizen journalism and social media has meant information can be transmitted and reproduced bypassing official sources. He also claims that flak is "not much of a deterrent" online.

Certainly the media landscape, in particular how we receive our news and information has changed greatly since 1988 when *Manufacturing Consent* was published. Old media viewership numbers are plummeting as new technologies take over as the prime mediums of communication and information. US weekday newspaper circulation grew steadily from the Second World War and plateaued between 1960 and 1990 at around 60 million, dropped to 55.7 million by 2000 and then fell precipitously and possibly terminally to 30.9 million by 2017. This drop in readership was matched by cuts to staff; the total number of newsroom employees for American newspapers fell from 73,810 in 2006 to 39,210 in 2017, a nearly 50 per cent reduction in 11 years (Pew, 2018a). Fewer than one in five Americans' main source of news comes from print and the majority of journalists see their profession going the wrong way (Wilnat and Weaver, 2014).

The Internet has also challenged television's long-standing dominance. If trends from 2017 continue, 2018 will be the year more Americans get their news online than from TV. Television has become the domain of the elderly; the median age for a Fox News viewer is 68, MSNBC and CNN, 63. Nearly three times as many adults under 25 get their news online than from TV. The Internet and social media's popularity is also growing rapidly with those over 65 too; 30 per cent of the elderly get their news primarily online, a 50 per cent increase from 2016 (Gottfried and Shearer, 2017).

The use of social media has exploded in recent years. Rising from 5 per cent in 2005, 69 per cent of American adults (including 37 per cent of over 65s) now use some form of social media, with it being almost ubiquitous among those under 30 (Pew, 2018b). Sixty-eight per cent of Americans use Facebook and 24 per cent Twitter (Smith and Anderson, 2018).

A similar decline in old media is occurring in the UK, where national newspaper circulation has fallen from almost 30 million in 2003 to 12.4 million in 2017 (Ofcom, 2018). Furthermore, those aged 16–24 are three times less likely to read newspapers than those aged 65 or over and far more likely to use the Internet for news than television or radio. The number of hours spent watching TV is falling too (Ofcom, 2018), with the elderly watching twice as much of it than the average. There has also been a huge decline in trust of the media (Swift, 2016), with journalism being one of the least trusted professions, now ranking above only estate agents and politicians for trustworthiness (Ipsos Mori, 2017). In their study of nine Western countries, Newman and Fletcher (2017) found that in not one of them did a majority of the public agree the media does a good job distinguishing fact from fiction.

However, while there is much talk of an information revolution, some of it may be overblown. While it is true that the financial barriers to entry on the Internet are minimal, an independent site may take years of good content to cultivate an audience, whereas large corporations can and have used their power, finances and prestige to develop huge followings immediately. The reality is that seven of the ten largest online news sites in America by visits, CNN, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Fox*, *USA Today*, *Forbes* and *Time*, are simply the online arm of old, established news media (Statista, 2018). Furthermore, two of the others, *Yahoo News* and *Business Insider*, are owned by massive old media and communication multinationals (Verizon and Axel Springer respectively). Internet-only publications are rare, and most provide little hard

journalism whatsoever.

Moreover, very few people read blogs of independent journalists or writers and even fewer people write them, with independent, web-based bloggers and journalists usually coming from privileged backgrounds and with professions that give them the tools and free time to blog, such as lawyers, established mainstream journalists or diplomats. Fluency in the English language is also a prerequisite for reaching any sort of wide audience, meaning that voices of people from modest socio-economic backgrounds or non-English-speaking countries are largely unseen. The vast majority of websites and blogs do not reach a wide audience and make little to no impact on public discourse. Furthermore, blogs tend to provide commentary on previous reporting, rather than create it themselves. Thus, the Internet has not led to a democratization of information and news creation, but has given opportunities for a small number of privileged people in the West to make a small impact. Although alternative information is available, in practice, very few people make use of it. Google and other search engines funnel users to old media sites while Internet-only or alternative news sites do not feature prominently on search results. Additionally, Internet media giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google are actively attempting to throttle alternative media in an attempt to regain complete control of the public debate by changing their algorithms to de-rank or demote alternative news sites that challenge the elite line or by completely removing advertisements from these sites (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Sites like Twitter are not democratic, but highly unequal in terms of reach, a user's influence dependent largely on their amount of followers. One study found that 10 per cent of Twitter users generate more than 90 per cent of the content and most users have only tweeted once or less. These top 10 per cent of users are primarily celebrities or journalists who owe their following to their mainstream media profiles. Sixty per cent of users have fewer than 100 followers while only 3 per cent have more than 1,000 (Freedman, 2016: 110).

Thus, the arrival of the Internet and social media has not led to a democratization of media but to the creation of enormous monopolies like Google and Amazon, the likes of which have never been seen. The dramatic changes in the political economy of news and media have not led to a golden era in journalism but, in fact, have enhanced the applicability of the propaganda model and increased the strength of most, if not all, of the five filters on news production. Far from challenging the hegemony of the old media, the arrival of the Internet has allowed them to spread their dominance into a new sphere. This is not a natural occurrence, but a result of a struggle between large corporations who wished to control and monetize the new technology, and activists who wished to claim the new media as a radical, democratic space. The effect on each of the five filters will be discussed respectively.

Ownership

Herman and Chomsky noted that in 1983 50 giant firms dominated the media, accounting for the majority of newspapers, books, broadcasting and films but by 1988 the number had decreased to just 29. Quoting Ben Bagdikian, they argue that this concentrated elite ownership over the means of communication constitutes a “new private Ministry of Information and Culture” that effectively “sets the national agenda” (2002: 4, 13) and has a seriously deleterious effect on the diversity of opinion offered.

Since *Manufacturing Consent* was published, media concentration has increased alarmingly. Today, just five gigantic corporations control over 90 per cent of what America reads, watches or

listens to. The five companies are General Electric, News-Corp (Murdoch), Disney, National Amusements and Time Warner. While many felt the Internet age would liberate us from the grip of old monopolies, the online situation is, if possible, worse, with enormous monopolies dominating the market in social media (Facebook, Twitter), search engines (Google) and shopping (Amazon). Together, these companies have spent tens of billions buying up the competition and expanding into other areas of media. For example, Facebook spent over \$19 billion on messaging service WhatsApp in 2014 and \$1 billion on image-sharing platform Instagram in 2012. Giant media companies long ago attained a critical mass where they now directly lobby governments to pass laws – like the 1996 telecommunications act – that remove restrictions on their further growth.

In Britain, just three corporations, News UK (Murdoch), DMGT and Trinity Mirror control 70 per cent of newspaper production while the BBC accounts for three-quarters of all national and international TV news (and radio), with ITV accounting for more than half the rest (Media Reform Coalition, 2014). A few companies controlling such a great amount of our media has a profoundly negative effect on the state of democracy and the array of information and views the public has access to, an informed populace being a prerequisite for any democracy.

It has always been understood that news organizations are beholden to their owners' outlooks and interests, and that many owners directly interfere with the news-making process. As former *Daily Telegraph* chief political commentator Peter Osborne (2015) stated, "no newspaper in history has ever given an unfavourable gloss on its owner's accounts." The archetypal example of a modern media baron is Rupert Murdoch. The Australian is well known to demand absolute political obedience from his staff; all 175 of his editors around the world supported the Iraq invasion in 2003 as he did. One former *Fox News* contributor claimed working under Murdoch was "almost as if we were being monitored by a Stalinist system ... it is very much an environment of fear" while a second confided "if you don't go along with the mind-set of the hierarchy, if you challenge them on their attitudes about things you are history" (*Outfoxed*, 2004). British Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed Murdoch was an unofficial member of his cabinet and one of the four most powerful men in the country (Goss, 2013: 16). Media baron Conrad Black was equally as blunt on how much ownership affected output of media: "If editors disagree with us, they should disagree with us when they're no longer in our employ. The buck stops with ownership. I am responsible for meeting payroll. Therefore, I will determine what the papers say" (Klaehn, 2003).

While today media is less likely to be owned by a press baron and more likely to be a corporation owned by thousands of anonymous shareholders of a parent company, it is no less problematic. Corporations demand similar loyalty to their own interests. For example, popular MSNBC host Phil Donaghy was fired for his opposition to the Iraq invasion as his stance threatened MSNBC's parent company, General Electric's (GE) profits. GE is a massive weapons manufacturer and stood to make enormous profits. The other MSNBC hosts did not have to be told to support the invasion.

Corporate shareholders have no interest in the veracity of the news, only in short-term profits. As Zollmann (2015) notes, corporations are legally obligated to prioritize profits over all else. Thus, reporting that challenges corporate profits is strongly discouraged. Markets also pressure media to operate cost-effectively and discourage investigations that would challenge the structures of power and encourage the recycling of official lines while market pressures have led to the concentration of ownership of media and the incorporation of media into transnational

corporate empires. As such, media have become wings of larger corporations. It is unclear why MSNBC employees should view themselves as working for a different company than workers on an assembly line in a GE weapons factory. The great Indian journalist P. Sainath (2011) worries about the ramifications of the extension of the media into every imaginable sector of industry and commerce. As he said:

Large media companies are big players in fields ranging from agriculture to aviation, from sugar to stock markets, from finance to fashion, from management to mining. For the rest of it, it is very hard to tell the difference these days between fourth estate and real estate. Plus, there are the extremely complex interlocking directorships and interlocking ownerships that see many top corporate leaders sitting on the boards of media. The short point is this: the media are not pro-corporate, the media are not pro-business, the media are not pro-establishment, they *are* the establishment. They are the cutting-edge ideological arm of it. They are large corporations and very big business.

These sorts of interlocking business interests allow for enormous corporate synergies, giving these conglomerations huge advantages over other, smaller, independent media and businesses. One example of this is Disney and the latest Star Wars movie, *The Last Jedi* (2017). *The Last Jedi* was produced by Lucas Arts (a Disney subsidiary) and was released across America, where Disney-owned movie theatres made sure it was prominently shown and advertised. Disney media went into overdrive to promote the movie. Disney-owned ABC news ran advertisement publicity stunts masked as news for the film, such as one story that read “Dying veteran has final wish granted, watches ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’ with friends and family.” The Disney-owned ESPN sports network recast soccer’s greatest stars as characters from the Star Wars franchise and did the same for each National Hockey League team. Popular late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel had the cast of *The Last Jedi* on his show, broadcast on Disney-owned ABC while Disney-owned radio station hosts discussed what Star Wars characters they would be. Comics book giant Marvel (Disney-owned) tweeted to its 5.7 million followers about Star Wars and published articles about it on Marvel.com. Disney-owned websites like Hulu featured advertisements for the movie while Disney stores worldwide celebrated its release and sold *Last Jedi* merchandise. These sorts of synergies dramatically increase the profitability of media ventures and crowd out competition from smaller companies or independent media. *The Last Jedi* grossed over \$1.3 billion at the box office and became the tenth highest grossing movie of all time.

Online synergies exist as well, with companies like Google promoting their own video websites like YouTube and email clients like Gmail and all can be used to launch new services. These help to essentially compel users to use their other products and services over competitors’ and drown out competition from new businesses.

Even within media organizations that have differing ownership models, like the BBC and the *Guardian*, the managers and trustees are themselves part of the elite establishment through business connections, interconnecting board memberships of other large corporations. Thus, we find that the pressures to conform to dominant lines and to the prioritization of profit over all else is no less strong. BBC journalists have been instructed to “emulate *Buzzfeed*” and produce soft common interest stories and clickbait listicles of no journalistic merit rather than hard news (Burrell, 2015). On the day of writing the BBC homepage included stories entitled “Harry Potter gets a weird new chapter,” “The movie mash-ups that need to happen,” “Why I loved being a Formula One Grid Girl,” “Eight food trends you’ll be seeing in 2018” and “How your cat is secretly manipulating you.”

Ownership of media is more concentrated than ever, allowing tiny groups to control the public

zeitgeist. This has serious implications for decreasing diversity of opinion. Furthermore, the transformation of media companies into cogs in giant transnational corporations allows for less space for investigative journalism and voices challenging the elite, business or state power. As a result, the first filter continues to be highly relevant to media output.

Advertising

A second key factor that is shaping the content of the media is its reliance on advertising from big business for revenue. The price we pay for the newspaper does not even come close to covering the costs of its day-to-day running. The large majority of funding for newspapers comes from advertising. This increases to 100 per cent for much of television, radio and online content. There is a saying that he who pays the piper calls the tune. The propaganda model argues that advertisers hold huge influence over the media as it gives businesses the power to choose which media to fund according to their own interests, meaning they can and do remove advertising from media whose political line is contrary to their own. Thus, media have to compete to provide business-friendly environments that corporations deem worthy enough to place advertising around. As such, in a capitalist free market where the ability to attract advertising is paramount, big business acquires a veto on the content and political outlook of media, and newsrooms are careful not to produce stories or content contrary to the interests of international capitalism. This has the effect of censoring content critical of the system. Ben Bagdikian (1992: 121) lamented that these revenues have “insulated these media from the wishes of their audience.” Indeed, news organizations consider advertisers to be their audience, the “content” to be their messages, and the product to be their viewers or readers. This is especially true when dealing with content that is free to view.

Advertisers overwhelmingly wish to appeal to the wealthy in particular, as they have much greater spending power. Media who can provide wealthy readers or viewers consequently generate far more revenue. Therefore, the media is structurally pushed to reflect the interests and outlooks of the wealthy. One way of doing this is providing a strongly conservative political stance in reporting and editorials.

Herman and Chomsky (2002: 18) note that advertisers do not like controversial content or pieces that encourage readers to think critically, especially about the economic system, as it pulls them out of a “buying” frame of mind. Instead, their preference is for light entertainment. Therefore, media becomes an effective spearhead for the hidden ideological message of consumer capitalism. One example of advertisers’ power over the media was the *Guardian*’s coverage of Edward Snowden and the NSA spying revelations. While the story was a major journalistic scoop and drew large numbers of new readers worldwide, it also led advertisers to cancel their sponsorship of the newspaper, a key reason for the demise of its American operation. As a former executive said, “While Snowden put us on the map, it makes corporate clients very nervous about wanting to get big into us” (Perlberg, 2017). Here we see the contradiction between serving the public and surviving in a market-based system. Journalists understand and internalize the pressures to serve and not to upset their audience: corporations. Stories are written and rewritten in order not to challenge corporate profits. For example, in December 2017, the *New York Times* published a story titled “Walmart, criticized for low wages, will let workers take pay before payday.” The title was swiftly amended to “Walmart, huge US employer, will let workers take pay before payday.”

The scale and sophistication of advertising has grown immensely since *Manufacturing Consent* was published in 1988. A 2015 report from IHS Markit found that the industry supported 20 million US jobs and generated 19 per cent of America's total economic output, with each dollar spent on advertising generating a \$19 return (Levesque *et al.*, 2015). In the 1970s Americans were exposed to around 500 ads per day. By the twenty-first century that number had risen to as many as 5,000 (Johnson, 2006). Advertising has also grown from 13 per cent of total TV content to 25 per cent. In a sign of the times, more people recognize the McDonald's golden arches than the Christian cross. Furthermore, more sophisticated tactics such as native advertising and product placement have grown as the boundary between commercial and content has blurred. As Professor Sut Jhally (2017) summed up:

We are drowning in a flood or an ocean of commercial messages. There is just no escape from it. Simply put, in terms of sheer size and scale alone, there has never been a mass information campaign to match advertising in the history of the world.

The Internet has fundamentally changed advertising. By 2016 advertisers already spent more online than on television and are projected to spend more online than offline by 2020, as new companies like Google AdSense offer businesses much more precise methods of reaching their audience (Molla, 2018). For example, Google could offer a golf company wishing to target likely consumers 50,000 people who have visited multiple golf websites in the last month, in a defined geographical area, aged 30–49 with an income of at least \$50,000 virtually instantly, whereas a newspaper, TV or radio station could offer its entire audience, only a small subsection of whom would play golf. Online advertising companies can therefore offer more targets quicker, and much more accurately than the old, scattershot approach of the old media of radio, television and print. Furthermore, sites like Gumtree and Craigslist have decimated crucial revenue from newspaper classified ads. This has led to local media being hit the hardest by the arrival of the Internet; between 2009 and 2013 alone, advertising revenue fell 23.4 per cent in regional UK newspapers (Tutt, 2014).

With the balance of power in their favour, hugely profitable online marketing companies offer very little to websites that host their advertisements. A print reader generates 20 times the advertising revenue than an online reader (Noam, 2009). Furthermore, 27 per cent of Americans and 21 per cent of British users use ad-blocking software online with younger and richer people particularly likely to use it (Newman *et al.*, 2018). Ad-blocking usage is growing at a 30 per cent rate year on year, from 20 million users worldwide in 2010 to 236 million in 2016 (Cortland, 2017). This has not led to media ignoring online readers, but rather an attempt to cast the net as wide as possible to make up for poor revenue.

As a result, there is an immense pressure to get clicks in order to stay afloat. What stories are covered, even in large news organizations, are now very often decided by algorithms that predict what stories and keywords will generate the most traffic. However, as in old media, no two clicks are equal. New media also looks to draw in rich, Western audiences, with visits from poor countries virtually worthless to them. A click from Minnesota or Michigan is worth far more than one from Macedonia or Mauritania. Thus, stories that will resonate with rich, Western audiences are covered while those from other countries will not. As a consequence, news homogenizes online too, and will likely reflect the conservative bias of the wealthy.

Online advertising targets users on any website or app, not just on news sites. Targeted, individualized adverts can reach users while they shop, connect with friends on social media,

chat, play games or during any other online activity. As a result, there has been a decoupling of advertising from news content, meaning there is far less funding for journalism than before, leading to wholesale cuts in staff. As such, the entire model is under threat. The 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report notes that there is a crisis over how to fund journalism and a rise in fake news, as the pressure to get clicks leads to news organizations publishing widely shared salacious and fraudulent stories in order to generate income (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Its former senior contributor Osborne (2015) noted even the broadsheet *Daily Telegraph* ran a story about a woman with three breasts, knowing it was false, due to the new pressure for income.

Online advertising has led to a collapse in revenue for old media. From a peak of \$49.4 billion in 2005, total advertising revenue for US newspapers dropped to an estimated \$16.5 billion in 2017, falling by an average of 6 per cent per year over the last decade (Pew, 2018a). The losses in revenue have contributed to the growing concentration of media ownership, as large organizations with larger resources buy up smaller and failing ones.

Consequently, the firewall between editorial and advertising in news organizations, if it ever truly existed, is now considered “outdated,” even by Dena Levitz (2012), the manager of digital strategies for the News Media Alliance. “Advertorials” are commonplace, even in the highest quality news organizations. Osborne (2015) noted that during his time at the *Telegraph*, the newspaper was filled with positive “news” stories about supermarket giant Tesco, but its accounting scandal was barely covered, while his exposés of HSBC’s money-laundering scandal were flatly rejected, one executive telling him bluntly that HSBC is “the advertiser you literally cannot afford to offend.”

Therefore, the arrival of the Internet and the collapse in advertising revenue for media has not weakened the grip of advertisers, merely sunk the industry into a deep malaise. As Robert McChesney (2013: 172) said, “The Internet has taken the economic basis away from commercial journalism, especially newspapers, and left the rotting carcass for all to see.” Indeed, media companies are in less of a position than ever before to anger an advertiser, meaning the second filter is, in fact, *more* powerful than ever. This holds true for both large and small, online and traditional media. A 2000 survey found that 73 per cent of American journalists agreed that they had self-censored as to not challenge their advertisers (Pew, 2000).

Perversely, large media conglomerations may be more susceptible to advertising pressure than smaller ones. For instance, the *New York Times* published a series of articles on medical incompetence with prescription drugs. Pharmaceutical companies, who did not advertise with the *Times*, were nevertheless able to stop further articles by cancelling \$500,000 of advertising in the magazine *Modern Medicine*, which the *Times* owned and which relied heavily on pharmaceutical advertising (Braithwaite, 2013: 221).

Contrary to Rampton’s claims, online news is strongly affected by the second filter. Big business demands that their advertisements not sponsor “sensitive” or “controversial” topics online. As previously noted, many progressive news websites have had advertising pulled from their websites while independently produced news shows like *The Majority Report* and *The Young Turks* challenging the dominant media narrative on important political topics have seen their content demonetized as part of the “adpocalypse” where online media has been starved of funds (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Sourcing

The collapse in advertising revenue has led to an increasing dependence on official sources and government and corporations effectively subsidize the media by providing free content daily. This content could be photo opportunities, quotes, video footage, statistics, interviews or many other things. Modern journalism enforces a hierarchy on who is considered a credible, legitimate source in reporting, with high government officials and representatives from big business and think tanks at the top as “primary definers,” with union officials, activists and members of the public far below. The pronouncements of those at the top are considered credible and newsworthy, those at the bottom less so. Veteran journalist Robert Fisk (2013) highlighted how engrained and problematic this practice is:

I’m just looking at a copy of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, February 1st, 2013. It’s a story about al-Qaeda in Algeria. And what is the sourcing? “U.S. intelligence officials said,” “a senior U.S. intelligence official said,” “U.S. officials said,” “the intelligence official said,” “Algerian officials say,” “national security sources considered,” “European security sources said,” “the U.S. official said,” “the officials acknowledged” ... We might as well name our newspapers “Officials Say.” This is the cancer at the bottom of modern journalism, that we do not challenge power anymore. Why are Americans tolerating these garbage stories with no real sourcing except for very dodgy characters indeed, who won’t give their names?

Financial constraints force media to look for stories where news frequently happens, such as at the mayor’s office or the courthouse on a local level or at press conferences organized by the government, big business or large organizations. This means that the elites set the agenda of the news, effectively deciding what the media will discuss. What they say, what they wish to become news, becomes news. Ordinary citizens can hold press conferences, but only the powerful will be able to attract the media.

Herman and Chomsky (2002: 19) argue that under the current journalistic norm of elite sourcing, the information given is considered “presumptively accurate” and “objective” and it is considered good journalism to report what they said without scrutiny. This practice, where journalists are instructed not to take sides in arguments themselves, simply relaying facts and what others have said leads to a situation where elite opinions are simply parroted by the media. Therefore, a symbiotic relationship develops, where the elites need the media to propagandize the public for them and the media need the elites to provide them with free content, thus reducing costs and potentially increasing sales with scoops and exclusive stories. Journalists and high sources are in regular contact, and develop close personal relationships.

The powerful can use these relationships to further influence coverage. Journalists must cultivate and tend to rely upon a number of key contacts and cannot risk angering them by reporting in a manner they would not like. These sources expect something in return, privileging certain journalists and cutting off contact with others in order to further influence and coerce the media into reporting news in a manner more in line with their interests. Elite centres of power also create well-funded think tanks to act as official sources that promote policies that further their influence (see [Chapter 5](#)). Moreover, they can produce serious flak in the form of organized opposition or costly legal cases that could potentially put the media company out of business.

The reliance on these sources often coerces the media into carrying highly dubious stories and muting others, as to appease their sources. As Herman and Chomsky (2002: 19) note, “It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers.” Those who are not subsidizing the media, like local activists or residents, can be easily criticized and attacked without fear.

One illustrative example of this is in 2012, when former RT journalist Abby Martin asked

Senator Rand Paul why he supported Mitt Romney despite his aggressive foreign policy, at odds with Paul's non-interventionist stance. Martin (2012) claims Paul attempted to have her fired and arrested. She was forced to attend a disciplinary meeting at the Capitol Building in front of Paul, and the Bureau Chiefs of Al-Jazeera, Fox, CNN and MSNBC, who told her "we have worked extremely hard to get access to Congress and we can't have people like you set it back." This illustrates how many in the media see access to official sources as more important than questioning power.

Herman (2018) claimed that because of the reduction in funding for journalism and the rise of PR agencies, sources have gained greater leverage in influencing media since *Manufacturing Consent* was published. This was proven by Lewis *et al.*'s (2008) study of the elite British media. Across TV, radio and newspapers, they found that at least 41 per cent of press articles and the majority of TV news items were wholly or largely based on PR material. The large majority of this PR came from big business or the government. Half of all print news was lifted from newswire agencies, although only 1 per cent was attributed to those agencies. As they concluded, the current system "will favour those, notably business and government, best able to produce strong and effective PR material."

The worldwide cuts to the profession have had several negative effects. Journalism has become markedly de-professionalized, with widespread casualization of labour, the freelancing of staff and the firing of specialists. Investigative journalism and foreign reporting, among the most expensive forms, have been hit the hardest. Furthermore, with the rise of the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle, media produce more content than ever, with far fewer staff. Journalists are therefore under extreme time and financial pressure. Many are expected to produce five to ten stories per day – over one per hour! This has led to the rise of what Nick Davies (2009) calls "churnalism," where the quality of output has substantially decreased and news organizations cannibalize each other's stories or quickly cut and paste together ones from tried and tested sources. Under this pressure, journalists do not have the time to find new sources, sticking with tried and tested ones, nor do they have the time or specialization necessary to critique them, leading to a parroting of official sources. Into this void step PR agencies, who are eager for their propaganda to reach a wider audience. A recent example of media uncritically parroting PR can be found with the European Union's decision on banning chemical giant Monsanto's Roundup weed killer. Monsanto is widely accused of covering up that the product causes cancer in humans. Their PR department spun the decision as such: "Green-fingered Brits could soon be forced to weed their entire garden by HAND if Brussels bureaucrats ban a chemical found in the biggest selling weed-killers, it has emerged." The first sentence of Britain's largest newspaper the *Sun*'s article was word-for-word the same as Monsanto's, including the capitalizations.

Communication technology could allow for media to contact a more diverse set of sources, and for blogs and other forms of citizen journalism to bypass and weaken the third filter, as Rampton predicted. However, this has not been the case. In their study of the BBC's sourcing between 2007 and 2012, Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.* (2016) found that there was an *increase* in reliance on official sources, with other voices, such as members of the public or the public sector, decreasing, and trade unions falling to zero. They found that the prime minister alone was quoted more than all NGOs, charities, activists and pressure groups combined and Conservative Party sources outnumbered the Labour Party by almost 2:1. Furthermore, the official sources, they found, were the primary definers of the news, setting the agenda for the story and framing the public debate, with other sources far more likely to feature as brief sound bites. While blogs

do allow some to bypass the official sourcing filter, very few people actually read them; over 99 per cent of blogs do not receive even one visitor per day (Goss, 2013: 173). Furthermore, blogging is, in practice, largely the preserve of privileged Westerners, meaning there is a distinct lack of diversity of opinion. Therefore, the third filter of the propaganda model has increased in its relevance to modern journalism.

Flak

The fourth filter is flak, defined as negative responses to media content. It can take many forms, including letter-writing campaigns, boycotts, lawsuits or smear campaigns. The ability to produce consequences for media, especially the serious and costly kind, is not equal, but directly related to power, argue Herman and Chomsky (2002: 26–8). Fear of negative responses from powerful organizations “condition the media to expect trouble (and cost increases) for violating right-wing standards of bias.”

Flak is more of a problem today than ever. It is virtually a prerequisite that journalists today use social media to promote their stories. The technology allows instant feedback and interaction between journalists and audiences. However, this means it is far quicker and easier than ever to send abusive messages to journalists anonymously. Furthermore, the arrival of the Internet means groups can co-ordinate easily to produce directed flak at an individual or an organization. As cult journalist Matt Taibbi (2017) said, “Herman and Chomsky wrote about flak in the era before social media. Today blowback against dissenting thought is instantaneous and massive,” something he terms “superflak.”

There are a number of cases demonstrating the severity of flak in the modern age. Two journalists, Alexei Wood and Aaron Cantu, faced over 70 years in prison for being in the vicinity of protests at Donald Trump’s January 2017 inauguration. They were only acquitted a year later. Meanwhile, Julian Assange, editor of WikiLeaks, a media organization that published leaked documents and videos detailing US war crimes, was charged by Washington under the Espionage Act and was forced to seek asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London in 2012 where he has remained. Many American officials, including President Trump and Hillary Clinton, have called for his execution, while large financial organizations like Visa, PayPal and Mastercard removed their services to Wikileaks. The aforementioned Snowden affair is another case highlighting the costliness of flak to news organizations. Governments directly interfere with national programming as well. Progressive host Cenk Uygur was told by his bosses at MSNBC to “tone down” his anti-establishment content and that “people in Washington” were concerned about his tone. Uygur was subsequently demoted then chose to leave shortly afterward (*The Young Turks*, 2011).

Flak is apportioned on the Internet more than ever, especially to journalists who challenge power, particularly those from minority backgrounds. In 2017, after reporting on violent anti-government demonstrations in Venezuela, Abby Martin and Michael Prysner were the subject of a viral fake news Twitter campaign, boosted by many influential local journalists, that they were informants working for the Venezuelan government. They received dozens of death threats and there was a campaign inside the country to find and lynch them (Gosztola, 2017). Likewise, journalist Luke O’Brien and his family members were targeted and threatened after he exposed a powerful online hate campaign, with his name and address published online (Baumann, 2018).

But media organizations are also a source of flak, not just its recipient. The BBC reported

Professor John Robertson to his university after the academic published studies showing the news organization's biased coverage of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. Robertson (2014) claims his colleagues were warned to "stay away" from him. Meanwhile, a number of media outlets have waged smear campaigns against political figures like Jill Stein and Bernie Sanders, as well as journalists such as Glen Greenwald and Max Blumenthal, labelling them as "Putin's puppets" and "Russian agents" (see [Chapter 4](#)). This has a chilling effect, shutting down debate and silencing those who criticize the establishment.

Corporations are notoriously risk-averse, not wishing to court serious controversy that could lead to costly legal cases. Therefore, taking risks with publishing is generally not encouraged. This leads to a situation where journalists will pre-emptively self-censor due to the prior threat of flak. In their book *More Bad News From Israel*, Philo and Berry (2007) found that BBC journalists covering the country were highly wary of flak, "waiting in fear" for the phone call from the Israeli embassy. Media that is deemed "controversial" by the establishment is considered unsafe to advertise on. Progressive news sites and shows have seen advertisements pulled across the board, disincentivizing them challenging state and corporate power. The loss of advertising has also affected the far-right, with outlets like *Breitbart* losing 90 per cent of its advertisers in a two-month period in 2017 (Bhattarai, 2017).

Flak from smaller, grassroots campaigns can also, arguably, have a positive impact on the media. After what the UN Human Rights Chief called "decades of sustained and unrestrained anti-foreigner abuse, misinformation and distortion" and particularly after the *Sun* called migrants "cockroaches," it urged the UK government to tackle the open hate speech of many tabloid newspapers, comparing their rhetoric to Nazi newspapers' coverage of Jews in the 1930s (UN, 2015). The UK government failed to act. Therefore, a small pressure group called Stop Funding Hate was set up and successfully managed to persuade a number of large businesses to remove their advertising from the newspapers the UN identified.

While Rampton claimed flak was not much of a deterrent online, it is clear that its impact and its prevalence have increased in the modern era, the filter affecting journalists and their output more than in the days of the original formulation of the propaganda model.

Anti-communism

The final filter influencing the behaviour of the media that *Manufacturing Consent* outlines is an anti-communist ideology. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 29–31) argue that while communism is presented as the ultimate evil, the concept is deliberately never defined, causing the concept to be nebulous and malleable into whatever shape is necessary, and used against any group or state. As one ex-*New York Times* journalist was asked what his colleagues understand by phrases like "communist" or "Marxist-Leninist," he responded, "Nothing. None of them would be able to tell you what it means. It's simply used as a term of abuse" (Broadbent, 1993: 155). Nevertheless, Chomsky identifies the 1950 document NSC 68 as a key text in outlining and verbalizing the secular religion of anti-communism. The document alleges that there is a worldwide Kremlin-based conspiracy to undermine democracy and transform the world into an authoritarian communist dictatorship controlled by Moscow. In response to this threat, it was up to the United States to protect democracy and freedom at home and abroad by stamping "communism" out.

The utility of this filter, for the authors, lies in splitting the left as it can be used to attack liberals, painting them as being soft on or friends with the enemies of America. Thus, it is an

extractive technique, putting liberals permanently on the defensive, meaning they have to spend an inordinate amount of time and effort attacking those to the left of them, becoming functionally identical to reactionaries. It sows division among progressives and labour movements and serves as a useful tool of political control. Once a group is labelled “communist” by the political elite, their eradication is acceptable, as is supporting reactionary movements to that end, while anyone asking for evidence of a particular group’s original sin can be branded a communist sympathiser and marginalized and attacked in a wave of patriotic fervour.

However, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s, the fifth filter appeared to have lost its relevance, with many arguing that it should be re-written or replaced. For example, Boyd-Barrett (2015) suggests an anti-terrorism filter. Under this filter, any group or regime can be labelled “terrorist” and attacked or invaded, justifying NATO’s constantly expanding war on terror in the Middle East, North Africa and further afield. Certainly, by the 2000s the war on drugs had merged with the war on terror in political parlance, with drug-traffickers in Latin America rechristened “narco-terrorists,” justifying US intervention in the region.

Others, including Herman and Chomsky (2002: 17) themselves, have argued that the force of anti-communist ideology has weakened and the filter should be expressed as the ideological convergence of the media and establishment on the supposed benefits of neoliberal globalization. Thus, there is a strong belief in the “miracle of the market” where markets are assumed to be both benevolent and fundamentally democratic, while non-market mechanisms are treated with suspicion. Herman (2018) claims that journalism has internalized this ideology, to the point where any system diverging from the free-market appears bizarre and utopian.

Pedro (2011) argues that old enemies like the Soviet Union have disappeared and been replaced with enemies in South America and the Middle East labelled terrorists. New enemies are always necessary to justify imperialist policies. He argues that along with an anti-filter, there is also an equal pro-filter, which presents the US government as fundamentally benevolent. Thus, this powerful two-pronged ideological mechanism is built upon the Manichean worldview expressed in NSC 68, exploiting the “othering” of foreign groups.

On a similar note, Goss (2013: 97, 119) suggests the rewriting of the anti-communist filter as an us/them dichotomy, based upon the work of Teun van Dijk, claiming that all societies have their own versions of the division, allowing for the internationalization of the propaganda model. Along these in- and out-group dichotomies, Rasul (2015) suggested an anti-Pakistan fifth filter for the Indian media.

One recent example of the us/them filter on display was in February 2018, when 23-year-old Iranian-American fashion blogger Hoda Katebi was invited to speak about her new fashion book on Chicago’s WGN TV network. Instead of asking her about fashion, the hosts accosted her about geopolitics, claiming that “we cannot trust Iran” when it came to nuclear weapons. A startled Katebi answered that, due to the history of US imperialism in the region, it is the United States we cannot trust. The host responded, “You don’t sound like an American.” In Trump’s America, where he attempted to ban all Muslims from entering the country, and with ICE agents deporting large numbers of immigrants, this reply is tantamount to a threat and is a powerful disciplinary mechanism against people of colour who challenge the official line.

In [Chapter 4](#) I argue that the anti-communist filter has recently been reborn as an anti-Russian filter in Western media, where organizations and political figures on both left and right who challenge the neoliberal centre can be tarred as Putin’s puppets or Russian agents. Russia has

become the number one political issue in Western discourse, with many media organizations determined to prove the questionable assertions that a Moscow-based fake news campaign got Trump elected and that he is a fundamentally compromised “Siberian Candidate.” Similarly, other political figures, such as Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Syriza in Greece and Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein in the United States have been accused of being agents of Moscow. Indeed, the same fate has befallen virtually every major political figure across the United States and Europe that does not accept every tenet of neoliberalism. Thus, it functions in the same fashion as the anti-communist hysteria of 1950s America.

The utility of this is to distract the public from the obvious failings of centrist political parties, postponing any introspection and critique of the system. It also allows the mainstream media to reassert their control over the means of communication while it develops a conspiratorial mindset among the public, increasing their trust of the government and sowing mistrust of alternative opinions. Thus, inconvenient facts or arguments can be dismissed as Russian propaganda, like they were during the Cold War.

This filter has quickly returned to become one of the most powerful disciplining mechanisms the media – and the elite more generally – have at their disposal. Furthermore, despite the disappearance of the communist menace, us/them dichotomies continue to be used to discipline the media and the population. As Pedro (2011) says, “the dominant ideology is constantly shedding its skin in order to continue defending capitalism as the best form of organization and justifying the activities of the ruling elite.”

Conclusion

The much-vaunted technological revolution has changed the way in which we consume news and media. We increasingly receive media online and through mobile devices while we have witnessed the fall of print, the decline of television and the rise of new forms of media, like blogs and podcasts. However, the content of what we see has changed little. Although the Internet in particular has opened up new spaces for alternative opinions to emerge and reproduce, the reality is that this has not happened on a wide scale. The news and opinions we read online very often come to us through the online arm of legacy media corporations. Furthermore, as Chomsky argues in [Chapter 1](#), little on social media is original and tends to be based upon old media stories.

Contrary to Rampton’s (2007) claims, the dramatic changes in the economy and communications industry over the past 30 years have boosted the applicability of the propaganda model and strengthen most, if not all, of the five filters as mechanisms of control over the output of the media. Ownership of media has become ever more centralized and concentrated, with large media companies becoming parts of wider capitalist conglomerations. This allows a smaller range of opinions to be expressed. Advertising is a tremendously important filter, with most new media completely dependent on corporate sponsorship for revenue. Online advertising agencies like AdSense have strongly affected the media, leading to a precipitous decline in revenue. This has, in turn, led to widespread cuts in staff around the world and many media organizations going bankrupt (leading to increased concentration of ownership as failing titles are bought up by larger corporations who can better sustain short-term losses). This has increased advertisers’ power vis-à-vis media, with the firewall between advertising and editorial now extinguished. Thus, the competition to serve advertisers has become more intense, with few willing to risk

angering their remaining sponsors.

Given less time to produce more content than ever, much of journalism has simply become copying and pasting from newswires and official, tried and trusted sources, while global distribution networks have meant these sources are broadcast across the world. Time-pressed and precariously employed journalists are less inclined than ever to contradict their sources, partially for fear of flak, which, in the era of social media and the Internet, is easier to organize and journalists easier to reach.

The fifth filter has changed the most and is the most questionable one in the modern era. However, if taken in its new forms, suggested by Herman and Chomsky and others, it is still highly relevant to explaining modern media behaviours. Therefore it can be said that the changes in the media landscape have strengthened the filters, meaning that the propaganda model continues to be as important and useful a tool in understanding how the modern media function in society today.

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4

FAKE NEWS, RUSSIAN BOTS AND PUTIN'S PUPPETS

Alan MacLeod

Western media have collectively mistrusted Russia for over a century; since the Russian Revolutions of 1917 the country was treated as the West's *bête noire*. In his final published article Edward Herman (2017) addressed this mistrust, noting that between 1917 and 1920 the *New York Times*' zealous opposition to the new Bolshevik government caused it to predict the imminent collapse of the regime no fewer than 91 times as journalists uncritically relayed statements from unidentified official sources.

The successes of the Russian, and later Chinese and Cuban, Revolutions created great traumas for Western elites, fearful of losing their class positions, and anti-communism became something of a national religion in the United States. The 1950 National Security Council document NSC 68 laid out this new official secular religion, accusing the USSR of being responsible for a global communist conspiracy to subvert and infiltrate the pure and righteous nations (most notably the United States) with communism. This carefully crafted official paranoia was used to justify military expansionism abroad (where any insufficiently subservient state could be labelled "communist" and attacked or overthrown) and a witch-hunt on "communist" subversives in the United States that came to be known as McCarthyism. In practice, this came to mean any leftists, social democrats and independent liberals in positions of influence in education, entertainment and politics. The purge had the effect of shifting politics and culture to the right and was a highly effective mechanism of control as those not sufficiently loyal to state and business power could be tarred as communists, thereby potentially ending their careers. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 29) noted that the national religion had the effect of keeping liberals permanently on the defensive, causing them to behave like reactionaries. So strong was this technique of control that the authors described it as one of the five principle filters that shape news media.

Yet by the early years of the twenty-first century, the USSR and most other communist states had turned capitalist and relations between the West and Russia had completely changed. Boris Yeltsin was seen as America's man in the Kremlin, the United States having legitimized his power grab and interfered in the 1996 elections, including filling Russian media with what would now be called negative "fake news" about his opponents to ensure he won. This was reported on with pride in the West; *Time Magazine* ran with the front-page headline "Yanks to the rescue." His successor, Vladimir Putin, supported the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and became a close personal friend of President Bush. Chomsky therefore suggested the fifth filter was outdated and should be replaced by the belief in the "miracle of the market" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 17–18), anti-terrorism (Mullen, 2009) or whatever pretext the United States

invents to justify further global ambitions (Chomsky, 2016). Others (Boyd-Barrett, 2004) argued that the fifth filter was now an agreement in the supposed superiority of neoliberal globalization. As such, it felt for a long time as if the fifth filter had become the propaganda model's weak link.

The receding of the anti-Moscow sentiment was plain to see in politics and media during the 2012 presidential election campaign. Senator John Kerry mocked Republican nominee Mitt Romney for suggesting that Russia was still America's enemy, stating at the Democratic National Convention, "Romney's even blurted out the preposterous notion that Russia is our number one geopolitical foe. Folks, Sarah Palin said she could see Russia from Alaska, Mitt Romney talks like he's only seen Russia by watching 'Rocky IV'." Kerry was forced to stop speaking as the crowd erupted in laughter. Hillary Clinton noted Romney's remarks were "somewhat dated" and backward-looking while President Obama, during the third presidential debate, bluntly stated, "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back ... the Cold War's been over for 20 years." Romney's assertion was considered a major faux pas and mainstream media pundits framed him as a political dinosaur. MSNBC's Rachael Maddow claimed he was trying to copy Reagan while Chris Matthews wondered, "What decade this guy's living in?"

Yet this good relationship was already showing signs of strain. Putin balked at NATO's eastward expansion to Russia's Baltic border in 2004. Previous Russian leaders had been given assurances that the organization would not expand "one inch to the east" of Germany. Despite this, NATO tripled its military presence on the border between 2012 and 2017. The United States also placed first-strike-threat missile systems in Eastern Europe, supposedly to counter a non-existent Iranian threat. During the Ukraine crisis, the United States supported the anti-Russian presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich. Furthermore, the United States and Russia were on opposite sides again in the Syrian Civil War, with the former supporting groups euphemistically described as "rebels" in the Western press against the Russian-supported government of Bashar al-Assad. The United States even bombed a military base manned with Russian troops (for more on Syria see [Chapter 5](#)).

However, it was the accusations from the Democratic Party, and later, the US state, that the Kremlin interfered in the 2016 US presidential election, causing the victory of Donald Trump (and the loss of Hillary Clinton) that propelled US–Russia relations into perhaps the primary international media story of the modern era. One consequence of this is the reawakening of the dormant anti-communist filter as an anti-Russian filter, where those who question not only the extent or impact of Russian involvement in the election, but even the official line in foreign or domestic policy can be successfully smeared as Putin's puppets. This negative feedback has quickly become an extremely powerful filter shaping media but could not have become so successful without the deep levels of fear, mistrust and resentment towards Moscow built up over the past century. There now follows a short history of the evolution of the Russiagate story.

After the well-publicized machinations of the Democratic Party elite to skew the process in her favour and against her challenger, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton won the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination. Clinton enjoyed the support of the mainstream media; the *Washington Post* ran 16 separate anti-Sanders articles in 16 hours (Johnson, 2016a) and both Clinton and the media were happy that Donald Trump would be her Republican opponent. The Clinton team felt it would be an easy victory while the unpredictable billionaire TV star was great for ratings; there was a 55 per cent increase in average prime-time viewership of cable news between 2015 and 2016, a phenomenon sociologists have called the "Trump bump" (Pew Research Centre,

2017a). Trump received an estimated \$1.9 billion in free media publicity. During the primaries, CNN, MSNBC and Fox all cut away from Sanders' campaign speech to show an empty Trump podium.

The election was marked by WikiLeaks' publication of Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta's emails. They showed that Clinton had a grossly unfair advantage against Sanders in the primaries, that her own publicity team held her in contempt and that she assured bankers that she had a "public" and a "private" position on Wall Street; that while she may promise the public to regulate them, she assured them she was completely behind them and merely lying to the nation for political reasons. Russia was identified as the source of this hack.

The Podesta emails also showed that Clinton's team decided before the primaries that linking Trump to Russia and to Vladimir Putin, by now a figure of hate in America, was the optimum strategy. The issue of Russia was by far the most discussed topic during the presidential debates, with Clinton claiming Trump was controlled by the Kremlin, stating, "Putin would rather have a puppet as President." Indeed, Russia was discussed 18 times as much as poverty or inequality and four times more than healthcare (including the repeal of Obamacare) (Johnson, 2016b). The media agreed with Clinton. Paul Krugman (2016) in the *New York Times* claimed Trump would be a "Siberian candidate" while even former CIA director Michael Hayden (2016) endorsed Clinton, writing an op-ed for the *Washington Post* claiming, "Trump is Russia's useful fool."

Despite the overwhelming support of the mainstream media (Clinton received 500 newspaper and magazine endorsements to his 28), Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States. One popular explanatory factor for this stunning victory was the prevalence of "fake news" during the election campaign. Untrue stories from low quality websites circulated around social media spreading rumours and falsehoods. In November 2016 the *Washington Post* promoted a website, propornot.com, in an extremely well-publicized article. *Propornot* claimed fake news was being promoted by the Kremlin to game the election for Trump. The website was described by the *Post* (Timberg, 2016) as "two teams of independent researchers," using "Internet analytics tools" that had identified over 200 fake news websites that were "routine peddlers of Russian propaganda." *Propornot* refused to reveal who they were or who funded them yet their list of websites was widely promoted. Included were WikiLeaks and Trump-supporting right-wing websites like *InfoWars* and *The Drudge Report*, anti-Trump leftist websites that were also critical of Clinton like *Truthout*, *Truthdig* and *The Black Agenda Report*, as well as libertarian vehicles like Antiwar.com and the Ron Paul Institute. In other words, news sites that did not toe the neoliberal line between the Clinton Democrats and moderate Republicans. Some of the sites on the list produce extremely high-quality journalism; *Truthdig* hosts Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges while *Naked Capitalism* was cited as one of CNBC's top 25 best financial blogs.

Propornot explicitly informs its readers that websites that critique or criticize Obama, Clinton, Angela Merkel, the EU, NATO, the "mainstream media," centre-left or centre-right moderates are a sure sign of Russian propaganda and encourages readers to investigate further. It also notes any site warning of the dangers of aggressiveness with Russia, that it might lead to world war three, is likely Kremlin propaganda too. As it notes, "Russian propaganda never suggests it would just result in a Cold War 2 and Russia's eventual peaceful defeat, like the last time." Leaving aside the millions of victims of the Cold War in South East Asia, Central America and many other places, the criteria of what is deemed Russian fake news is clear: any news outlet critical of the military industrial complex, war, mainstream journalism, neoliberal economics or

the political system is a Kremlin puppet. Only the corporate centre can be trusted. Whether this constitutes McCarthyism is evidently a frequently asked question, as it appears on the FAQ. *Propornot* insists it is not despite simultaneously calling on the FBI to investigate the news media they have identified (while they remain anonymous). At least Senator McCarthy put his name to it.

The validity of the list is highly dubious. That the *Washington Post* chose to promote and effectively endorse it as neutral experts is remarkable, especially given the actions of the anonymous group, who use the language of puerile, foul-mouthed 13-year-olds when interacting on their official Twitter account. For example, in response to one political blogger, they said, “We don’t care if you’re paid to perform sexual favors for Putin or doing it for free. You’ve still got his dick in your mouth.”

Months later, the *Post* added an editor’s note to the article claiming it did not endorse *Propornot*’s list. However, the article had already helped spark widespread concern in the media about Russian-controlled fake news. Organizations like Google, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit and Twitter announced they would be taking measures to weed it out. The effect was to hammer progressive outlets that challenged the hegemonic corporate media. Traffic to progressive sites not on *Propornot*’s list plummeted after Google, Bing and Facebook changed their algorithms. *AlterNet* experienced a 63 per cent reduction, *Truth-Out* 25 per cent, *The Intercept* 19 per cent and *Democracy Now!* 36 per cent (Damon and North, 2017). Reddit and Twitter deleted thousands of accounts while YouTube announced its new algorithm would weed out fake news. It promptly sent a video claiming the Parkland shooting was a hoax to the number one top trending video. Furthermore, the new algorithm promoted mainstream news sources like CNN and relegated independent news shows. Independently produced progressive news that challenged the dominant line on Syria, fracking and many other sensitive political topics had their content demonetized as part of what became known as the “adpocalypse.” Crucially, mainstream news outlets continued to receive advertising revenue on their videos covering the same topics. The effect has been to disincentivize independent media from challenging corporate media on controversial issues and to threaten their very viability.

On both left and right, many outlets and journalists were tarred as Putin puppets. Some, such as Keith Olbermann, proved their loyalty by being as belligerent on Russia as possible, while others, such as Glenn Greenwald, Aaron Maté and Max Blumenthal, have continued to question the official line. The consequence of this is a new period of McCarthyism, not from the right as previously, but predominantly from the centre, whose purpose is to re-establish corporate hegemony over communication, challenged so openly from both left and right during the election.

Despite their apparent concern with fake news, the mainstream media has propagated a great deal of misinformation about supposed Russian attacks or influence on America. In late 2016 the *Washington Post* (Eilperin and Entous, 2016) headlined that “Russian hackers penetrated US electricity grid through a utility in Vermont, officials say.” It quoted the Governor of the State declaring that “all Americans should be both alarmed and outraged” that “one of the world’s leading thugs, Vladimir Putin” had attacked the United States and calling for the United States to “vigorously pursue” and put an end to Russia’s actions. The easily verifiable reality was there was no hack whatsoever, merely that after receiving a Homeland Security notice sent to all US utility companies, Burlington Electric had found some malware on a single laptop unconnected to the grid. Instead, the *Post* did not fact-check the words of anonymous officials. Like with

Propornot, long after story had run and had been read by hundreds of thousands and picked up in other media, the newspaper added a note informing the few who read it months later that the story was not entirely true.

Another example of the media's over-preoccupation over Russian meddling was CNN's (Starr *et al.*, 2016) story, "Intel analysis shows Putin approved election hacking," which began by quoting an unnamed US official claiming Russia hacked the election "with sophisticated hacking tools, the equivalent of those used by the US National Security Agency." Yet buried in the story the article contradicted itself, stating their sources said, "there is certainly no obvious intelligence linking Putin [to it]" and that they had no evidence to implicate him. Eight out of ten people who interact with and six in ten who share it read only the headline of a story, with few reading the body of the text.

There were also a number of highly anticipated official reports released on the extent of Russian hacking of the election, although few had much substance whatsoever. Despite this, they were widely reported as conclusive proof of the Trump–Russia collusion theory. The short, 13-page joint FBI and National Homeland Security report made many accusations but offered no evidence whatsoever. More than two-thirds of it merely provided basic boilerplate advice on protection from hackers. Furthermore, the report came with a disclaimer on the first page noting, "This report is provided 'as is' for informational purposes only. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) does not provide any warranties of any kind regarding any information contained within."

The Director of National Intelligence (DNI) report was released around the same time. It was billed as the bombshell that would lead to Trump's impeachment. It concluded that it was "highly confident" that Russia "interfered" with the US election. This conclusion was the headline across the mainstream media landscape. The short report was very low on actual evidence, however, and also came with an incredible disclaimer that "Judgements are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact."

Most of the evidence that Russia was interfering in the election revolved around the content of Russian media outlets like RT and *Sputnik*, which were favourable to Trump and critical of Clinton. The report noted that RT shows often presented the US political and economic system in a negative light, gave air time to third party candidates and covered topics like environmental issues and the Occupy Wall Street movement. It noted that programmes like *Breaking the Set* and *Truthseeker* had an anti-fracking message and that the network was a "leading voice in opposing Western intervention in the Syrian conflict." What this has to do with the election is unclear.

It should be noted that nearly all the evidence presented is from 2012 or earlier, years before the election. Both shows mentioned had been off the air for more than a year by 2016. Indeed, most of the report appears to have been written years earlier. Thus, it tacitly takes the position that the United States is a near-perfect society and criticism of any aspect of it is propaganda, highlighting the totalitarian mindset of the US establishment's concern that some Americans may be exposed to another opinion. Its primary argument is therefore Russia swung the election by airing content about Occupy Wall Street four years previously.

Nevertheless, despite the disclaimer and the inclusion of graphs showing RT and *Sputnik*'s tiny reach in comparison to other networks, the report was heralded as providing "overwhelming" proof of Russian "hacking" (Rozsa, 2017) by the media. That this could have been the case can only be explained by the complete subservience of journalists to the official

line and the pre-selection of right-thinking people to staff those positions. President Obama expelled 31 Russian diplomats from the United States and the Trump administration forced RT to register as a “foreign agent” under a 1938 law designed to counter Nazism. RT now has trouble booking guests to come on their shows as it has become a career-killing move to do so, with politicians condemned for previously appearing on the network. Thus, a network that questioned the mainstream US line on politics and economics has been delivered a serious blow.

The Steele Dossier was published in January 2017, and, like the other two reports, became a leading story in news around the world. Written by a British spy, its central claim was that the Kremlin has evidence of lewd Moscow orgies where Donald Trump would pay Russian prostitutes to urinate in front of him and onto a bed previously slept in by Obama. It claimed that Putin was using this evidence to blackmail the incoming president, turning him into a Siberian candidate. No evidence was provided. However, the juiciness of the story spread it around the world and led to an increased paranoia that, not only had Putin supported Trump, “hacked” the Podesta emails (thereby “hacking” the election) but also had Trump personally under his control due to the seriously compromising evidence. That the dossier was paid for by Hillary Clinton’s campaign (Entous *et al.*, 2017) came out only later and seemed not to have damaged her or Steele’s reputation in the media, nor the credibility of the dossier’s claims. The nebulous phrase “election hacking” was so widespread and used so liberally by the media that a majority of Democrats came to believe that Russia had hacked into voting machines during the election, stuffing the ballot with Trump votes, thereby swinging the election (The *Economist*/YouGov, 2017a).

Unable to convince the majority of the public to treat the idea of Russian hacking of the election seriously, the thrust of the investigation changed throughout 2017 and 2018, with alleged Russian interference in social media, primarily through Twitter troll bots and Facebook advertisements and groups becoming centre. In February 2018, a US grand jury indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian agencies with interference in the US political process. Among the entities was the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian “troll farm.” It was charged that the organization had attempted to swing the election for Trump by creating various Facebook groups and by spending \$100,000 on pro-Trump and anti-Hillary advertisements.

However, only a quarter of this figure was geo-located to the United States. Over half was spent after the election and over half of the advertisements were not about the election at all. Facebook’s initial inquiry found that they were commercial in nature, not political. The agency spent just a few hundred dollars in key battleground states, minuscule in comparison to the \$6.5 billion spent by Republicans and Democrats overall (with Clinton outspending Trump two to one). Among its most tangible achievements included organizing a pro-Trump rally in Florida attended by eight people, although the size of the rally was rarely mentioned in reporting. Mueller’s report also showed the IRA actually organized anti-Trump events as well. Despite this, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who was being touted by many as a frontrunner for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020, was branded a traitor for aiding the “enemy.” Facebook changed its algorithm to prevent further Russian advertising and fake news spreading on its site. As with other sites, however, progressive news and politics pages reported dramatic drops in traffic after the change.

The media and the political establishment responded with vitriolic and bellicose language to Russiagate. Many in the media, like the *Washington Post* (Tumulty, 2018) and both Republicans like John McCain and Democrats such as Jeanne Shaheen described Russia’s actions as an “act

of war.” Many others have gone further. Clinton herself called it a “cyber 9/11” while politicians like Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and influential media figures like the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman have declared it a “new Pearl Harbor.” MSNBC’s Chris Hayes interviewed Jerry Nadler (D-NY) who decried Trump’s inaction, stating, “Imagine if FDR had denied that the Japanese had attacked us at Pearl Harbor ... Russia is *destroying* our country!” David Frum demanded a response, claiming Trump’s inaction was a “dereliction of duty” (Greenwald, 2018). A viral video fronted by Hollywood actor Morgan Freeman summed up the establishment message: “We have been attacked. We are at war with Russia.”

The belligerent language matches the rhetoric used at the height of the Cold War. Indeed, Hillary Clinton has already stated she would pursue a military response to the cyber hacking. Russiagate has had some effect on some of the population. Rising from just 2 per cent in 2012, a 2017 survey found 38 per cent of Democrats in 2017 saw Russia as an adversary; a figure higher than during the Cold War (Kiley, 2017).

If the actions of Russia constitute a new 9/11 or Pearl Harbor then it is of use to remember the US response to both actions. The response to 9/11 was to unleash two invasions in quick succession, leading to unending occupations and an expanding and never-ending war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya, unleashing a death spiral across the region. The response to Pearl Harbor was to launch the largest war in American history, leading to massive carpet-bombing campaigns, leaving millions dead and the dropping of two atomic bombs. A war with a nuclear-armed Russia could be far more devastating, even than this.

While the threat of a hot war increases, the possibility of a disastrous accidental nuclear confrontation, as US and Russian missiles are put on hair-trigger alert, is more ominous still. In 2018, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved its famous doomsday clock to two minutes to midnight, the closest the world has come to Armageddon in their estimation since 1953, before even the Cuban Missile Crisis, explaining “nuclear risks have been compounded by US-Russia relations that now feature more conflict than cooperation” (Mecklin, 2018).

Chomsky (2004: 74) notes that during the Missile Crisis, the world was literally “one word away from nuclear war” as US ships attacked Russian submarines. The submarine commanders discussed retaliating with nuclear weapons. A nuclear attack would have, of course, prompted a massive counterattack on Russia. Two of the three commanders voted to do so. However, Captain Vasili Arkhipov vetoed the order, a decision understood by the US National Security Archive to have “saved the world” from apocalypse. That so many in the US establishment media are pushing for a return to this state is extraordinary.

The utility in taking this position is captured in Freeman’s video, as the actor explains, “for 241 years our democracy has been a shining example to the world of what we can all aspire to” and “Putin uses social media to spread propaganda and false information, he convinces people in democratic societies to distrust their media, their political process.” Thus, for Freeman and those who espouse this position, the mainstream media and political system was flawless and should be trusted. It was not the failures of capitalism or deep racial and class divides in the United States that led to the election of Trump and the defeat of Clinton, but the nefarious actions of Vladimir Putin. Therefore, there is no need to scrutinize them. It is a tactic to retain control of the Democratic Party, for continued corporate dominance of the media and for the continuation of the political, media and economic system as a whole from challenges to its legitimacy.

The media’s focus on Russia has come at the detriment of other serious issues. One example of this is *The Rachael Maddow Show*, the highest rated news programme on cable TV, which

devotes more of its time to Russia than all other topics combined. Maddow is symptomatic of American news more generally. A study of ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts in May and June 2017 found they devoted 75 per cent of their coverage to Russia, despite it being the top issue for only 6 per cent of Americans, whose principle priorities were healthcare and unemployment (Gabriel, 2017). Unfortunately, those subjects were barely covered. The media's excessive concentration on Trump's Russia connection is taking space away for serious critiques of Trump's policies, including on healthcare, unemployment and the climate, more important for and relevant to the majority of Americans.

The great disparity between the priorities of the owners and advertisers of the media and the public's view and why journalists continue to focus upon Putin must be explained. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 9) state that most biased choices in the media arise not from top-down intervention but from "The pre-selection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power."

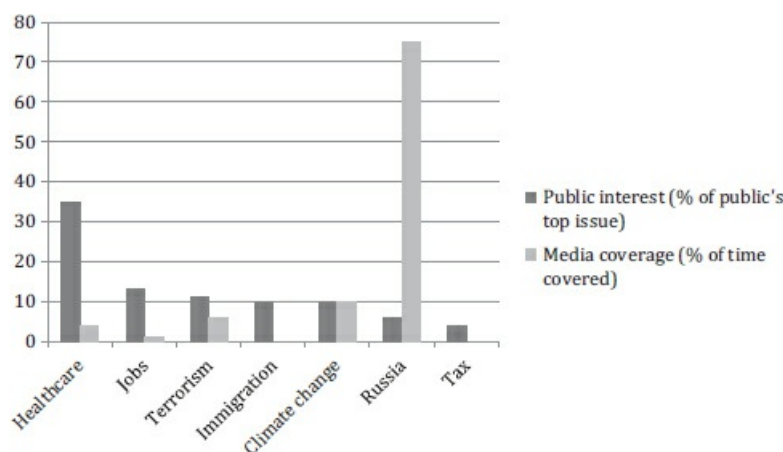


FIGURE 4.1 What Americans care about vs. what the media cares about

Source: Gabriel (2017)

However, top-down intervention does occur. CNN producer John Bonifeld was caught on camera admitting that the CEO of the company, Jeff Zucker, told him to "get back to Russia" after they covered the Trump administration's withdrawal from the climate accords, a potentially fatal blow to the prospects for survival for the human species, according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. He also admitted that the whole Russia–Trump collusion was "mostly bullshit" with "no real proof" and a "witch-hunt" and that the media was focusing on the story for ratings. "Our ratings are incredible right now," he revealed (Concha, 2017). Maddow's constant coverage of Russia has propelled her show to become the highest rated on cable news.

For all that ratings have increased, the ongoing story has failed to envelop America. Harvard-Harris (2018) polls have consistently shown that a significant majority (59–60 per cent) of Americans feel that the investigations into Russia are hurting the country, not helping it, while a series of Gallup (2018) polls found that less than 1 per cent of Americans consider Russia a top problem for the country. Trust in media is low and a continuing preponderance with promoting factually dubious stories about Russia and Trump may further erode public confidence in the media, which was slipping long before Vladimir Putin is alleged to have attacked the United

States.

The anti-Russian filter would not have the power and potency that it does without the deep levels of resentment, fear and hostility towards the USSR built up throughout the Cold War, during which Americans lived in fear of communist infiltration and a Soviet missile attack. The new movement has used the emotionally charged symbols and imagery associated with the Soviet Union to emphasize Putin and the Kremlin's nefariousness. The *New Yorker* published a Cyrillic cover, implying we would all have to learn Russian now that Putin controls the White House. *Time* magazine was more explicit; its May 2017 cover showed the White House being subsumed by the Kremlin. The message could hardly be clearer: Russia has taken over the United States. This notion draws on a tradition that passes back through the aforementioned NSC 68 and its proclamations of a Moscow-based conspiracy to subvert and conquer the United States, the last pure nation left.

Putinism is an expressly anti-communist, conservative ideology; the largest opposition party in Russia is the Communist Party. Despite this fact, conflation with the Soviet Union and communism are commonplace throughout the Resistance to Trump movement. Prominent liberal commentator Joy Ann Reid uses terms like USSR and Russia interchangeably, addressing Putin as "comrade" and his country as a communist state. In response to the Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia's request that the United States return seized Russian government property, senior Democratic politician Donna Brazille claimed "the Communists are now dictating the terms of debate." One of the most popular images of the resistance is a "Trump Putin" logo where the "T" of Trump is replaced by a hammer and the "P" of Putin by a sickle. That the result of a right-wing capitalist controlling another right-wing billionaire capitalist could result in a communist takeover goes to show how flexible the idea of communism is in American political culture. Nevertheless, the Resistance is clearly drawing from the deep well of fear and resentment of the word built up during the Cold War and has reanimated the McCarthyist "communist" menace, the potency of which owes much to the anti-communist filter of the media.

In much the same way as they were blamed for Clinton losing the election, Bernie Sanders and Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein were also disciplined by the anti-Russian filter and portrayed as Putin's useful idiots, particularly after the US Special Counsel investigation, led by former FBI director Robert Mueller. The counsel produced a report into Russian interference in the 2016 election, alleging that the Russian-based IRA attempted to widen divisions in American society and had "interfered" in the 2016 election to help Trump win.

Stein became a figure of hate for Democrats, and her presence in the election had long been posited as the reason for Trump's victory. Her refusal to wholeheartedly embrace the Russiagate narrative drew serious fire from the media. In February 2017 Rachel Maddow demanded to know why Stein was silent on the Trump–Russia connection, proving that not only was resistance to the official line treated with suspicion, but even failure to sufficiently endorse the narrative. Maddow claimed she could not explain Stein's silence because she could not pronounce it in Russian (Gettys, 2017). In response to the announcement that Stein's connection to Russia was being investigated, Zac Petkanas, Director of Rapid Response for the 2016 Clinton campaign tweeted:

Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.

Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.
Jill Stein is a Russian agent.

This accurately summed up the media and political atmosphere. The Mueller indictment alleged that the IRA promoted Stein, Trump, Sanders, black activists and others to damage Clinton, citing one Facebook post and one or possibly two Facebook ads that were pro-Green Party. Stein also defended Julian Assange, a “smoking gun,” according to Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee investigating her (*Guardian*, 2017). The media attacked her, depicting her as Putin’s puppet. Stein fought back, calling the charges “laughable” and an “obvious smear.” Grilled on MSNBC, she claimed “It doesn’t pass the laugh test as evidence of our campaign benefitting” from Russia, going on to highlight other, much more important reasons Trump won, “We were aware of other kinds of interference, for example, we know that \$6 billion in free air time as given to Donald Trump by the big networks [like MSNBC].” Much was made of the fact she was present at a Moscow dinner Putin also attended. That Putin was welcomed to the White House and even went on holiday with President George W. Bush, who described him as a personal friend, has been consigned to the memory hole, as Bush was being rehabilitated by the Democratic elite for his criticism of Trump. A majority of Democrats now hold a favourable view of the former president, who is now embraced on the top liberal TV programmes like *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (*The Economist/YouGov*, 2017b).

In contrast to Stein, Sanders has consistently endorsed the Russiagate theory, noting on Twitter that it is “clear to everyone (except Donald Trump) that Russia was deeply involved in the 2016 election and intends to be involved in 2018.” Despite his commitment to the cause, Sanders was fiercely attacked in the media as a Siberian candidate himself, proving that no action makes one safe from suspicion. A passing mention in the 43rd charge of the Mueller indictment that the IRA was helping his campaign was seized upon by the media, who described him as “struggling to address” the “Russian support” (Singman, 2018). This was built upon a long-standing narrative that he is the Kremlin’s choice for the next president. The *Washington Post* (Kirchick, 2017) asked, “When Russia interferes with the 2020 election on behalf of Democratic nominee Bernie Sanders how will liberals respond?” thus tarring any future political actions as Russian-orchestrated. How posting Photoshopped homoerotic pictures of Sanders on Facebook helped his campaign was not addressed.

Indeed, virtually every political movement that challenged the neoliberal consensus was smeared as Kremlin puppets. CNN (Byers, 2017) claimed that Russia had bought advertisements for Black Lives Matter (BLM) and targeted them at Baltimore and Ferguson, hotspots of recent protests, thus associating the group with the Kremlin. The *Washington Post* (Timberg and Romm, 2018) also reported the IRA paid for self-defence lessons for one black activist and shared images promoting the Standing Rock environmental protests against the new Dakota Access Pipeline. Confidante of Clinton and Obama, Neera Tanden described Chelsea Manning as a “Russian stooge” and her run for Senate as part of a campaign whereby “the Kremlin pays the extreme left to swing elections.” That the demonstrable reach and impact of the IRA and other trolls is minuscule is rarely mentioned. The effect is to cast doubt upon any individual, movement or organization challenging power as potentially a Russian psychological operation.

The tactic of associating groups with the Kremlin in order to demonize, defame or discipline them has spread to other countries as well. The Atlantic Council (Polyakova *et al.*, 2017)

published a report calling Greek political parties Syriza and Golden Dawn the “Kremlin’s Trojan horses.” Not coincidentally, they are the main two parties challenging neoliberalism in Greece. Indeed, it has linked virtually every major European party challenging the neoliberal centre with Moscow. It was this organization that Facebook partnered with in order to weed out fake news on its site. Funded by NATO, the council’s board of directors includes notorious statespeople Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and James Baker, Generals David Petraeus and Wesley Clark, as well as a number of ex- and current CIA directors and senior tech executives. By September 2018, Facebook had begun to work with the National Democratic Institute, headed by Madeleine Albright, and the International Republican Institute, formerly chaired by John McCain. Reuters (Menn, 2018) reported that the media giant was anxious to better curate what people in other countries saw in their news feeds. Facebook promptly deleted a number of Iranian media channels and the Latin American network *TeleSUR English*, both of which provided alternative viewpoints to the Washington line. It also worked closely with the Israeli government to remove Palestinian voices from its platform. When groups like this have control over global news distribution and over which sources reach the public and which do not, it is tantamount to state censorship. Since the Atlantic Council’s partnership with Facebook, the US government now has considerable control over the means of communication worldwide, where it is a crucial avenue of information. Fifty-two per cent of Brazilians, 61 per cent of Mexicans and 51 per cent of Italians and Turks use the platform for news; 39 per cent of Americans gets their news from the site (Newman *et al.*, 2018).

France’s president accused Russia of hacking their election, a claim much circulated in the media but later proven incorrect. President Mariano Rajoy of Spain, another neoliberal, claimed there was an avalanche of bots spreading fake news during the Catalan independence referendum while it is often heavily implied that the left-wing Podemos party is in Putin’s pocket. Indeed, it is impossible to find a European political party to the left or right of the neoliberal beltway that has not been repeatedly linked with the Kremlin by the centrist establishment.

The leader of the leftist UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, is a prime example of this. In March 2018 Russian double agent and British spy Sergei Skripal was poisoned in Salisbury, England. It was immediately assumed Vladimir Putin was personally responsible. Corbyn, a long-time peace activist, uncharacteristically immediately blamed Russia and called for retaliation, tweeting, “The Russian authorities must be held to account on the basis of the evidence and our response must be both decisive and proportionate.” But Prime Minister Theresa May’s was even more extreme, immediately imposing sanctions on Russia without offering any evidence for the country’s guilt.

The UK media launched a storm of condemnation, not on the aggression of May but on Corbyn’s failure to respond with sufficient jingoism. The front page headline of *the Sun*, Britain’s highest selling newspaper, read “PUTIN’S PUPPET: Corbyn refuses to blast Russia on spy attack” while the second most widely read newspaper, the *Daily Mail*’s front page led with “CORBYN THE KREMLIN STOOGE.” The BBC’s flagship news and politics programme, *Newsnight*, filled its screen with a red-tinted picture of him in a Russian hat Photoshopped with a background of the Kremlin, the implication being clear.

The effect of the return of the fifth filter has been manifold. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 29) note that the filter,

Helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with communist states and radicalism. It therefore helps fragment the left and labour movements and serves as a political-control mechanism. If the triumph of communism is the worst imaginable result, the support of fascism abroad is justified as a lesser evil. Opposition to social democrats who are too soft on communists and “play into their hands” is rationalized in similar terms.

Putin and Russia have re-emerged as a convenient enemy to unite and mobilize the population against, and as a brush to tar, movements and institutions that challenge the neoliberal status quo, from right or left. As such, it represents a strong disciplining tactic to ensure media and political figures remain sufficiently loyal. Masha Gessen, a Russian anti-Putin journalist and activist, has said, “We’re seeing this sort of re-emergence of Russia as the ultimate toxic paintbrush that you can scare anybody with, and hope that it ends their political career” (Chotiner, 2017).

The return of the fifth filter has allowed the centre to smear and sow public distrust of political challenges from the right and left. Thus, movements not under the control of the Democratic or Republican establishment like BLM and the Standing Rock protestors can be dismissed as useful idiots for Moscow rather than engaging with their ideas. Likewise, the political movements challenging discredited neoliberal economics that have erupted over Europe, such as Podemos and the Corbyn insurgency, and in America, around the campaigns of Sanders and Trump can be written off as merely the result of an all-powerful Russian Internet army, rather than as a consequence of genuine frustration and suffering caused by the current system. The McCarthyist tactic of branding political enemies as traitors has proved effective at sowing distrust in the left, shutting down debate and as a disciplining mechanism. If the West is under attack, now is not the time to question the system. Thus, the public become more grateful to and credulous of those in positions of enormous power and with very poor track records of transparency and truthfulness like the CIA, FBI, the military and the large media companies like the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and CNN that drive the narrative. The effect has been to hold these organizations to a lesser standard and accept hearsay from anonymous official sources as gospel, even from those who lie for a living like the secret services. The new filter encourages Americans to forego their faculties, close ranks and develop a conspiratorial mindset that differing opinions and information are not valid or genuine, but an attempt at brainwashing emanating from abroad.

It has also proven a convenient tool to destroy independent media and to re-establish corporate control over the means of communication. Huge media companies like Facebook and Google have used it as an excuse to change their algorithms and effectively disincentivize alternative opinions being voiced in the first place by cutting advertising revenue and from being discovered and shared by de-ranking sites from search listings and whitelisting certain sites from being seen. The constant discussion of fake news in the mainstream media has done a great deal to encourage mistrust and constitutes a silent attack on alternative media sources, many of them very high quality, who have seen their traffic numbers plummet after being smeared as Russian fake news. Foreign news channels offering a differing perspective like RT, *Al-Jazeera* and *Press TV* (Iran) have also seen their viewing figures fall. Conversely, the anti-Russian sentiment has also increased ratings for TV news and subscriptions to major newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The filter has proven extremely valuable to the old media monopolies.

The subtext to the Russia story is that the “hacking” of the election, the “collusion” and the “fake news” were the principle reasons why Clinton lost an unfair election to Trump. As such, it allows the Democratic leadership, under pressure from the left to change their policies, to

construct a narrative to why they did not win. Consequently, there is no need for introspection, and certainly no need to cede control of the party to the insurgent Sanders wing.

Instead of encouraging a much-needed discussion as to why neoliberalism collapsed in America and is collapsing around Europe as an ideology, as centrist parties across the West fall into irrelevance, the fifth filter allows the Democratic establishment to close off debate and to tighten its control on power and to discount the disgruntlement over the great racial and class inequalities in America as deriving from Russia. The Democrats are in no small part responsible for exacerbating the inequalities themselves. This “happy families” version of America was summed up by Clinton’s semi-official campaign slogan, “America is already great.” Papering over these cracks may work in the short term but will not end well.

The fifth filter also aids the military industrial complex, who are happy to have a new enemy in Putin. In 2017, the Senate passed a \$700 billion military budget, the increases in size alone would be easily enough to pay for free college tuition in the United States. It has also had the remarkable effect of expanding support for a neo-conservative war agenda among the Democrats’ liberal base.

The constant linking to and investigation of Trump and Russia has also arguably pushed the president into accepting a highly interventionist neo-conservative foreign policy. Before the election he claimed he wanted to work closely with Putin and develop a peaceful and fruitful relationship. Now he has taken steps even Obama did not take in bombing Russian-manned bases in Syria and arming anti-Russian factions in Ukraine while building up NATO forces on the Russian border. This was something he opposed before his election. Despite the media depiction, Trump’s policies towards Russia have been extraordinarily antagonistic. In April 2018 he warned that Russia should “get ready” for an attack. The new anti-Russian fifth filter has been a highly useful tool for political and social control and could not have been so successful without the century of propaganda and hostility towards the Soviet Union. This can be seen through the amount of communist imagery used to attack Donald Trump with, despite the fact the USSR has not existed for nearly 30 years.

Finally, it also serves to obscure Hillary Clinton’s own connections to Russia. As Secretary of State, Clinton signed off on a deal that gave the Russian government control of over 20 per cent of America’s uranium production, a strategic asset vital for national security, after investors donated over \$140 million to her foundation, much of which was possibly used in her election bid. Furthermore, the Russians consequently gave her husband Bill \$500,000 for a speech in Moscow with a Kremlin-connected bank (Becker and McIntire, 2015). The Podesta emails show that the Clinton campaign considered this Hillary’s “top vulnerability” in the upcoming election after polling showed more than half of all voters said they were less likely to vote for her after hearing that information.

The fifth, anti-Russian filter has returned swiftly to become a powerful influence on media and society and a useful disciplining mechanism for individuals and organizations that stray too far from neoliberal orthodoxy. The media’s overwhelming preponderance in covering Russia’s interference in the United States and other elections has had a negative effect for the public, as it takes away time from serious critique of Trump’s highly deleterious policies on health, education, foreign policy and the environment. But it has an enormous utility for the establishment.

It has made the public increasingly critical of alternative opinions and news sources and more trusting of official sources and the mainstream media and allowed huge media companies to

attempt to reassert their hegemony over public discourse. The ability to smear political figures as Putin puppets is a powerful weapon in limiting debate and increasing discord among the left and allows the establishment to insinuate that any movement challenging it from the right or left, even those such as BLM and the Sanders movement, is doing the work of Putin. It matters little that these accusations are often backed up by very little; it mattered little during the McCarthyist era too. This weapon has proved too good to be restricted to the United States and has been deployed across Europe as well.

It also constitutes an attempt to divert focus away from both the Democrats' and America's structural problems that allowed for a Trump victory and blame their woes on a foreign adversary instead. Thus, the Democrats did not lose because of Clinton's failings as a candidate, her unpopularity, the mistakes in her campaign, gerrymandering, their own corruption, the electoral college system or their shift to the right, thereby abandoning the American working class, but due to evil foreign influences that hoodwinked the electorate. It allows them to present an image of a united America and ignore the deep fissures in the American economy and society, ignoring or deriding those movements that rise up as a consequence of the policies they enacted. It provides an excuse as to why they lost to the most unpopular major presidential candidate in history and a reason not to cede control of the party to Sanders and to postpone any critical evaluation of their failures.

Herman (2017) described the Russia narrative as amusing "fake news" while Chomsky (2017) declared it a joke: "half the world is cracking up." However, the return of the fifth, anti-Russia filter has dramatically increased tensions between the two states most equipped to destroy the world. The fate of the planet is no laughing matter.

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5

DEFLECTIVE SOURCE PROPAGANDA

A Syrian case study

Oliver Boyd-Barrett

From deflection to deflective source propaganda

Deflection propaganda focuses the attention of the receiver on (1) a certain aspect or action of a person or situation with the intention that this will distract the audience from (2) something else that, had it been included, it is surmised, would have reduced or transformed the audience reaction to number one. It is a common ploy in war coverage. For example, the Syrian Arab Army of the government of Syria under President Assad and in alliance with Russia and Iran helped retake East Aleppo in November to December 2016 from the al-Qaeda/al-Nusra front. The enemies of the Damascus regime (the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, UAE and numerous non-ISIS jihadist groups, including the al-Qaeda/al-Nusra front, whom the regime's enemies supported with arms and money, directly or indirectly, and ISIS itself), together with the mainstream media of these same countries, marched in lockstep in focusing not on the jubilation of the liberated population or the 500,000+ Syrian citizens who were shortly to return to their homes in that city, but on the resulting "collateral damage" allegedly suffered by citizens (although "terrorists" often have no distinguishing uniform). Between 600 and 900 citizens were said to have been killed (figures that depended considerably on anti-regime sources such as the White Helmets). Western and media sensitivities to collateral damage were far less inflamed when in July 2017 an American-led operation liberated Mosul from ISIS in Iraq. The Red Cross estimated that between 900 and 1,200 civilians were killed by US-led coalition and artillery strikes during the eight-month operation, and 80 per cent of West Mosul was destroyed.

These liberations were comparable. But the liberators of Aleppo were deemed "bad" by the Western powers that had long sought to unseat Bashar al-Assad from power, and the liberators of Mosul were deemed "good" because they were "our" people, a classic example of Herman and Chomsky's (2002) theory of worthy victims at play. Collateral damage in the first was forefronted and condemned, but downplayed and justified in the second. The attention of mainstream media audiences in the West could be directed towards noble Western intervention in Mosul by conveniently forgetting the equivalent achievement at comparable cost of the West's enemies in Aleppo. This is an example of deflection propaganda. *Independent* journalist Patrick Cockburn (2017) noted:

There are many similarities between the sieges of Mosul and East Aleppo, but they were reported very differently. When civilians are killed or their houses destroyed during the US-led bombardment of Mosul, it is Islamic State that is said to be

responsible for their deaths: they were being deployed as human shields. When Russia or Syria targets buildings in East Aleppo, Russia or Syria is blamed: the rebels have nothing to do with it. Heartrending images from East Aleppo showing dead, wounded and shell-shocked children were broadcast around the world. But when, on January 12th, a video was posted online showing people searching for bodies in the ruins of a building in Mosul that appeared to have been destroyed by a US-led coalition airstrike, no Western television station carried the pictures. “We have got out fourteen bodies so far,” a haggard-looking man facing the camera says, “and there are still nine under the rubble.”

But in this chapter I want to focus on a particular form of deflection propaganda: deflective source. This strategy falls within the third filter of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model: journalistic dependence on “legitimate” sources. The third filter notes that journalists are encouraged to seek out official and credible sources and to report what they say uncritically. This gives those deemed legitimate considerable power and influence.

Source deflection concerns the manipulation of source credibility, with a view to making the source of a given piece of information (and therefore the information itself) appear more credible than it is. In other words it is made to look like a legitimate or highly credible source when, if all the relevant information was available, it would be regarded by most reasonable people with scepticism. Dubious information can be made to seem as though it has high credibility if it is picked up, used or re-used in an intermediary source that enjoys high-perceived credibility. A great deal of routine political and administration information, whose actual sources may be highly partisan and deceptive, can enjoy higher perceived credibility when included in the coverage of mainstream news media. The strategy is amongst the oldest and most common of those routinely deployed by the intelligence community (the notion of deflective source propaganda is discussed in Jowett and O’Donnell, 2015).

Classic examples of deflective source propaganda

Deflective source propaganda is illustrated in the work of British spy William Stephenson who was assigned by Winston Churchill to manipulate the United States into the Second World War. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor up to 80 per cent of Americans in 1940 opposed joining the war. After Dunkirk, Churchill sent the multi-millionaire Stephenson to the United States on a false diplomatic passport. Stephenson had close links to movie and news interests. He opened an MI6 centre in Rockefeller Centre, one arm of which was the British Information Service (BIS). BIS engaged in soft propaganda for entertainment media, including its own New Jersey radio station. One of his operatives, David Ogilvy, was assistant director to George Gallup; his function was to skew survey questions so as to encourage the belief that US support for war was growing faster than it really was. BIS subsidized the Overseas News Agency, a branch of the Jewish Telegraph Agency, which it used to feed manufactured stories, often couched within factual material about German atrocities, to the BIS-owned New Jersey radio station. Newspapers then picked up the news. One such story stated that the British had invented a new super-explosive for filling depth charges. It was printed on the front pages of many leading US newspapers, known to be regularly monitored by the Germans. Stephenson tried to influence US politics by having *agents provocateurs* incite riots at meetings of isolationist organizations, and providing funds to pro-interventionist organizations and candidates for political office. From Canada, he purportedly ran a network of 3,000 agents, counter-intelligence operatives, forgers, burglars, code breakers and killers. Among many other things, Stephenson and his team forged a map purporting to expose Nazi plans to occupy and reorganize South America into five vassal states. The map went to Hoover and Roosevelt, who used it as proof

that Hitler planned to conquer the Americas (Simkin, 2014).

Thus, Stephenson engaged in deflection source propaganda in four major ways:

1. The creation and dissemination of information that would encourage the United States to enter the Second World War against Germany, without disclosing that the source of this information or its dissemination or both was a party (the UK) that had a direct interest in the anticipated outcome.
2. The exploitation, and, if necessary, the corruption of media that were otherwise held in good esteem by the public to disseminate information that was false or dubious but would pass as credible because of the media in which they appeared.
3. The creation of media that looked as though they were legitimate information purveyors but whose purpose was propaganda, and exploitation of the public perception that these media were legitimate by using them as conduits for false, dubious or partisan information.
4. The staging of events that would not otherwise have occurred as though they were naturally occurring, with the expectation that the events in themselves and media reporting of the events would create an impression in the mind of the public favourable to calls that the United States should engage in war.

The notion of deflection source overlaps significantly with the idea of fake news, where “patently false information is intentionally presented in a phony but utterly believable ‘news media’ format in order to sway public opinion” (Macaray, 2018). The “news format” is the legitimating device that deflects audience attention away from the credibility of the actual information on its own terms, or of its actual point of origin, to the perceived legitimacy of the means by the information is now disseminated. Macaray cites the 1934 California gubernatorial election contest between Republican incumbent Frank Merriam and Democratic (many would say socialist) challenger Upton Sinclair. A lesser candidate was Louis B. Mayer, an immigrant from Ukraine, whose successful management of MGM had raised the studio to Hollywood dominance, establishing Mayer as one of America’s richest men. To attack Sinclair’s popular campaign for “Ending Poverty in California,” Mayer hired moviemakers Whitaker and Baker to produce a series of faux newsreels, designed to resemble authentic newsreels and shown in California movie theatres, with which to frighten potential Sinclair voters. One newsreel showed hordes of vagrants merging from boxcars being interviewed by a faux journalist. Another showed a phony Russian declaring that he would be supporting Sinclair because Sinclair’s system worked so well in Russia (Macaray, 2018).

In his celebrated television history of the work of the father of public relations, Edward Bernays, Adam Curtis (2002) identified a propaganda template that has been applied many times since in regime-change operations. Bernays advised the United Fruit Company and worked in tandem with President Eisenhower and the CIA under Allen Dulles to safeguard the interests of United Fruit in Guatemala, where a new, duly elected progressive administration under Jacobo Arbenz sought to undercut the stranglehold of United Fruit over the country’s banana-based economy. He proposed nationalizing unused land in the ownership of United Fruit, compensating United Fruit with the cash value that it declared for tax purposes.

Bernays’ strategy was to transform the positive image of Arbenz from that of a popular reformer to one of Soviet collaborator and threat to the security of the United States. He was not – although, not unreasonably, Arbenz did include a member of the Communist Party in his

cabinet. Bernays arranged visits to Guatemala City for selected American journalists with little or no existing knowledge of the country. During this time the journalists were wined and dined, exposed principally to critics of the regime, and were witness to anti-government demonstrations organized for their benefit by United Fruit. He established a Central American News Agency whose function was to drum up anti-Arbenz stories, particularly stories that tied Arbenz to the USSR, and to ensure that these were disseminated to US and other Western newspapers, which, either by their own volition or responding to nudges from within the Washington administration, reprinted or rewrote them. This relatively “soft” propaganda campaign was backed by hard force whose purpose was terror and coercion. The CIA mobilized discontents within the Guatemalan army (or bribed them into discontent) and assembled an oppositional force from within neighbouring countries, while CIA planes supplied air cover and dropped bombs on Guatemala City. In face of the inevitability of a *coup d’état*, Arbenz resigned (see also Ewen, 1996).

Thus, Bernays used the deflection strategy by distracting the attention of the world’s media audiences from the fact, first of all, that the primary beneficiary of US intervention in Guatemala was United Fruit and, second, that United Fruit, which had hired Bernays and spoken to the White House, was the real initiative for all the events that followed. US intervention, mostly disguised behind the trappings of an apparent but faked spontaneous popular resistance to Arbenz, was presented in US media as the outcome of an appropriate response to a collaboration (which did not exist) between the Arbenz administration and the Soviet Union, one which constituted a direct threat to the security of the United States and its people (which it was not, even remotely).

Source deflection propaganda in Syria

Deflection source propaganda has been a persistent feature of the “war on terror” that was supposedly initiated by the events of 9/11 but was in reality preceded by a much longer history relating to the use and manipulation of radical Islamist movements by Western powers for the benefit of their short-term foreign policy objectives – even when these manoeuvres were not beneficial in the long term (Curtis, 2012; Davidson, 2016). In the remainder of this chapter I shall illustrate some of the principal forms of such propaganda in the specific case of the supposed “civil war” that erupted in Syria in 2011 (perhaps more realistically perceived as a foreign invasion, supported by foreign powers, traceable at least as far back as the formation of the Ba’athist regime in Syria in 1947).

Activists

Writing as early as February 2012, William Bowles called attention to the constant references in Syria coverage by Western mainstream media (still bemused by events they had already chosen to label, with incredible short-sighted optimism, as the “Arab Spring”) to “activists” and to what “activists say.” But who were these activists and how did Western mainstream media verify their accounts, if at all? Were activists the same as “armed insurrectionists”? Was armed insurrection a legitimate response to state violence? Or was armed insurrection actually the cause of state violence? And if the armed insurrectionists were supported, funded and armed by outside forces (they were), why was this not an illegal interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state? Yet the BBC’s reporting over several months was exclusively as seen from the side of the armed

insurrectionists (Bowles, 2012).

Foreign Correspondents

The Syrian conflict is notable among many for the poor representation of Western journalists with their feet actually on Syrian soil. To operate independently in those parts of Syria that had been under the control of ISIS, non-ISIS but jihadist groups or armed insurrectionists was exceptionally perilous. Writing in 2016, Cockburn noted that foreign journalists covering developments in East Aleppo and rebel-held areas of Syria overwhelmingly did so from Lebanon or Turkey. They were right not to trust their lives even to the most moderate of the armed opposition inside Syria but wrong to depend for their information on sources that could only operate in East Aleppo under license from the al-Qaeda-type group, or sources located anywhere else where these organizations held sway (Cockburn, 2016). The problem extended to classic news agencies. One study found that in the almost complete absence of independent journalists, *Reuters*, *Associated Press* and *Agence France-Presse* were sourcing citizen videos from YouTube channels and passing it on to their clients (Murrell, 2017). Many major news organizations were actively discouraging the use of freelance journalists (not least because of the perils this involved) in favour of local sources. However, there was no structure in place to supervise this. In Syria, no major news organization had an office in Damascus with international staff to give locally hired news gatherers daily support. Even among major clients of the news agencies, some such reports attracted charges of bias and fakery (Pendry, 2015).

This was a principal reason why so many Western mainstream media were content to accept information from organizations that were tolerated by, if not affiliated to the jihadist groups, and whose credibility was therefore highly suspect. This was a pernicious problem. One veteran correspondent noted:

Very few corporate journalists have been on the ground in Syria. (Paradoxically, those who have are effectively embedded in areas dominated by al Qaeda-type groups, which Western governments are supporting directly and through Gulf intermediaries). Most of these journalists are relying on information provided by Western governments, or from groups with strong, vested interests in Assad's overthrow.

(Cook, 2018)

A civil war pretold

A shortage of Western journalists notwithstanding, mainstream media were eager to tell the story of the supposed start of the Syrian civil war in March 2011. The uniform narrative of *Al Jazeera*, CNN, BBC and *France24* was about teenage graffiti artists, the parents who protested when their teenagers were arrested, an over-repressive police quelling that in turn provoked an uprising. Writing for the *American Herald Tribune*, Sahiounie provided backstage details to this "Arab Spring" fairy-tale. Asking the question why a civil war would break out in such a small, unknown place close to the border with Jordan (and therefore conveniently situated for receipt of arms from Jordan flowing into Syria through Deraa) his account had a much wider cast of players: the earlier arrival of CIA-directed Libyan jihadists, a radical cleric Sheikh Sayasneh in alliance with local members of the Muslim Brotherhood (that had for long been committed to the overthrow of the nationalist, non-sectarian Ba'athist regime) and the Libyans' stockpiling of arms at the Omari mosque (Sahiounie, 2016).

Non-local disseminators of local news: SOAR

Multiple sources claim that the armed insurrectionists in Syria have always been violent sectarian groups. These include the Muslim Brotherhood, which both has a long history in Syria and a long history of working in aid of Western regime-change plotters – who have generally preferred malleable religious fanatics to nationalists or communists (Curtis, 2012). Mainstream Western media tend rarely to cite such groups directly but use proxy sources. Since 2011 these have included information sources such as the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOAR), so-called “rescue units” such as the White Helmets that work solely in areas controlled by the insurrectionists, and “non-government organizations” (in fact many of these are funded primarily by governments to achieve state purposes) including human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

SOAR started out as a one-man (Rami Abdulrahman) operation based in Coventry, UK. Though claiming to be independent, it received funding from the European Union and the Foreign Office in addition to the founder’s two clothes shops. It was openly in favour of regime change in Syria. Its *modus operandum* was the coordination of information from contacts on the ground in jihadist-controlled areas. Notwithstanding these curious particulars, Western mainstream media from 2011 very frequently cited it, as though it was a highly credible, professional news source. Opposition-linked sources like SOAR exercised the influence that they did because independent, professional news sources were so absent. As Cockburn noted,

“The real reason that reporting of the Syrian conflict has been so inadequate is that Western news organisations have almost entirely outsourced their coverage to the rebel side” (Cockburn, cited by MediaLens, 2018).

Television pundits

Even some pro-opposition information sources like the Aleppo Media Centre, based in Turkey, were located outside of Syria. Deflective-source propaganda is increasingly necessary in contexts of modern propaganda where the aim is to have the same narrative repeated by as many sources as possible. The narrative really only has one source: whatever establishment alliance *du jour* is beating the drums for war. But for propaganda purposes it is necessary to make it look as though that narrative is shared by everyone, the mainstream media included. As Johnstone (2018) said:

The mass media has given a few elites the ability to effectively turn a false story that they themselves invented into an established fact so broadly accepted that anyone who doubts it can be painted in the exact same light as someone who doubts the roundness of the Earth. The illusion of unanimous agreement is so complete that blatant establishment psyops are placed on the same level as settled scientific fact, even though it’s made of little else but highly paid pundits making authoritative assertions in confident tones of voice day after day.

Of such pundits, the non-profit research organization Public Accountability Initiative declared in 2013 that across a vast majority of their media appearances, financial interests were not disclosed to audiences.

Twenty-two commentators presented as experts during the so-called corporate media debate about military attacks on Syria have ties to “large defence and intelligence contractors like Raytheon, smaller defence and intelligence contractors like TASC, defence-focused investment firms like SCP Partners, and commercial diplomacy firms like the Cohen Group,” the report finds. Of 111 appearances in major media outlets, the ties of these 22 commentators were disclosed a total of 13 times. A majority of these commentators voiced support for a US-led attack on Syria.

(Public Accountability Initiative, 2013)

Too often, therefore, the deeply partisan positions of mainstream media Syria pundits were not disclosed. Yet their views were given far too much weight in policy circles and academe. Allday (2016) observed that:

A number of unscrupulous pundits have managed to position themselves as experts on Syria and the broader region. It has been enormously dispiriting to see many people—in both academia and the media—treat the output of these partisan, often deeply compromised individuals as if it were objective analysis.

Among those that he identified were Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute (formerly of the Brookings Institution in Doha), whom he described as vocally pro-intervention and in denial of the actual extent of Western intervention. Shadi Hamid, a former Brookings Institution colleague of Lister's was described by Lister as "one of the most egregious and blatant propagandists for US empire currently active" (Allday, 2016). Others were Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, who had explicitly called for the United States to dismember and then occupy Syria; and Emile Hokayem of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, who, in October 2016, even argued that defeating ISIS would be a negative development for the region.

Human rights organizations

Several human rights organizations (that often pass as non-government organizations) like Amnesty International have news services that, while drawing on the relatively substantial networks of their members and employees, are not the equivalent of professional journalists or general news agencies. Hayward (2017) recounted consistent hostility towards the Syrian government in a number of Amnesty reports. A fairly early report from June 2012 charged the government with war crimes. Yet Amnesty's research standards were less than compelling, possibly for the same reasons, I would suggest, that explain Western mainstream news media weaknesses in covering Syria: too few people actually on the ground, egregious overdependence on sources affiliated to jihadist groups, and the presumption of so many Western journalists and Western "non-government" organization employees that the West's point of view is the best. Was the research systematic? Hayward was profoundly sceptical for the reasons given. Was the evidence gathered from primary sources? Hayward could not see how the report demonstrated definite knowledge of the extent of any attack mentioned, exactly who perpetrated it, or how the government organized the implementation of state policy. Was the evidence collected by Amnesty's staff on the ground? No. The report was frank: "Amnesty International has not been able to conduct first-hand research on the ground in Syria during 2011."

Was every aspect of data collection verified by corroboration? Not really. The report noted:

In very few cases has Amnesty International been able to obtain information indicating where a person was being detained at the time of their death. Consequently, this report uses qualified terms such as "reported arrests" and "reported deaths in custody", where appropriate, in order to reflect this lack of clarity regarding some of the details of the cases reported.

Hayward found nothing in the report that amounted to corroboration of the evidence despite Amnesty's assertion that

The crimes behind the high number of reported deaths in custody of suspected opponents of the regime identified in this report, taken in the context of other crimes and human rights violations committed against civilians elsewhere in Syria, amount to crimes against humanity. They appear to be part of a widespread, as well as systematic, attack against the civilian population, carried out in an organized manner and pursuant to a state policy to commit such an attack.

(Cited in Hayward, 2017)

Nor could Hayward find evidence of corroboration of claims of more widespread abuses or of the claim that the government had a policy to commit what amounted to crimes against humanity. Was the evidence relied on by Amnesty cross-checked with all parties concerned? Hayward argued that given that the government was charged, the government should have been a centrally concerned party. Yet the report made it clear that the government had not consented to deal with Amnesty International. Nor was the government obliged to have dealings with Amnesty; it might well have had good reasons not to, short of guilt. Non-collaboration is not tantamount to guilt.

On the basis of evidence from people who worked within the prison authorities at Saydnaya and witness testimony from detainees, an Amnesty International report in 2016 estimated that between 5,000 and 13,000 people were extra-judicially executed at Saydnaya between September 2011 and December 2015. The critical blog Moon of Alabama (2017b) was sceptical. Most of the witnesses were identified as opposition figures and “former” officials who did not live in Syria. The witnesses all seemed to have an interest in condemning the Syrian government. There was no divergent view. Amnesty had found the persons it questioned by contacting international NGOs like itself and known foreign-financed opposition (propaganda) groups, including Urnammu for Justice and Human Rights, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and the Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability. Amnesty’s numbers represented a very wide range, based solely on hearsay and guesstimates of two witnesses. And only two witnesses described actual executions. Of the victims, Amnesty could provide names for only 95 of them, and it was not certain that even these had been extra-judicially executed. The SNHR had provided a list of over 300 persons who had died or were tortured (but not executed) at Saydnaya. SNHR is a group in the UK “probably connected to British foreign intelligence and with dubious monetary sources.” The report claimed that death sentences were approved by the Grand Mufti of Syria, but no evidence was provided of any such approval. The Grand Mufti has no such role in a secular polity (Moon of Alabama, 2017b).

Amnesty International admitted that the summation of the report was fabricated in the United Kingdom at Amnesty International’s office, using a process of “forensic architecture,” in which “the lack of actual, physical, photographic, and video evidence, is replaced by 3D animations and sound effects created by designers hired by Amnesty International” (Cartalucci, 2017). “Memory” was the basis for Amnesty’s 48-page report:

Amnesty International’s report lacked any actual evidence, with its presentation consisting instead of admittedly fabricated images, sounds, maps, and diagrams. Amnesty – lacking actual evidence – instead abused its reputation and the techniques of classical deception to target and manipulate audiences emotionally. What Amnesty International is engaged in is not “human rights advocacy,” but rather politically-motivated war propaganda simply hiding behind such advocacy.

(Cartalucci, 2017)

A similar misrepresentation occurred with the “Caesar’s Torture photos” scandal whose disclosure was attributed in part to Human Rights Watch (HRW). On January 20th, 2014, two days before negotiations about the Syrian conflict were scheduled to begin in Switzerland (and which soon collapsed), a widely disseminated story from CNN, the *Guardian* and *Le Monde* alleged that a former Syrian army photographer (code-name Caesar) had 55,000 photographs documenting the torture and killing of 11,000 detainees by the Syrian security establishment. The story was supposedly authenticated by the Carter Ruck law firm, on contract to Qatar. In

December 2015 HRW released a report titled “If the dead could speak” with significant focus on the Caesar accusations.

The report was dissected by an independent researcher, Rick Sterling (2016). He detected 12 significant problems:

1. Almost half the photos showed the opposite of the allegations: that is, over 46 per cent of the photographs (24,568) did not show people “tortured to death” by the Syrian government, but dead Syrian soldiers and victims of car bombs and other violence.
2. The claim that other photos only showed “tortured detainees” was exaggerated or false. The photos and the deceased were real, but how they died and the circumstances were unclear: some likely died in conflict, others in hospital, others still were likely decomposing before they were picked up.
3. The true identity of “Caesar” was probably not as claimed. “Caesar” kept his identity secret from the Western audience and refused to meet journalists or researchers.
4. The report was biased and rushed. The investigation was financed by the government of Qatar, a major supporter of the armed opposition. The contracted law firm, Carter Ruck and Co, had previously represented Turkey’s President Erdogan, an opponent of the Syrian government. The American on the legal inquiry team, Professor David M. Crane, had a long history of working for the US Defence Department and Defence Intelligence Agency. He had campaigned for a Syrian War Crimes Tribunal and testified before Congress in October 2013, three months before the Caesar revelations. By their own admission, the inquiry team was under “time constraints.” The inquiry team did not even survey most of the photographs.
5. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) appears to have been involved. In an interview on *France24*, David Crane of the inquiry team described how “Caesar” was brought to meet them by “his handler, his case officer.” The expression “case officer” usually refers to the CIA, which has a long history of disinformation campaigns.
6. The accusers portrayed simple administrative procedures as mysterious and sinister. The Carter Ruck Report speculated that the military hospital photographed the dead to prove that the “orders to kill” had been followed. The “orders to kill” were assumed. A more logical explanation was that dead bodies were photographed as part of normal hospital or morgue procedure to maintain a file of the deceased who were received or treated at the hospital.
7. The photos had been manipulated: in many cases the information card and tape identity were covered over and sections of documents obscured.
8. The photo catalogue had duplicates and other errors. For example, some deceased persons were shown twice with different case numbers and dates.
9. With few exceptions, Western media uncritically accepted and promoted the story. But Dan Murphy in the *Christian Science Monitor* worried that “the report itself is nowhere near as credible as it makes out and should be viewed for what it is: A well-timed propaganda exercise funded by Qatar, a regime opponent who has funded rebels fighting Assad who have committed war crimes of their own” (Murphy, 2014).
10. Politicians used the Caesar story to push for more US/NATO aggression.
11. The HRW assessment was biased. It did not acknowledge the war conditions and circumstances of the attack and focused only on the deaths of opposition fighters. After the chemical attacks in greater Damascus on August 21, 2013, HRW rushed a report concluding

that the source of rockets must have been Syrian government territory. This was subsequently challenged by many credible, scientific, journalistic and witness sources (Boyd-Barrett, 2015).

12. The legal accusations were biased and ignored the supreme crime of aggression (Sterling, 2016).

Government-funded “non-government” organizations

Atlantic Council

Prominent among anti-Damascus sources was the Atlantic Council, a Washington, DC-based think tank whose funders include the US State Department, oil and weapons corporations, banks, NATO, the defence industries of various countries and the US Air Force, Army, Marine Corps and Navy. One of its components is Bellingcat.com. In its propaganda war against the Syrian government and its liberation, with Russian and Iranian help, of Aleppo in 2016, the Atlantic Council presented an award to a six-year-old, Bana al-Abed, whose tweets seemed to claim that Syria and Russia were creating hell for ordinary civilians. No mention was made of the allegations (see Bartlett, 2018a) that Bana’s father was a member of a terrorist organization, the Safwa Brigade, or that her home was in close proximity to numerous headquarters of terrorist organizations. The Atlantic Council was in no hurry to exploit the similarly young victims of terrorism who tweeted in jubilation when liberated by the Syrian Arab Army in Dhouma in 2018 and who disclaimed any knowledge of Western allegations of a chemical attack (Bartlett, 2018a). For more on the Atlantic Council, see [Chapter 4](#).

Avaaz and Purpose

Among this legion of complicit NGOs was Avaaz, which in 2012 campaigned unsuccessfully for a no-fly zone across Syria (a gambit intended to deny the Damascus government its right to air defence, and give NATO planes impunity to attack whatever targets it wished). In Libya, Avaaz was more successful; a no-fly zone was imposed in March 2011, on the false pretext that Libyan leader Gadhafi was about to inflict a massacre on his opponents in Benghazi. NATO bombs proceeded to unleash more death and destruction than the total that had so far been experienced in that conflict. Avaaz joined pro-NATO voices in asserting (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the Syrian Army had used chemical weapons in East Ghouta in 2013, and claimed on the basis of dubious evidence that there was a “rape crisis” in Syria for which the Syrian Army was responsible.

Avaaz was part of a network of what can be considered government-linked propaganda front organizations. It was founded by Res Publica/MoveOn.org, Executive Director Ricken Patel, Tom Perriello, Tom Pravda, Eli Pariser (MoveOn Executive Director), Andrea Woodhouse (consultant to the World Bank) Jeremy Heimans (co-founder of GetUp and Purpose) and Australian entrepreneur David Madden (co-founder of GetUp and Purpose). Avaaz co-founder Tom Perriello later became president and CEO of the Centre for American Progress. Perriello has been described by one of his critics as “pro-war, pro-Israel” (Mansfield, 2017). The team has close links to Harvard and to McKinsey and Company.

Other co-founders, Jeremy Heimans and James Slezak, were also involved in establishing Purpose, a for-profit behavioural change consultancy dedicated to the founding of “social movements” – often armed insurrectionists fighting on behalf of the Washington Consensus against nationalist and socialist “hold-outs” against neoliberalism:

Firms and agencies such as Purpose write and develop the scripts and design the sets. They bring the stories to life, strategically exploit and manipulate our emotions, ultimately ensuring we come to accept and partake in their politically acceptable means of discourse – discourse sanctioned (and financed) by the empire.

(Morningstar, 2014)

There were links between Purpose agents and the Clinton Global Foundation. Purpose Inc. sold its consulting services and branding/marketing campaigns to Google, Audi, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Additionally, Purpose had a role in creating at least four anti-Assad NGOs or campaigns: the White Helmets, Free Syrian Voices, the Syria Campaign and March campaign #withSyria. March campaign #withSyria website partners included Open Society Foundation, Amnesty International, Christian Aid, Care, Friends of the Earth and Oxfam. Free Syrian Voices partners included Amnesty International, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, FIDH, Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders.

White Helmets

The White Helmets have been described as “al-Qaeda propaganda sidekicks,” and as a “British disinformation operation that is financed by more than \$100 million of US and UK taxpayer money,” performing as a fake “rescuer” group which makes and distributes staged videos and photos and fake victims of the war on Syria (Moon of Alabama, 2017a).

Prior to the liberation of Aleppo in 2016, there was a reported attack on a truck convoy in a rebel-held area of Urum al-Kubra close to Aleppo. The principal source used by Western mainstream media – sometimes through Bellingcat.com (itself affiliated to the pro-NATO propaganda agency Atlantic Council) which would post “evidence” on its website – was the leader of the White Helmets in Aleppo at that time, Amman al-Selmo. Investigative journalist Gareth Porter (2017) undertook a detailed analysis of this episode, and of the statements and evidence of White Helmet sources. He chronicled how Selmo and/or his deputy (1) provided very different accounts of the same events to different journalists, including information as to their location and of what they were doing during the supposed dropping by what they claimed were variously (2) Syrian or Russian airstrikes of (3) “barrel bombs” (an opposition propaganda construct intended to give the impression that a conventional and long-established weapon was in fact something even more extraordinarily hideous than other weapons of war), (4) the number of such airstrikes being identified as between 20–25 over several hours even though the White Helmets were unable to supply video footage of a single one of these, yet claiming that (5) they could monitor conversations between pilots and controllers as to which targets should be bombed, a claim that was judged inconceivable by an expert source, and (6) showing images of bomb and missile impacts and craters that were far too small to have been possibly made by the alleged barrel bombs or missiles in question, (7) identifying geographical origins of missile strikes that were, in fact, much too distant to have been the sources of the particular missiles cited while (8) failing to disclose that the rebels themselves were well supplied with missiles of

similar calibre. Despite the egregiously unsatisfactory statements made by Selmo and White Helmet collaborators, Porter noted, Western mainstream media continually returned to Selmo as though he was a credible source through the subsequent liberation of Aleppo (Porter, 2017).

Testimony from Syrian civilians released after a five-year occupation by al-Nusra Front factions in East Aleppo, called the White Helmets nothing more than “Nusra Front’s civil defence” (Beeley, 2017b). The Syrian Arab Red Crescent told Vanessa Beeley that they had never seen the White Helmets conducting humanitarian work in East Aleppo, either during or after occupation by the extremist groups (Moon of Alabama, 2017a). In Dhouma, they were exposed for housing themselves in the same building as al-Nusra/Qaeda terrorists, carrying weapons, using dangerous and erratic rescue and emergency techniques, proclaiming support for terrorists and expressing the desire to see Syrian military personnel killed. A video made by the leader of Tahrir al-Sham (al-Qaeda in Syria), Abu Jaber, on March 16th, 2017, showed Jaber praising the White Helmets as the “hidden soldiers of the revolution” and thanking them for what they do (Turbeville, 2017).

Many sources testified to White Helmet involvement, among other groups, in the staging of fake videos used in support of false flag incidents. One such source was independent Canadian journalist, Eva Bartlett (2018b). Former journalist Robert Stuart dissected a BBC *Panorama* documentary as passing off for real a clearly staged terrorist false flag attack against a hospital. The story’s main protagonists included two health workers with strong affiliations (unrevealed by the BBC to its audience) to terrorist groups (Stuart, 2018). Instances of White Helmet involvement in terrorism cited by Beeley (with video and photographic evidence) clearly showed them participating in Nusra Front operations, including Sharia court sentencing and executions, the staging of a false flag chemical weapons incident in Khan Sheikhoun in 2017 (which provoked, on the basis of no evidence, a US retaliatory strike on Syria’s Sharyat Air Base) and support for the Nusra Front during the Rashideen massacre on April 15th, 2017:

Evacuees from besieged Kafarya and Foua were imprisoned in their buses for two days, with minimal food or water. On the third day, the children were lured from the buses by Nusra Front and White Helmets distributing potato chips. As the children surged towards the food, a blue truck drove into the crowds of children and a bomb inside the truck was detonated, killing and injuring over 300.

(Beeley, 2017a)

The White Helmets are sometimes erroneously referred to as the “Syria Civil Defence.” The real Syria Civil Defence was founded in 1953, has 4,000 workers, and is affiliated with the UN, WHO, OCHA, the Red Cross and Red Crescent. For safety reasons it has worked only in government-controlled areas since 2016 (serving 80 per cent of the Syrian population). In rebel areas, much of their equipment was seized by insurrectionists for use by the White Helmets. The White Helmets claim to have saved 90,000 lives but there is no documentation to support this claim. Beeley (2017b) cites many civilian witnesses who were subjected for long periods to terrorist control in places like East Aleppo and who testified that the White Helmets provided no assistance to civilians, and had worked closely with Nusra Front and similar terrorist organizations. She claimed many documented and archived images showing White Helmet operatives carrying arms or posing with arms alongside armed militia groups in Syria, including Nusra Front.

The White Helmets were established in Turkey and Jordan in 2013 by former British soldier and private security expert James Le Mesurier, while he was employed by ARK Group DMCC.

Both Le Mesurier and ARK Group CEO Alistair Harris, have OBEs – in Le Mesurier’s case, honouring his “services to Syria Civil Defense and the protection of civilians in Syria.” Beeley noted that the White Helmets were embedded exclusively in areas occupied by known terrorist organizations, including Nusra Front and ISIS (Daesh), along with so-called “moderate rebels” such as Ahrar al Sham and Nour Al Din Zinki. “All these groups and subgroups,” she wrote, “are responsible for carrying out ethnic cleansing pogroms and documented atrocities against the Syrian people” (Beeley, 2017a).

The White Helmets have constituted a multimillion-dollar marketing and social media campaign conducted through a network funded by various US, UK and Middle Eastern enterprises, and made up of Avaaz, Purpose, Syria Campaign and the White Helmets (Beeley, 2018a). Another player in the campaign was the Voices Project in the UK, established by Jeremy Heimans (who was also involved, as just noted, in setting up Avaaz and Purpose). Syria Campaign was given seed funding by Petrofac CEO Ayman Asfari who had strong links to the British government and Conservative Party. The White Helmets have been estimated to make four to five publicity videos daily. These routinely betray anomalies that raise doubts as to the appropriateness of their equipment and methods for the situations in which they are filmed.

ARK Group, a conduit for UK government funding to the White Helmets, received this funding from the predecessor of the Conflict and Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), namely, the Syria Conflict Pool. Both CSSF and its predecessor were part of the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office. CSSF was established in 2015. From 2016 it also funded Mayday Rescue as a Netherlands-based “non-governmental” organization – nevertheless funded by governments (UK, Germany, Netherlands and Denmark) seeking regime change in Syria. The CSSF was directly controlled by the UK National Security Council, chaired by the prime minister. It was guided by the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and incorporated UK National Security Objectives. Specifically, the White Helmets’ funding from the CSSF fell under National Security Objective “2d: Tackling conflict and building stability overseas.” This was a constituent part of the broader “National Security Objective 2: Project our Global Influence” (Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, 2018).

A summary document published online indicated that by 2018 the CSSF funding for the White Helmets was coordinated by the Syria Resilience Programme. The document highlighted the core objective of the programme was to support “the moderate opposition, to provide services for their communities and to contest new space” and to empower “legitimate local governance structures to deliver services giving credibility to the moderate opposition.” The document proceeded to state that the White Helmets (“Syria Civil Defence”) “provide an invaluable reporting and advocacy role,” giving “confidence to statements made by UK and other international leaders made in condemnation of Russian actions.” Although the “Syria Resilience CSSF Programme Summary” was a draft document and not official government policy, it represented the potential dual use of the White Helmets by the UK government: first, as a means of supporting and lending credibility to opposition structures within Syria; second, as an apparently impartial organization that could corroborate UK accusations against the Russian state.

In a context in which both the US and UK governments had been actively supporting attempts to overthrow the Syrian government for many years, this material cast extreme doubt on the status of the White Helmets as an impartial humanitarian organization.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) funding for the White Helmets passed from ARK

Group to Mayday Rescue. At least one conduit of funding to Mayday Rescue from the FCO was another front organization, US-based Independent Diplomat. It was established by a former UK Foreign Office employee, Carne Ross. Independent Diplomat was a registered lobbyist working with “Syrian-led civil society groups” and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. The group organized a promotional speaking tour in 2016 for the leader of the White Helmets, Raed Saleh, linked to the al-Nusra Front, and for the Syria Program manager at Mayday Rescue, Farouq al Habib. The 2018 McCain Institute “Award for Courage and Leadership” was given to Raed Saleh in April 2018 in the company of Syria Campaign’s Kenan Rahmani acting as translator and PR agent. The McCain Institute was funded by an array of Saudi and Zionist benefactors and foundations, many of whom also funded the Clinton Foundation. US Senator John McCain was chairman of the International Republican Institute, one of the various organizations operating under the umbrella of the USAID-funded National Endowment of Democracy, notorious for its support of regime-change operations (Beeley, 2018b).

Another White Helmets leader, Al haj Yussef, was documented by Beeley (2017a) as advocating the unity of extremist factions such as Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham, expressing allegiance and support for Ahrar Al Sham (which was responsible for massacres in the Alawite village of Al Zarea in May 2016), publicly calling for the shelling of civilians in Damascus during the 2014 elections, advocating the practice of executing civilians during Ramadan if they failed to fast, and endorsing the looting of Syrian Arab Army houses after their capture or summary execution.

The White Helmets are estimated to have received \$150 million in funding from the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Netherlands, Denmark, Japan, New Zealand and Canada (Beeley, 2017a). The UK’s FCO admitted in 2018 that it had funded the White Helmets to the tune of approximately \$50 million since its foundation. The networks that support the White Helmets and comparable organizations involve the upper tier of Western elites. The Operations Manager of MayDay Rescue in 2016 was Archie Gilmour, for example, whose father Andrew was the UK’s Assistant Secretary-General of Human Rights and Head of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and whose godfather was his father’s Eton and Oxford friend Boris Johnson, British Foreign Secretary until July 2018 (Beeley, 2018a).

While the UK was its primary supporter, the White Helmets also received \$23 million under the Obama administration via USAID and Chemonics. USAID is controlled by the US National Security Council, the Secretary of State and the president. Swann (2018) reported that MayDay Rescue received \$128.5 million in January 2013 from USAID, of which \$32 million went straight to the White Helmets. In addition, Swann suspected that European Union funding might be hidden behind the “Emergency Health and Relief Support to the Population Affected by the Crisis in Syria” programme run through the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid. Other contributions as of 2017 came from Holland (\$4.5m), Germany (\$4.5m), Denmark (\$3.2m) and Japan. Additionally, the White Helmets had received equipment and supplies from multiple sources: for example, Qatar provided support (as much as \$2.2m in 2013), including arms, via its Fund for Development and the Qatar Red Crescent. The New Zealand Fire Service announced in 2016 it would provide training (Swann, 2018).

When the Syrian Arab Army successfully regained most of its territory from ISIS and the Western-supported jihadist terrorist organizations who had occupied large areas of Southern

Syria in 2018, the governments of the United States, United Kingdom and Canada sought the help of Israel's International Defence Force in evacuating 800 and possibly many more White Helmets to safety – alongside, it was widely suspected, large numbers of Western intelligence operatives – to Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Canada and to rebel-held areas in Northern Syria (van Auken, 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on a specific and well-established form of propaganda, that of the defunctive source, which plays into the third filter of the Herman–Chomsky (2002) propaganda model. This highlights the features of Western mainstream journalism practice that facilitate propaganda, including the very high regard for and dependence on “authoritative sources.” Whereas those who hold senior positions in society's major institutions are typically highly constrained in what they can say in public – so as to defend themselves and the institutions that they run – orthodox journalism operates as though such sources can generally be believed or that, even if they cannot be believed, they deserve maximum opportunities to disseminate their preferred falsehoods at the expense of less powerful but, sometimes, more credible sources. Orthodox journalism practice recognizes that for information to be found credible it must also *appear* to be credible, recklessly presuming that authority lends credibility. Propagandists, with or without the collusion of journalists, play on this by doing their best to pass disinformation through channels that mainstream media deem credible and authoritative. This faux credibility extends to the media themselves. The wealthiest, furthest-reaching media (most of them mere components of vast media and non-media conglomerates that lie at the very heart of the monopoly capitalist economy) are deemed to have higher “authority” and “credibility” than much poorer, alternative media that have only modest reach. Propagandists therefore, supported by powerful public, press and corporate relations companies, place supreme emphasis on achieving the dissemination of misinformation in the former. Particularly in contexts of war the resources of the state come directly into play, through the nurture of deceptive and often-secret front organizations charged with the dissemination of disinformation to mainstream media. Ultimately, a price is paid when the games are exposed and mainstream media reputations as “authoritative” and “credible” conveyors of information are tarnished. But absent revolution or similar major historical disjuncture, this is rarely a permanent or deep result.

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6

EXPANDING THE PROPAGANDA MODEL TO THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

An interview with Matthew Alford

Alan MacLeod and Matthew Alford

In this October 2018 interview, Matthew Alford and Alan MacLeod discuss the propaganda model's applicability to Hollywood, television, the video games industry and sports. It also details modern developments in advertising, sourcing and product placement.

Alan MacLeod (AM): You have spent your professional career studying Hollywood cinema and its relationship to power. How appropriate is the propaganda model to cinema? Can we apply it to Hollywood? And what are your concerns with the model?

Matthew Alford (MA): The propaganda model is useful, in that it gives important insights into how and why the media so slavishly follows the lead of the state–corporate nexus that dominates Western societies. It provides a framework for understanding how concentrated ownership, advertising, a reliance on government sources, flak and ideology essentially mean that the media only ever discusses the state as a benevolent actor, even when it is committing the most horrendous crimes and atrocities.

The model is roughly as appropriate for predicting and explaining the output of the American film industry as it is for the American news media – namely, it predicts the limited bounds of debate very well and provides sensible, but hard to measure, explanations for this constriction in discourse. I am sympathetic to the predictive and explanatory functions of the propaganda model for media performance. It should be on the 101 for every humanities and social sciences undergraduate course in the Western world.

Beyond a sort of elegant thumbnail sketch though, I no longer see much point in applying the model to industries or scenarios at a post-doctoral level. Although it makes for a nice student essay I cannot see how to take the model itself any further as a researcher or discuss it in more original ways. For a start, it's called the "propaganda model," implying the active construction of falsehoods, while the model itself proposes a passive "filtration" system. So which is it? It's not clear. Nor is the relative strength of each filter clear or measurable. Nor are the five factors listed necessarily the most important ones in determining what the media does and why – they're just a checklist of structural factors, really, to which other scholars have added the importance of things like technology and the CIA's direct "buying out" of big chunks of the press and TV (Boyd-Barrett, 2004).

It's true that, through using "paired examples," the model is able to show how some atrocities are represented more seriously than others, which is great, but unsurprising – and harder to apply to entertainment; there just aren't enough clear, comparable examples of films dealing with different issues, as there were with differing news coverage on, say, 1970s Cambodia and Indonesia.

AM: Movies are enormously important in shaping the way in which Americans (and others) see the outside world, and how the outside world sees America too. Big budget, blockbuster movies are concentrated largely in America and I suspect have a stronger influence on shaping how we think about the world than perhaps any other medium, meaning that Hollywood is a tremendous tool of American "soft power" – in other words, propaganda. Even today, foreigners often see the United States as a magical land of opportunity unlike any other. But you have argued Hollywood is also a tool of the US government. In what ways does the government affect the output of Hollywood films?

MA: The US government has supported thousands of films, TV shows and other media, but I still think "propaganda" is a strong, loaded term and I don't use it much. If we go beyond a simple dictionary definition of propaganda, we get into ideas like intentions, the source, the level of manipulation, the level of deception, and so on. Still, the US government – primarily the Department of Defense (DOD) but also the CIA and occasionally others – has undeniably participated in major cinematic propaganda projects, with extensive, conscious manipulation, like *The Green Berets* and *Black Hawk Down*. My co-author Tom Secker and I (2017) call these products "national security cinema."

The political impact of movies is hard to measure with any precision. The data just isn't there. I think we can assert, though, that there is at least some propagandizing impact on the population and that this helps the national security state pursue its narrow, dangerous, amoral interests. To cite a specific example, Erin Kearns and Joseph Young (2014) showed torture scenes from the TV series *24* to 150 students. Some scenes showed torture working (as it often does on the show), and other times, the researchers re-cut the show to remove any indication that torture had produced important information. Remarkably, even among a group of "liberal" college students, participants who saw the footage where torture works were far more likely to say that they supported real-world torture. Participants who just saw torture, without evidence of its impact, hardly deviated from a control group. Furthermore, seeing torture scenes made the students more likely to advocate torture. They were much more likely to sign a petition supporting the use of torture in interrogation than previously, which indicates that the media can go so far as to make people actively pro-torture, not just passively more OK with it.

On a personal level, you might be interested to know that for at least a year when I was eight years old I used to repeat the mantra "I have not got AIDS" to myself every night before I fell asleep. The ostensible cause of this paranoid anxiety was a terrifying 30-second-long public information address about the HIV epidemic, narrated by John Hurt. I think I saw this TV address just twice but it was sufficient to traumatise me for months over a disease that I had no chance whatsoever of having. The media is good at provoking fear, in part because it's an authoritative voice that doesn't readily or innately invite critical engagement.

AM: And have you found any new examples of government interference or collaboration with the media since your previous work, *National Security Cinema*, was published?

MA: I recently visited the DOD Film Collection Georgetown University library in Washington, DC. I don't believe any other researcher has used this collection before or since.

There was a handful of new cases in these files. In 1995, for example, the Pentagon supported an episode of the popular sitcom *Home Improvement*, where Tim and Jill get to drive tanks at a Marine base. Basically, the DOD was trying to ensure that the military didn't come across as being sexist, and that Tim and Jill's arguments over getting to drive the tanks weren't politicised.

It also turned out that the late 1990s TV show *Pensacola* was supported by the DOD. It was always likely that this was the case, since the whole series was set on a military base, but the collaboration was not actually in the public domain. The library archives contain extensive correspondence between the Pentagon and the TV producers – the military clearly saw it as a big hit for them.

More interestingly, to me, though, the files overall were very much incomplete. The library itself was unable to give details on where material had gone and was hazy even on its origin. It is clear to me that an individual or individuals had sifted through the files and removed large chunks of DOD–Hollywood correspondence. Whether this was for political reasons or not, I cannot be sure, but I believe that to be a significant contributing reason.

We have also continued to receive numerous documents through FOIA requests, which show the DOD worked on a stunning range of productions, including *Earnest Saves Christmas*, *Karate Kid 2*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Twister* and *Pitch Perfect 3*.

AM: It seems to me that the level of collaboration between Hollywood and the DOD is increasing. At the most recent Oscars, the DOD tweeted that it was happy to work with Hollywood to promote the military's image. If this happened in the Soviet Union would we not see it as a sign of the state control of the media? Is the level of government involvement increasing?

MA: It is hard to measure and worth bearing in mind that the US military has consistently intervened in Hollywood productions for over a century. As early as 1915, the Home Guard assisted the production of the notoriously racist Ku Klux Klan recruitment movie *Birth of a Nation*.

Something new, though, is that since 2005 the DOD has been much more active on down-market TV shows rather than just focusing on cinematic releases. The DOD only supported a hundred or so TV titles prior to 2005 but around 1,000 since that point. The other thing it has done is to work on the biggest franchises in the world, including more fantastical productions, rather than just the traditional, one-off military-themed movies. For example, it has worked on *Iron Man*, *Transformers*, *Batman*, *Terminator: Salvation*, *James Bond* and *Mission: Impossible*. So I do think that the problem of state involvement in screen entertainment has become more pronounced but let's remember too there's a long history of this relationship.

AM: Not only that but many have noted the extremely close relationships between the CIA and the Hollywood community, with some, such as Ben Affleck, claiming Hollywood is full of literal CIA agents!

MA: Affleck was trying to pass off that comment as a joke but at some level he must have known that it was not far off the mark. We know that numerous Hollywood figures have visited CIA headquarters. Just to cite a few names: Robert De Niro, Tom Cruise, Dean Cain, Dan Ackroyd, Will Smith, Patrick Stewart, Kevin Bacon, Claire Danes, Mike Myers and Bryan Cranston. You cannot get into CIA headquarters without an invitation.

In 2013, the producer of *Pretty Woman*, Arnon Milchan, publicly admitted that he had used his position in Hollywood to steal US nuclear weapons secrets and help Israel build its bomb. He had been recruited by the Israeli government's long-standing senior official, Shimon Peres.

Milchan said other Hollywood bigwigs were involved, including the recently deceased producer Sydney Pollack (*Three Days of the Condor*, *The Interpreter*, *Michael Clayton*). Milchan's status had taken three decades to emerge.

I have looked into other ties, too, although not so systematically. My colleague Joel van der Reijden found that famous actors – and all of the studio bosses – are very commonly employed by large liberal institutions like Ford, Soros, Gates, Omidyar, the Clinton Global Initiative and Rockefeller. These networks meet at places like the Sun Valley and Forstmann Little conferences – both Trilateral Commission offshoots. None of it is necessarily sinister, in terms of producing propaganda, but undoubtedly this acculturation in the industry has helped it be highly favourable to the national security state and that has never really been in question, except for a decade or so from the late 1960s.

AM: It is often said that Hollywood has a strong liberal bias. Certainly many actors have displayed open hostility towards Trump and the entertainment industry has largely shunned him. But your work challenges this and asserts that one of Hollywood's primary functions are to prop up the US state, US foreign policy, demonize communism and socialism and promote neoliberal capitalism. Why do you hold this position?

MA: Hollywood is liberal in the sense that as a community and in terms of output, it is sympathetic to the Democrats and tends to espouse liberal viewpoints on issues like race, abortion, Trump and so on. But to call this liberal is shallow at best. More to the point, to equate American liberals with an anti-war stance – the issue that is by far the most important to me as an outsider to American society – is just flat out wrong. The Clintonite wing of US politics – which is essentially represented by Hollywood – is as rapacious on foreign policy as the conservatives. In fact, although Trump may yet lead us into unprecedented disaster, he has followed peaceful initiatives on key areas of foreign affairs, notably Russia and North Korea, while the liberals have gnashed their teeth in anger. So, I feel both the conventional liberals and conservatives in the United States are roughly as dangerous as each other and either faction could end up reducing us all to ash.

Turning to Hollywood itself, it is true that the industry has used the Nazis as villains much more than communists. And it does use business leaders as convenient villains in many stories. So the picture is always mixed. But if you consider Hollywood as being part of a broader nexus, involving the military industry complex, you can see how it works to reflect the interests of the hidden power systems. Look at the case of Charlie Chaplin, for example. Chaplin's 2,000-page FBI file shows that, as a result of his left-wing beliefs, the Bureau conducted lengthy investigations into his politics and his sex life, including pursuing leads offered by anonymous sources, clairvoyants and gossip columnists. Destroying Chaplin's iconic status became an obsession for the Bureau, who reached out to MI5 for help trying to dig dirt, though the British found nothing indicating he was a communist, let alone a Soviet spy. In September 1952, Chaplin and his family left the United States to go on a European tour to promote his new film, and, after consulting with FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, the Attorney General revoked Chaplin's re-entry permit, banning him from the country. Even though the Bureau's files concede that they had no evidence that could be presented in court to justify barring him from re-entering the United States, Chaplin decided not to contest the decision and lived the final 25 years of his life in Switzerland. He did not return to America until 20 years later when he visited New York to receive an honorary Oscar in 1972. In short, the FBI quietly ended the career of the greatest comedian of all time on the false grounds that he was a communist. Hollywood did nothing to

stop it.

AM: There is a rich tradition of scholarship, including from Edward Said, Jack Shaheen and Deepa Kumar, that argues that popular culture provides the crucial groundwork in demonizing certain foreign countries and groups of people to lay the groundwork for war. In what ways does Hollywood help the US foreign agenda worldwide?

MA: There are several points here. First of all, we just do not truly understand the effect of popular culture because it is so badly and so infrequently measured. Policy planners are not going to be affected whatsoever, in all likelihood, by entertainment – although occasionally there are stories about some oddball think tank calling themselves “The Jedi,” or similar, and President Reagan may have been directly influenced by the nuclear war film *The Day After* (1983). My best guess is that popular culture has at least a significant impact on the public and plays into long-standing prejudices, which help to marginalize and infantilize the role of the population. Look at how important a film like *Hotel Rwanda* was in shaping popular views of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, for example. The standard story about Rwanda, replicated in the film, is that the United States turned a blind eye to the hundred-day frenzy of genocide pre-planned by the Hutu government against the Tutsi minority and some moderate Hutus. Supposedly, the United States was concerned about putting its troops in harm’s way, especially given the debacle in Somalia the previous year; thus it ignored what Philip Gourevitch (2000) called “the Jews of Africa” (the Tutsis) and became “bystanders to genocide,” as President Obama’s Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power famously put it.

Critics like Keith Harmon Snow argue that not only did the United States fail to intervene to prevent “genocide,” it intervened both before and after the massacres to ensure its side – the RPF – won. So, for instance, according to a French judge, it was Paul Kagame and his Tutsi associates who shot down the Hutu president’s plane, killing all on board including President Habyarimana himself and President Ntaryamira of Burundi – commonly accepted as the trigger for the genocide. This act was part of Kagame’s final assault to seize power after a four-year war, with the assistance of the US-sponsored Ugandan military.

AM: And what are the underlying assumptions in Hollywood films about the US government?

MA: When Hollywood represents the US government, there may be rotten apples in the mix but the system as a whole is shown able to root them out. This may in part just be to do with the traditional need for “happy endings” in stories but when the national security state is involved with production, that’s another important factor. We are left, typically, with entertainment outputs that assume that the power wielded by our side across the world is at least benevolent but, really, wonderful and exceptional. This is a delusional and narcissistic view of Western power, which comes with great dangers if we want to prevent further destruction – including of ourselves.

More broadly, the US government has supported thousands of screen products in an extremely successful attempt to ensure that they do not challenge the fundamental benevolence of the American state. The DOD has had a huge effect on some entertainment products. For *Hulk* (2003) the DOD requested “pretty radical” script alterations in exchange for Marine Corps support, including: changing the desert lab where the Hulk is created into a non-military, privately owned facility; making the “baddie” an ex-military character who runs the lab, rather than a serving officer; removing dialogue about “all those boys, guinea pigs, dying from radiation and germ warfare”; and changing the codename of the operation to capture the Hulk from “Ranch Hand” to “Angry Man” since “Ranch Hand” had been the name of a real chemical

warfare programme during the Vietnam War.

AM: Reading your latest book, you provide countless examples of DOD involvement in films and TV shows. Many of which are relatively predictable, for example films including the military as a central theme, like *Air Force One*, *Top Gun* and *Battleship*. But there are also many incredibly surprising titles in there like *Home Alone 3*, *American Idol*, *Cheers*, *The Biggest Loser*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Master Chef* and *The Price is Right* that even critical viewers might never guess had military interference. It seems the DOD affect virtually all of our media. How are these titles affected?

MA: It depends from product to product, for example a reality TV show that isn't scripted will still have to submit a treatment or outline for the Pentagon to review, but there isn't a script so there isn't a line-by-line script review. Nonetheless, all of these products are viewed in rough cut by the DOD to ensure there is nothing "objectionable" in them. When it comes to films, even if all you want is one recording of a helicopter taking off (as in *Pacific Rim*), the entire script has to be reviewed by the DOD. Ditto any scripted TV show; it is the same deal. Talk shows and the like tend to be provided with talking points, to ensure they stick to areas the Pentagon is comfortable with. Game shows typically just have a 30-second salute to the troops, and have a couple of dozen in uniform in the studio audience. This does not require a script review, as alluded to above, and has a weaker claim to being "propaganda."

With some ongoing series, such as *NCIS*, the DOD has a standing relationship with them whereby they review the script for every episode regardless of whether they are providing support for each individual episode. On *The Last Ship* the Navy were so deeply involved that they even affected the overall tone of the series, not just specific scenes and dialogue.

AM: Can the DOD provide enough flak or influence films and TV to the extent that they are simply cancelled? And are there examples of films that go ahead without DOD blessing and help? How powerful are they?

MA: The studios know that many products just cannot easily be made without the military, so they shy away from critical scripts. We are hoping to acquire another huge chunk of material – several boxes – from the Marines, which we think will show yet more cases of outright rejections.

A particularly clear case was from 1994. Touchstone had scripted *Countermeasures*, to star Sigourney Weaver as a Navy psychiatrist who uncovers a murderous crime ring on board a nuclear aircraft carrier during the Persian Gulf War. In the screenplay, Weaver finds out that her patient was part of a White House cover-up to ship jet parts to Iran, in a plot that echoed the real-world 1980s Iran-Contra scandal, in which the United States created a slush fund through illegal arms sales to Iran, some of which ended up arming the Contra fascists in Nicaragua. The DOD refused to cooperate on the film, saying "There's no need for us to denigrate the White House, or remind the public of the Iran-Contra affair," which is again an explicit rejection of a script based on a proven political scandal.

AM: Today's big blockbusters are full of product placement. For example, in *Jurassic World* (2015), the main characters communicate with Samsung phones, drive Mercedes vehicles and sip Starbucks coffee. Often these deals ensure that the big movie studios will make profit before the film is even released. Yet surely this has negative consequences in concentration of ownership of film companies, pushing smaller ones out, and what does it do to the content of the movies? Herman and Chomsky's second filter claims advertisers are careful to only finance media that would promote their brands and consumerist capitalism in general. Does this mean that films will

not critique the system they come from? Will cinema become ideologically boring?

MA: Other people might be more militant about this. Personally, I think entertainment should be there to entertain and, in doing so, it should not lie. But that's very different to saying that entertainment should always be exposing deeper truths. I do not have much of a problem with Hollywood as a whole, more just the national security cinema.

To date, there aren't many clearly documented examples of advertisers being able to change film scripts – except the DOD, of course. Product placers simply refuse to place their products if they don't like the look of the film. But, I mean, who actually wants the mainstream film industry to be purely art-house? Andy Warhol once made a static 25-hour film of the Empire State Building – not a great one to show your kids. One of the best films of 2014 was *The Lego Movie*. It was, by its very nature, a huge product placed advert for Lego – but it was also a damn good satire of American corporate power!

The other thing is that although product placement is increasing, there are actually areas of the industry, such as Netflix, that are less dependent on advertising. There seem to be greater spaces now for more innovative products. This means there is a bit more ideological elasticity and overall things are maybe a bit healthier than they were a decade or so ago. Netflix is an ideological game-changer because it has to appeal directly to its 130 million subscribers rather than massive corporate advertisers. As a result, we have subversive comedies like *Glow* (feminist themes) and *Goliath* (a legal drama about the military-industrial complex). *Stranger Things* was turned down by a dozen networks before Netflix made it, and included anti-deep state themes, like the inclusion of MKULTRA-style experiments. Still, as my friend Nikos Evangelos said to me recently, “it's not clear that Netflix, by serving many smaller demographics, with an ideological variety suited to each one, has a net impact” and it might be that “the overall effect of political critique and fictional revolution in film is cathartic and non-mobilizing, if not demobilizing.” He added that dystopian visions are “a lot more prevalent than stories suggesting revolutionary change is possible: dystopia has the effect of confirming everything is wrong but also making it seem inevitable.” I thought that was right on the money.

AM: And what is national product placement?

MA: This is where a state advertises itself, using entertainment, and in doing so may sanitise its history. For example, Baz Luhrmann's epic film *Australia* was criticised for sanitising the country's colonial history. At the same time it has served the purpose of making Australia look like a great place to go on holiday – its release was accompanied by reams of coverage in the travel sections of newspapers and a lavish advertising campaign by the Australian tourist board. The studio's parent company was Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which worked hand in hand throughout the film's production with the Australian government. The arrangement worked well for both parties: the government benefited from the increase in tourism, and in turn Murdoch received tens of millions of dollars in tax rebates.

Along similar lines several Gulf nations provide very lucrative tax credits and other financial incentives to encourage the biggest franchises to film in their countries (including *Fast & Furious* and *Star Trek*). This means that the glitzy, shiny urban skylines feature heavily in blockbuster films, promoting these countries without any reference to their politics, role in the region and so on. We are likely to see more of this as Saudi Arabia starts investing in Hollywood on a large scale.

The James Bond movie *Spectre* is another good example, because the Mexican government went outside of the usual rebates and incentives to strike a \$20 million deal for the studio to film

in the country. In exchange the filmmakers altered the script so the bad guy in the sequence was not Mexican, that the Mexican governor was changed to an international political figure, that the sequence would be at least four minutes long and that it would feature the modern skyscrapers at the centre of Mexico City.

AM: Many people do not realize how much of a big business video games have become. The top video games gross far more than top movies. *League of Legends* has grossed an estimated \$5.7 billion, the *Call of Duty* franchise \$16 billion, *Grand Theft Auto* \$8.5 billion. The latest *Call of Duty* game sold \$500 million worth of copies in its opening weekend alone, larger than that of blockbuster movies *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Wonder Woman* combined (Tassi, 2017). Furthermore, young and impressionable people especially play these games for hours every day!

Hyper-realistic first-person shooters like *Call of Duty* are one of the most popular genres of video games. *Call of Duty: Ghosts*' plot revolves around being an American fighting against a red-beret-wearing anti-American Venezuelan dictator, clearly meant to be Hugo Chavez. There is no scrutiny of the United States' long history of overthrowing democratically elected presidents in the region (including Chavez himself in 2002). You simply fight the righteous fight against this evil foreign opponent. Meanwhile *Call of Duty 4*'s plot revolves around American invasion of the Middle East where you play as a Marine shooting Arab "terrorists." I cannot tell you how many millions of Arabs I, and tens of millions of other young people, have killed online. As Slavoj Žižek would say, this is pure ideology in its distilled form.

MA: You've given some great examples there. In the case of video games, there appears to be much less direct military control of the scripts in comparison to the movie and TV industries. We have only found reliable evidence to indicate that the US/UK military supported a fairly short list of games, albeit often prominent and influential products, such as: *Battle Zone Apache*, *Doom*, *America's Army*, *Super Battletank*, *Desert Strike*, *LHX Attack Helicopter*, *Army of Two*, *Rainbow Six*, *Splinter Cell*, *Homefront*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, *Battlefield 3*, *Call of Duty Black Ops*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Medal of Honour: Warfighter*.

AM: Gun companies pay for their guns to be included in games. Likewise the military assist developers in order to promote war and their image and use these games as recruitment and training tools (Romaniuk and Burgers, 2017). What are your views on propaganda and video games?

MA: Due to the nature of video game production they don't require anywhere near as much military support, so the power dynamic is different. We did find instances where they refused to support a game because the enemy was an ex-Marine, or you had to fight against the Chinese government, so similar rules seem to apply as with films and TV.

AM: The DOD and the military have also expanded their influence into sports events. In the NFL there are entire weeks of play dedicated to "Salutes to Service," where players wear camouflaged uniforms. Indeed, one rarely acknowledged fact in the controversy surrounding Colin Kaepernick not standing for the national anthem and saluting the troops is that the tradition is entirely new and artificial, with the DOD paying the NFL millions of dollars to be allowed to perform stadium flyovers and have troops and enormous American flags on the field before games (Mach, 2015). This is, in effect, the US taxpayer paying for themselves to be propagandized into militarism.

MA: Yes, well you've summarised that beautifully! It's definitely all gone a bit *Rocky IV*.

AM: Thank you. You also have practical experience of working in the media. Has your view on how the media works changed now you have seen it from the inside? Is there anything you'd

like to share? And what about the most recent changes to the entertainment industry?

MA: The experience of fairly independent creative work is very different, I think, to the industrial style and scale of creative work generated by the mass media. The individual really doesn't have much control in such systems, unless they're at the top. A couple of experiences, though, which may be of interest: I was an extra on the Cate Blanchett movie *Elizabeth*, playing a role in the Elizabethan military. We had wanted to hold up placards reading "Catholic Rights Now" and "War with Spain, Not in My Name" but obviously that was a little tricky in practice! I also once wrote a feature for the *Guardian* in which, strangely, they changed my description of the Mujahidin from "terrorists" to "freedom fighters," which was illustrative of how a whole narrative can be shifted with a simple decision by a man in charge.

The latest major examples of national security cinema include: *American Sniper*, *Wonder Woman*, *Lone Survivor*, *Argo*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Red Dawn* and much of the Marvel franchise including 2019's *Captain Marvel*. There are even new *Rambo* and *Top Gun* films in production.

There have been several more recent films that go against the grain: *Get Out*, *The Shooter*, *Kill the Messenger*, *The East* and *The Ghost Writer* are all great dramas about what has become known as the "deep state." It's true that they were often buried by their own distributors. Meanwhile, films like *Black Panther* and *American Made* continue to soft-sell criticism of the US empire by providing criticism in a jokey or fantastical way, which dulls the impact, rather like *Three Kings* and *Avatar* – the latter which also had DOD support (likely leading to the villainous military characters being decoupled from the real US military).

Most recently, a movie about the former Vice President Dick Cheney looks set to be very critical – it's called *Vice*, and appears to portray the man as sociopathic. It will be out by the time this book is printed and it will be interesting to see whether it provides a comparable critique of the system leaders as, say, Oliver Stone's *Nixon*.

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7

STILL COMPROMISING NEWS

Obfuscation and evasion as dominant filters in Indian media's coverage of the IL&FS financial scandal

Tabassum Ruhi Khan

The propaganda model is important for illuminating how money and power operate in democratic free-market societies to undermine diversity of opinions and suppress dissenting viewpoints. Using the analogy of filters, the model explains the manner in which the elite point of view is made dominant, to the detriment of perspectives emerging from the margins, by operational and financial imperatives, which filter out news detrimental to ruling classes' interests. And news becomes largely propaganda because filters including high costs of broadcasting infrastructure, dependence on advertising revenues, predilection for "expert" sources (i.e. those with resources to influence media stories) and susceptibility to "flak" from advertisers, government and other powerful interests compromise media's position as an unbiased, objective and diversified news source. Moreover, the propaganda model argues that inordinate stigmatization of communist ideology in free-market democracies like America further curtail media's focus on issues of social, economic, political and environmental justice.

But the model's valuable key argument primarily addresses conditions when mass communication technologies of broadcast television, radio and print were prevailing and when only Western democratic capitalist societies had robust and thriving media institutions. However, even as the pre-eminence of mass broadcasting media is challenged by the ascendance of interactive media technologies, globalizing trends of the past three decades have ensured that the Western capitalist model of free and profit driven media is the dominant prevailing media structure across the world. This chapter examines the relevance of the model in these evolving contexts, especially as digital technologies grow with greater vigour and speed in non-Western countries like India and China. It emphasizes the need to understand the model's applicability from non-Western free-market democratic contexts; and especially with reference to a country like India, which has emerged as the poster child for both capitalistic expansions and democratic freedoms – labelled as the world's largest free-market democracy and one where private entrepreneurs drive the phenomenal growth in both broadcast and print media and digital technologies.

Moreover, India is also the focal point of debate as to whether new digital media technologies' growing popularity is undermining the validity of the filters, which have been influential in deciding the content of traditional mass media; or if the filters are being further strengthened by

the particularities of digital media technologies including innate biases of algorithms and filter bubbles.¹ In India the technologies of mass communication, print, radio, broadcast and satellite television, as well as those of the interactive digital media are simultaneously registering a steady growth and reaching an ever-larger percentage of its largely young population.² Hence the country presents a counterpoint to the current scenario in the West where the Internet is demolishing the revenues and thereby the monopoly power of old media, both print and broadcasting. However, the discussion about undermining of old media by digital media technologies is to be analysed not only with reference to loss of revenues and audiences but also with regard to how media content is affected by characteristics of digital technologies. This chapter engages in this debate by examining Indian news coverage of events that were of critical importance to the nation and its public. It investigates news coverage of a major financial scandal in the Indian media – specifically the English-language print and online news platforms, because not only do the two platforms perform the important agenda-setting function for reasons I explain below, but also because the dynamism between the two and the movement of news from one platform to the other provides an opportunity to study how entrenched interests attempt to influence news content in contexts when new technologies extend possibilities for dissenting viewpoints to emerge as well as to enhance audience engagement with alternative viewpoints, by either augmenting the power of existing filters or by creating new ones to address the fresh challenges.

In late August 2018 the Mumbai-based Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services (IL&FS) announced that it was about to default on its debt obligations. The news sent shock waves in the Indian stock market, which lost over \$116.33 billion in investor wealth in a mere ten days of September 2018, because as a non-banking financial institution with 169 subsidiaries and associate companies lending to other banks for infrastructure development the announcement exposed the vulnerability of the Indian financial sector to a contagion of defaults (The Week, 2018). The risks to the savings of the ordinary, small Indian investor were particularly acute as one of the major shareholders of IL&FS includes the state-backed Life Insurance Corp of India with a 25.3 per cent stake, along with Central Bank of India with a 7.67 per cent stake and State Bank of India with 6.42 per cent.³ Hence, while the news is of critical importance to the public, the manner in which it is covered by the media is illustrative of their relationship with hegemonic powers, especially since the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led Indian government won its mandate from the people on grounds of delivering good and corruption free governance. In investigating the coverage of the financial scandal in English-language print and online news media platforms, this chapter attempts to understand how power and influence adapt to challenges posed by new technological possibilities; and in doing so it also addresses the question of the methodology of studying the current media environment, which is very different from when the propaganda model and the analogy of filters were first proposed.

Indian media industries: the current status

Indian media industries have registered phenomenal growth since liberalization of the economy in 1991 to approximate a free-market model and moving away from its socialist moorings. The advertising and media industries have registered a growth rate that has been higher than that of the Indian economy's impressive 7 per cent growth rate. And especially remarkable has been the

growth of the Indian print media in the face of the severe decline that print medium has faced in most Western democracies (see [Chapter 3](#)). According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, in the decade between 2006 and 2016 the average number of copies of print media increased by 24 million, registering a compounded annual growth rate of almost 5 per cent. Moreover, in addition to the substantial increase in circulation (which stands at approximately 300 million copies of print dailies in 2015), there has been significant growth in the number of publications too (with nearly 8,000 dailies as compared to 1,347 in the United States). Much of this is driven by growth in vernacular print publications in Hindi and other regional languages including Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam at 5 per cent and above as a result of growth in population as well as in literacy. Meanwhile, the English news dailies have grown more slowly at about 3 per cent over the past decade. According to Pandey (2017), the trend is unlike the major democracies in the West, where circulation has dropped and the number of publications has stagnated or decreased as a result of declining populations and the rapid advance of digital technologies and media. In contrast, India's population and literacy are still increasing and Internet penetration is yet to reach the vast hinterlands.

The growth story of the print medium is also repeated with Indian broadcast television, which is the largest media industry – almost twice the size of print. The television industry's size and revenues are also expected to grow at over twice the rate of the print media industry. However, online media is fast catching up. While broadcast television has the highest advertising revenues of 257 billion Indian rupees (\$3.6 billion), with print following closely at 233 billion rupees (\$3.3 billion), digital advertising at 134 billion (\$1.9 billion) is expected to experience a phenomenal rate of growth of 30 per cent (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2017, figures as quoted in Pandey, 2017).

The point to note is that the exponential growth in digital advertising is driven by rapid expansion of the mobile telephony sector, which is distinguished as the fastest growing technologies. Hence, mobile phone-based browsers have become very important to content creators who are prioritizing mobile-optimized websites and delivery platforms, and this is especially true for news content, which is vastly popular in India. In fact, of the approximately 800 licensed satellite TV stations, around half are news-based outlets, because news channels' ratings often do better than entertainment programming (BBC, 2017). Many news websites with original content have emerged and many international ones are setting up subsidiaries in the country and they all cater to primarily the younger population who are well-versed in the new technologies. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (Agarwal, 2018), the number of Internet users in India is expected to rise to 500 million by the end of 2018, making it the world's second largest online community after China. Moreover, the number of mobile phone Internet users in the country is approximately 320 million as of 2017 (*Statista*, 2018). Hence news becomes a potent commodity given its popularity among Indian audiences as means of accessing it diversify. However, users of mobile telephony are concentrated in urban areas and its reach and spread in rural areas is still slow to catch up. According to a report by the BBC (2017), Facebook is the leading social network, while Twitter is used by celebrities, journalists and politicians, and while there is no systematic filtering of the web, the authorities have imposed restrictions and taken punitive action against several leading social networks over content, and routinely suspended Internet services in the politically volatile state of Kashmir every time that tension has erupted. For a detailed examination of media coverage of Kashmir, see [Chapter 8](#).

Given the concomitant growth of the different media technologies and diverse modes of audience engagement it can be argued that the Indian media industry appropriates the model of co-existence rather than convergence; and this may be the state of affairs for the next decade or more as infrastructure for delivery of broadband Internet to the interior of the country continues to be built and put in place. At the moment the relative slower speed of penetration of the Internet is sustaining the growth of print and broadcast media.

Tension and concentration of power

In the light of the current multiplicity of media outlets, it would be hard to believe that there is in fact a paucity of diversity of opinion. Indeed tendencies towards concentration and conglomeration of media have gone unchecked in India as compared to other countries; and every major Indian media company boasts of an array of television channels ranging from vernacular languages to the English language, as well as ownership of several print publications (CauseBecause, 2017). In addition they may also be hosting their own online websites or tacitly supporting others conducive to their viewpoints. Critics have expressed concern that “corporatization” of Indian media or its take-over by prominent business houses like the Reliance Industry’s Mukesh Ambani (also known as the Rupert Murdoch of India) is seriously damaging the independence of Indian media, and especially news media (Sharma, 2014). In the wake of Reliance’s takeover of Network 18 media which included several television channels – CNBC TV 18, CNN-IBN and CNN Awaz – as well as online news websites, apprehensions about the damage to news media were rife, especially in the absence of any effective safeguards to protect editorial freedom from interference from corporate owners. According to Varadarajan (2016), “market-forces” or the “commercialization” of media rather than the government have been responsible for covert media censorship, and,

There is less space for serious introspective reportage, and many subjects don’t get the kind of coverage they need because proprietors and media houses don’t consider them important. There’s no censorship, nobody is saying “you can’t do that”, it’s just that the resources aren’t available.

Instead there is an epidemic of paid news wherein resources are devoted to non-essential, false and biased news and favourable coverage is guaranteed to private clients by media houses in exchange for monetary and other returns such as equity in the company. The strategy was initiated by the most profitable media company Bennett Coleman and Company Limited (BCCL) which owns the influential English daily the *Times of India*. And under the euphemism of what was called “private treaties” a *quid pro quo* deal was set up preventing the *Times of India* from reporting any negative news concerning its unaccounted business partners. According to independent online news magazine CauseBecause (2017),

These kind of long-term “contracts”, which are usually with political parties, big and small corporations, and those seeking page three coverage (entertainment firms, film and TV companies, celebs, etc.), have become a common occurrence and now extend to many large media houses, following in the footsteps of BCCL’s brilliant sell-out strategies.

The reporting of even mildly critical news and alternative and non-elite viewpoints is further curtailed by the Indian media industry’s acute susceptibility to flak, first because the industry is excessively dependent on advertising (to the magnitude of 90–95 per cent in the case of some newspapers) as subscription revenues from readers on the whole tends to be low. Hence, publishers are neither keen to offend their advertisers, nor able to extend the realm of their

reportage to topics which will not appeal to their “prosperous upper-middle class people [readers] in Bombay and Delhi” (Varadarajan, 2016). Therefore vast areas of vital importance such as the dire situation facing Indian farmers and the agricultural sector are locked-out from media spheres simply because the news may not appeal to the urban middle-class readers who are the prime target of the advertisers. Second, other critical affairs are also kept away from the public eye by the rich and powerful, and by those from the ruling political establishment, who often take recourse to the law of criminal defamation to effectively throttle any critique of their ventures. According to Varadarajan (2016), these cases linger around for years and continue to prevent journalists and editors from any in-depth and unsympathetic reportage of how powerful interests operate in the world’s largest democracy.

The complexity of the Indian media scenario and possibilities for independence and diversity of opinion are also severely undermined by the absence of laws controlling concentration of media ownership. The Indian Telecommunication Act of 2000 is primarily concerned with media content rather than with factors and circumstances affecting media content. And efforts by the Telecommunication Regulatory Authority of India to curb concentration of media ownership as yet remain recommendations only (The Indian Express, 2014). At the time of writing, ZEE TV, which is a major media house with a range of Indian and English language television channels as well as other media and non-media ventures, announced its plans to merge with a strategic partner, while keeping the name of the partner carefully hidden. The rumour mills were rife about the identity of the partner, while there was no debate about how it may influence media content. The only concern expressed in the news reports is how the investments of media establishments could continue to reap profits. In the light of the rather depressing scenario, it can be argued that the propaganda model’s predictions for operation of privately owned media in free-market democratic societies are accurate for India. The leverage of money power in the setting up of media industries, the relentless search for profit and dependence on advertisers, the fear of retaliation from powerful interests, and the total lack of concern for media ethics as well as for the underprivileged in a country with the world’s largest poor population are the filters which decide media content in favour of neoliberal ethics and priorities, and suppress all criticisms of the infallibility of the markets. However, even as filters belong to a context where money and power obliquely exert themselves to shape media content, the unchecked concentration of media ownership in India has practically ensured that freedom of press is all but throttled by the unbridled authority of the privileged few.

And yet, notwithstanding the highly unequal power dynamics, the facade of democracy must be maintained. But the challenge in accomplishing this task comes from alternative media platforms that are capable of exposing the duplicity of the hegemonic powers. According to Varadarajan (2016) (who served as an editor of a reputable mainstream newspaper, the *Hindu*, before being ousted when its owners chose to personally overview editorial policy, and now steers a non-profit news website), the Indian online news platforms propose to “reinvent mainstream media as a new arrangement in the public sphere between citizens, readers and journalists” and create a space where a media organization can depend upon its readers and well-meaning philanthropists to “recognize the value of independent journalism” and to support journalists and editors devoted to bringing an independent perspective on matters relevant to democratic citizenship. Hence, in seeking non-traditional modes of financing alternative news media platforms, which are also more flexible and agile in news production processes, reduce the efficacy of the filters that dictate mainstream media’s content. He believes that online news

platforms have had a modicum of success because an independent non-profit news organization like *The Wire* has been able to report on subjects that mainstream media would strictly avoid⁴ for fear of offending their funding sources and/or for being penalized. However, notwithstanding the challenge posed by new technologies, it is the established media companies that earn the maximum profits.

But despite their lack of financial success it would be premature to write off alternative news web platforms because they are using unique ways, such as social media including Facebook and Twitter, to access and influence India's middle classes and the aspiring middle classes. And having extended their spheres of influence to audiences, who are also coveted by the English-language news dailies, they have personalized the sphere of politics in a way never done before. Hence, alternative media sites compete with mainstream media as agenda-setters, as demonstrated by the fact that mainstream media cannot afford to ignore stories that are trending or are popular on social media. A productive tension therefore exists between established mainstream media and alternative media outlets, wherein on one hand the dominant media of print and broadcast television cannot afford to ignore issues that are being raised on alternative media websites, which are making inroads into both English-speaking audiences as well as vernacular readers who are seeking challenging as well as more credible reporting on crucial issues. And on the other hand the dominant media must continue to strive through their reportage to tilt power dynamics in favour of the elites and to ensure that all contestations of the established order are effectively muted or blunted.

Given this complex scenario, it cannot be business as usual for old media, even if the conditions/filters that ensure prevalence of hegemonic perspective by smothering dissent have not been dismantled, and may in fact have been strengthened. The established mainstream print and broadcast media must think of other effective ways of curbing critical non-majoritarian perspectives in a situation which demands that, while issues important to the public must be reported, they must be covered in a manner which allows mainstream newspapers to protect their reputation for topicality and pertinence, while the matter at the heart of the news coverage itself ceases to be both. I expand on this conundrum by examining the coverage of the IL&FS financial scandal in three major English-language national newspapers, each with a distinct editorial stance, for the select period of the month of October 2018. I also examine the tension between alternative (specifically news platforms *The Wire* and *The Quint*) and mainstream journalism in the reporting of the financial crisis embroiling IL&FS to examine how mainstream print media deflect contestation of the established order.

The question of methodology

The propaganda model has been critiqued for failing to offer incontrovertible empirical proof to substantiate the working of the filters and for being simplistic in its presentation of evidence using the most basic of statistical methods to support its arguments (see Corner, 2003; Curran *et al.*, 1982; Lang and Lang, 2004a, 2004b; Sparks, 2007). However, if, as Klaehn (2003) argues, the model's aim is "to conceptualize relationships between dominant powers and major institutional sites and to enumerate the role of structural factors rather than to test 'micro-processes' of media functioning," then I propose that statistical enumerations of the propaganda model offer the most basic map of these relationships. The extant power dynamics must be further examined in more descriptive and non-statistical terms to understand how the manner of

creating and presenting a narrative of the events and issues along with the contexts of circulation and reception are also responsible for shaping the narrative's validity and import in the public sphere. In this chapter I examine not the numerical dynamics of how many stories were published about the IL&FS financial scandal, but where they were placed within the print newspaper; how they were framed or the manner in which they were perceived and presented; and what is the universe of competing issues or narratives which they must contend with. And although the rise of online news media platforms have made the issue of where the story is placed in the layout of a newspaper a non-issue, the dynamics of framing and the question of contending narratives continue to be applicable across both print and online media. It does not examine television broadcast television media because it does not lend itself to the comparative framework of studying print texts across print newspapers and online news sites.

Indian media's coverage of the IL&FS crisis: dominant frames and filters

I was drawn to cover the crisis when I read an opinion piece in *The Sunday Times of India* by Anil Dharker (2018), as part of my lazy Sunday browsing, which began:

By now everyone knows what the initials IL&FS stand for, but I have another option: Internal Looting and Fraud Syndicate. Too strong? Financial experts would give it a more polite name, but I am only a lay citizen, not a financial expert.

And I, as the lay reader who was clueless, continued reading the piece on page 23, placed next to a socialite's column and below the weekly economics-made-easy column because in lay terms Dharker was asking the questions:

How did IL&FS run up a debt of Rs 91,000 crore (let's spell it out: Rs 91,000,00,00,000)? Did it happen overnight? If it didn't, as it obviously couldn't, how did no one notice it till now? If it was noticed before, why didn't its shareholders (LIC, SBI, Oryx Corp of Japan, Abu Dhabi Investment Authority being the major ones) call a halt and sack its management much, much earlier? If the shareholder directors were sleeping, were the independent directors Rip van Winkles too?

Yes something big was brewing, but we "lay" citizens had little understanding of the event. I asked my friend, a health communication specialist with WHO and graduate from Emerson College Boston, if she could explain to me what she understood about this crisis. And her response is pivotal to pursuance of this story, because according to her, "It is all too 'businessy'. I can't make head or tail of it." A person with her level of education, who keenly followed the news, then went on to ask me, "but have you heard who is the latest casualty in the 'Me Too' scandal?"

The fact that a story of such import to the nation, whose unfolding, according to Gajendra Haldea (2018), the former Principal Adviser Planning Commission Government of India, would cost the investors, the banks and the exchequer significant losses, was barely comprehensible to its citizens, persuaded me to examine its coverage in three major dailies, each with a distinct editorial stance. The *Times of India* is the most profitable newspaper whose editorial policy prides itself on its infotainment presentation, and counts neither challenging of the status quo nor in-depth investigative reportage as among its forte, but it still draws maximum readership as well as revenues. The *Indian Express*, which is the exact opposite, positioning itself as supportive of hard-hitting investigative journalism as promised in the newspaper's logo's tagline the

“Journalism of Courage,” lags behind the other two dailies in terms of both readership and revenues. The *Hindu*, with the second highest circulation, on the other hand, is probably the last newspaper to cling to the fallacy of “objective” news coverage and presentation (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2017). But as a nod to the critiques of the propaganda model that refer to its lack of statistical sophistication, this study does not count the number of stories published in any of these news dailies. Rather the focus is on where the stories about the IL&FS scandal are placed in the newspaper, which section of the newspaper they are assigned to, and what is the repertoire of meaning within they were situated and evoked. The study also maps what are the other stories and issues which the newspapers are highlighting, and how do these competing narratives define the audience’s field of attention.

It would be a truism to state that to the person picking up the morning newspaper with their first cup of tea the front-page headlines are most effective in declaring what are the issues of import. And without going into exactitudes, it is enough to say that during the period of October 2018 the IL&FS scandal rarely featured as a front-page headline or story. However, according to Gajendra Haldea (2018: 20), in the event of the IL&FS loan default meltdown, “The resulting burden would have to be borne by none other than the common man, and it is bound to be enormous. By comparison, Vijay Mallya and Nirav Modi may have caused much less damage.”

But despite the enormity of the financial crisis it was not registering to be as such. In this context, it would be worthwhile to quote Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), that the impact of the message “is not a function of content differences but of differences in the modes of presentation.” This effectively sums up the connection between framing of news and the agenda-setting function of news stories. Scholars have long perceived a consonance between how news is presented and the way it is received/perceived by the audience (see Iyengar, 1991; McCombs *et al.*, 1997; Popkin, 1994). Hence, while news about Vijay Mallya’s extradition from the UK and Nirav Modi’s escape from India after defrauding a major bank were front-page news, the IL&FS collapse was not treated with the same sense of urgency. And removed from the space of prominence on the front page the story was consistently assigned to the business pages in the *Times of India* and the *Hindu* and delegated to the economy section in the *Indian Express*. It was also placed in the opinion and editorial sections of all of the three newspapers. I argue taking a leaf from scholars quoted above who see a connection between presentation and perception that the framing of the story is also contingent upon its placement in the newspaper’s layout. Hence, while the perspective of urgency was not applied to the IL&FS financial scandal, the other repertoires of meanings or frames associated with it are: specialist information for business/economy experts and intellectual public debate about the financial sector. And both of these frames place the story within the purview of the specialists, despite the fact that lucidly expressed opinions of experts like Dharker (2018) and Haldea (2018), both published in the *Times of India*, a newspaper not given to investigative journalism, were instrumental in my understanding of what the financial scandal entailed for the country. However, the problem is that people are reluctant to approach what they may see as a highbrow subject matter, as Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) argue, but they would readily respond if the matter were presented to them as a bold headline. Hence, as my friend’s response indicated, the issue becomes not only incomprehensible but escapes from the radar of a large section of the reading public by being relegated to business, economy and opinion sections.

But the leveraging of expert opinion in major newspapers serves two purposes for a mainstream newspaper like the *Times of India*: first, the newspaper maintains its relevance and

currency in the face of diverse views circulating in the digital public spheres. For example, both Dharker and Haldea had first expressed themselves on their blogs, and these blogs were then printed without editing in the main newspaper. These blogs were in addition to the consistent reporting in alternate online new platforms such as *The Wire* (see Basu, 2018a, 2018b; Hazari, 2018; Singh, 2018), among others, that were clearly linking the current crisis to the government's oversight. Hence, by including critical expert opinions, but delegating them to specialized sections of the newspaper, the issue's import and urgency are obfuscated and even evaded (also see "The Hindu explains," 2018). But while news media creates new frames for diverting attention from and marginalizing issues of corruption and malfeasance of the ruling sections of the society, the government itself used more direct methods of stamping out criticisms directed at it. In the first week of October 2018, the proprietor of the mildly critical news platform *The Quint*, who was only publishing advice about how to rise out of the morass of the crisis (see Bahl, 2018), found himself at the receiving end of the government's wrath when income tax officials raided the premises (Hindustan Times, 2018).

However, the issue of corruption could not be entirely swept under the carpet by powerful interests sensitive to the prime minister's grandiose promise that his government would erase this scourge from Indian society. According to Haldea (2018), who, as Principal Advisor of Infrastructure of the Planning Commission Government of India, had the opportunity to closely observe the infrastructure projects of IL&FS, there was a "common pattern of manipulation and machinations" which allowed IL&FS access to vast sums of public money while simultaneously allowing the company to escape public scrutiny. The question of how this could happen is not only an important matter of financial fraud but is also a question of how democratic process and parliamentary procedures are undermined and circumvented. The issue should clearly have been raised as urgent and critical and given prominent placement in print news media in bold headlines. However, when the issue of corruption underlining the IL&FS crisis was raised it was in the context of a political slugfest with one party accusing the other of corruption (see PTI, 2018).

However, in addition to the issue of framing of the IL&FS financial crisis, which allowed the issue to be side-lined and lose its importance, is the question of other stories that grab headlines and compete with this crucial issue. There have been instances when global media have aligned with powerful interests to push not just biased news but indeed patently false coverage of the events, as in the case of Venezuelan elections (see Carasik, 2015). But Indian mainstream news media could not really be accused of peddling false narratives or fake news. Rather the filters of obfuscation and evasion were further strengthened when all three newspapers consistently treated another event – the Me Too movement started by former model and actress Tanushree Dutta, a former model and actress – at approximately the same time as the IL&FS crisis was brewing, treating the former as front page news. But this is not to say that the fight for a safe environment at work for women is not important and/or a mere diversion. Because according to journalist Betwa Sharma (2014), "Over the past few years, the media has exposed corruption and driven growing public outrage at sexual violence against women. Rapes, once buried in the remote villages where they took place, are now routinely reported by 24-hour news channels."

However, the circumstances that I draw attention to are when reportage of sexual violence and misconduct become news in themselves with total lack of analysis of the circumstance, the regulatory environments, the social biases and the economic pressures which lead to the creation of a hostile environment for women. It is the treatment of salacious gossip with accusations

flying freely without care for evidence or balanced reporting as front-page headlines and news that becomes problematic, especially since it treats the problems of women as unique to women alone and unconnected to realities, which also affect circumstances of the other half of the population too. It was coverage of this sort that in my stack of news clippings from the three dailies counted in sheer numeric terms as more than three times the number of stories attending to the IL&FS scandal. And as Moore (2018) notes, stories like these serve as mere distraction, drawing attention away from the more pressing issue of financial hardship that would stare ordinary citizens in the face with the further unfolding of the IL&FS financial crisis.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the propaganda model's filters influence mainstream news media content, precluding viewpoints critical of established powers, the fact is that mainstream news media must acknowledge the possibility of the public having access to alternative perspectives and being kept abreast of relevant matters through alternative media online. Hence, this calls for other, more oblique ways of dealing with news, which could potentially damage power dynamics that tilt in favour of the elite and powerful interests. And as this chapter demonstrated, this is achieved not by banning the story, but by placing it within contexts and repertoires of meaning such that it loses its potency. Hence, placement of news within certain frames befuddles audiences even as mainstream news media maintains its relevance notwithstanding the rise of alternative platforms and the contingent diversity of opinion.

Notes

- 1 Eli Pariser (2011) in his book *The Filter Bubble* argues that accessing media outlets through the Internet or online supports tendencies of living in personalized worlds, and of cutting contact with other or contrary viewpoints. This not only isolates people but also has detrimental effects on creativity, productivity and robust debate.
- 2 More than half of India's population is below 25 years of age.
- 3 Other key shareholders are Japan's Orix Corp, holding 23 per cent, and Abu Dhabi Investment Authority with 12.56 per cent.
- 4 *The Wire's* (2018) interview with spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar created a furore among Hindu right-wing supporters because the interviewer asked him pointed questions on his stance in the Ayodhya controversy, something which mainstream media could not dare to do in the current political climate.

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8

INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE PROPAGANDA MODEL

A critical analysis of Bollywood blockbusters

Azmat Rasul

Through the lens of the propaganda model, this chapter explores the relationship between the Hindi film industry, Bollywood, and the international public relations strategies devised by the Indian government during the last couple of decades. As Indian official circles declared several times that Bollywood would function as an Indian soft power and an international public relations tool in the twenty-first century, the symbiotic relationship between Bollywood and the Indian government resulted in the production of blockbusters advocating Indian foreign policy in the region. After earning industry status in 1998, Bollywood carefully filters movie content due to its dependence on the Indian government for tax relief, foreign direct investment and soft loans from the banking sector in addition to the government's ability to produce flak, which, according to Herman and Chomsky (2002: 26), "is related to power" and helps control any deviations from the official policy designed by the international public relations strategists in the foreign office. I focused on flak as a content filter and argued that patriotism – as defined by the government – ruled Indian cinema and the moviemakers avoided raising issues that may not run parallel to the official policy for fear of flak from the government and the audience. A negative reaction from the government in the form of flak would have adverse and exorbitant economic implications for Bollywood, which has been experiencing unprecedented economic growth in the recent decades. I contend that Bollywood, being one of the most significant culture industries in the world, worked closely with the government to avoid the flak and, in return, harvested tangible economic benefits (e.g. tax cuts and soft loans) from the Indian government.

The relationship, symbiotic or ambivalent, between culture industries and states received paltry attention in the international public relations literature despite the fact that various states have actively promoted entertainment industries to enhance their political and economic clout. Traditionally, the state has intervened in the business of media due to their social relevance and impact on public opinion. In Europe, for example, the state is an important player that maintains its influence in the media market through its "own activities in the field of radio and television" (Richeri, 2011: 135). Similarly, extant research (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Mosco, 2009; Schiller, 2011; Zelizer and Allan, 2011) has identified patterns of close cooperation among transnational corporations, government, military and media (see also [Chapter 6](#)). Hesmondhalgh (2007) argues that the connection between state institutions and culture industries should be

thoughtfully examined as cultural products not only secure export income from foreign markets but also expediently disseminate state ideology and a set of values to other societies. The internal and external policies of a state, beyond doubt, have a deep impact on the operations of mass media as well as the production and consumption of cultural commodities (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; McQuail, 2010). In recent years, a few studies (Prindle, 1993; Wasko, 2004; Zelizer and Allan, 2011) have focused on the manipulation tactics applied by the policy-makers to harness the soft power potential of culture industries to propagate peculiar ideological perspectives and enhance political clout of the state through public relations strategies using entertainment industries.

Extant literature under the banner of the political economy approach indicates that the interconnection between culture industry and public policy is a hazy area due to the capacity of the state as the biggest producer of flak (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Due to the flak potential of the state, Guback (1969) and Schiller (1969) documented Hollywood's proximity with the policy-making circles to dominate the European film industries with the active support of the US government. Recently, a few scholars (Bagdikian, 2004; Bettig and Hall, 2012; McChesney, 2008; Prindle, 1993; Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007) have discussed the nature of relationship between the state and the film industry from a critical perspective. Nonetheless, a serious debate on the influence of the silver screen on foreign policy or vice versa is still wanting. Similarly, Bollywood, the largest film industry in the world, has also been paid little attention in discourses related to media-state interconnection in the area of international public relations. It is therefore heuristically significant to analyse the relationship between Bollywood and the Indian state to promote a softer image of India abroad.

Understanding the film industry through the political economy of media

The seminal works of Herman and Chomsky (2002), McChesney (2008) and Mosco (2009) on the political economy of mass media explained the intricate nature of relationship between mass media and government apparatus. The political economy of communication identified patterns of relationship between government and the mass media controlled by the political and business elite, which sought to perpetuate an ideology that helped maximize their profits in geometric progression. Extant research also claimed that technology-intensive and commercially driven mass media promote dominant ideologies because their political and economic interests are intertwined with those in the corridors of power (McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2008, 2009; Thomas, 2010; Wasko *et al.*, 2011).

The political economy of media is sparingly applied to explore the relationship between the film industry and policy-making. Guback (1969) offered an explanation by proclaiming that the film texts and content were easily accessible for research, while information about the economic and ideological structure of the culture industry was difficult to retrieve due to complex structures of ownership and control. Subsequently, Wasko (2004: 134) argued, "analysis is mostly based on materials generated by the industry itself and is hardly ever critical of the industry." Besides, researchers examined film as a text and context in the humanities tradition that made film a less attractive subject area for social scientists and political economists (Wasko, 2004). In recent decades, however, researchers focused on the political and economic interests of the film industry, and the rapid development and cartelization of film industries in the United States, Europe, Japan and India (Kunz, 2006; Lorenzen, 2009; Rasul and Proffitt, 2012).

Accordingly, the interest of the critical scholars in Bollywood, Mumbai's over-the-top film industry, has amplified, and the number of studies on Bollywood has multiplied (Flew, 2007; Geetha, 2003; Jaikumar, 2006; Rao, 2007). Bollywood applied a vigorous marketing strategy in recent decades, which was actively supported by the Indian government through Bollywood-friendly policies such as enactment of laws facilitating foreign direct investment and reduction in entertainment tax (Jaikumar, 2006; Rasul and Proffitt, 2012). This was not unique, as governments traditionally supported their culture industries in various parts of the world. For example, the US government keenly promoted Hollywood in East Asia, Europe and Latin America to exploit entertainment markets and sustain an American sphere of influence in different parts of the world (Miller *et al.*, 2005; Prindle, 1993; Trumpbour, 2002).

During the previous decade Bollywood produced films carrying political themes and advancing the Indian government's political agenda and state ideology in the region. Films such as *LOC Kargil* (2003) and *Lakshya* (2004) had strong patriotic and jingoistic undertones that were in consonance with the government's foreign policy. Conversely, when a process of détente between India and Pakistan had caught momentum in the region, Bollywood films such as *Veer Zara* (2004) *Main Hon Na* (2004) and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015) endorsed harmony and friendship between the two countries. Analysing Bollywood using the propaganda model with a focus on the flak filter will be a significant contribution in the political economy of mass media tradition, as the propaganda model has previously been employed to study the influence of various filters on the selection of news content only.

Filtered entertainment: Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model focused on the strategies employed by the politically and financially powerful elite to marginalize dissident voices. The essential constituents of the propaganda model are termed as news filters. The first content filter is outlined as the size, ownership concentration and owners' wealth, and profit-driven operations of media conglomerates. Recent decades have witnessed momentous changes in the structure of the media industry, and there is a growing trend towards conglomeration through joint operations, mergers, interlocking directorships and large investments (Bagdikian, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Mosco, 2009). For example, five major corporations control the flow of information and entertainment content in the United States (Bagdikian, 2004). These organizations generate huge profits through advertising and other commercial ventures, hire lobbying firms to cajole politicians to relax regulations in their favour, and increase their size and wealth at the expense of local and minority media organizations (Mosco, 2009). For a full discussion of the modern strength of these five filters, see [Chapter 3](#).

Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that advertising, the primary source of revenue for the media, functions as the second filter. Advertisers are not interested in the size of the audience, but they are interested in right kind of audience – those who have the purchasing power (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Jhally, 1989). Bettig and Hall (2012: 82) maintain that, “one of the primary goals of advertising is to differentiate between scores of virtually indistinguishable products that promise to fulfil our needs.” Because advertising is one of the chief sources of revenue for the mass media, it works as an important content filter in routine operations of media industry.

The third filter, according to the propaganda model, is “the reliance of media on information provided by the government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary

sources and agents of power” (Altschull, 1995; Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2). There has been a growing trend in media organizations to depend on the information provided by government sources and private experts. Anderson (1997) asserts that while covering political and environmental issues, media depend on government sources, and only one side of the story is told. McChesney (2008) notes that during media reforms movement in 2003, the mainstream media offered negligible coverage to the activists protesting against proposed media ownership policy changes by the US Federal Communications Commission. In recent decades, the media’s dependence on government for not only news but also for friendly regulations protecting their economic interests, has increased.

Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that the powerful political and economic elite also uses flak to discipline the media. They described flak as powerful negative reactions to the media programs and coverage. They also asserted that “The ability to produce flak that is costly and threatening is related to power, and the government and private commercial interests are chief producers of flak and cooperate with one another to contain any deviations from the established line” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 26).

Congruently, to maintain control over the culture industry, anti-communist ideology was used as the fifth filter to hold back dissident voices. Although this filter was substituted by other ideological confrontations after the demise of the Soviet Union, it remained a ruling paradigm in media discourse for decades. The progressive campaigners expressing liberal opinions were kept on the defensive because they were labelled as pro-communist and traitors. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 30) suggested that, “the anti-communist control mechanism reached through the system to exercise a profound influence on the mass media.” In recent times, anti-terrorism rhetoric supplanted communism as a potential enemy. Herman (2009) noted that the notion of a *Red Threat* helped the United States to support rogue states that served its political and economic interests, and anti-communism rhetoric was used as an intellectual cover during the Cold War. He asserted that the *war on terror* was providing a similar cover to the United States to support oppressive regimes across the globe. The fifth filter is examined at length in [Chapter 4](#).

These five filters affect the nature of content produced by media and curtail the range of content capable of passing through these filters. For example, violation of human rights, torture of political prisoners and corruption of US *allies* in other countries is likely to be tolerated by the American government and media (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 2008). Media are expected to follow the government’s policy as they will attract flak from the government if they plan to comment unfavourably on a friendly state. Inversely, “reports of the abuse of worthy victims not only pass through the filters; they may also become the basis of sustained propaganda campaigns” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 32). By and large, these propaganda campaigns are adjusted to safeguard interests of the elite and the government. Rupert Murdoch’s media empire is a glaring example of ideological apparatuses that closely worked with the Bush administration to further its agenda in different parts of the world (Sussman, 2011). Similarly, Bollywood, being one of the largest culture industries in the world, worked closely with the government as the Indian state’s soft power to avoid flak, and, in return, harvested tangible economic benefits (e.g. tax cuts and soft loans) from the Indian government.

International public relations, Bollywood and the Indian state

The Indian state realized the potential of Bollywood as a tool of international public relations and

public diplomacy at the turn of the century. Vaish (2011) argued that the growing popularity of Bollywood – a term coined by the Indian English press in 1970s – had signified Indian soft power in a globalized world during the last couple of decades, which attracted the attention of the policy-makers interested in promoting a positive image of India at an international level. Due to its global outreach, Bollywood's worth in the Indian market had been Rs. 5,990 crores (\$12 billion) in 2004, and the pace of growth was likely to approach Indian Rs. 17,500 crores (\$35 billion) in 2011 (Subramanian, 2007). Various media institutions such as radio and TV (*Doordarshan*) and new technologies such as the Internet and DVDs supported the vertical growth of Bollywood as a global cultural industry (Punathambekar, 2010). After officially declaring Bollywood an industry in 1998, the Indian government vigorously helped Bollywood sustain its commercial growth by reducing entertainment tax, enacting laws to simplify foreign direct investment and offering soft loans to the producers (Rasul and Proffitt, 2017). The government also offered Bollywood a tax relief on the income grossed through releasing movies in foreign countries (Thussu, 2006). The synergetic relationship between the Indian government and the film industry was articulated on numerous occasions through statements of official representatives. For instance, the Information Minister, Sushma Swaraj, plainly declared in 2003 that the Bollywood-friendly policies of the Indian government helped Bollywood increase its exports from \$40 million in 1998 to \$180 million in 2001 (Athique, 2012; Thomas, 2010). In June 2008, the Indian prime minister said that Bollywood would be used as a diplomatic tool and envisioned a new role for the culture industry that signified a symbiotic relationship between the Indian government and Bollywood (The Times of India, 2008). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that the soft power of India could work as a pivotal instrument of foreign policy and became the first Indian leader to acknowledge the impact of the culture industry and business on the making of foreign policy.

Keeping in view the wide-reaching reception of Bollywood movies, in 1998 the Indian Finance Minister termed the film industry as Indian soft power on the floor of the Lok Sabha – the lower house of the Indian parliament (Arpana, 2008). The Indian parliament had legislated rules enabling commercial banks to sponsor the film industry and allowing foreign direct investment to support the production of high-quality films. The government also reduced entertainment tax and relaxed rules governing the shooting of foreign films in India (Thomas, 2010). Due to cuts in taxes and softer regulations, Indian entertainment exports leapt from \$10 million in 1990 to \$100 million in 1999 (Power and Mazumdar, 2000). Kaur and Sinha (2005: 107) argued that the Indian government had realized the commercial potential of Bollywood on account of production of “family films” and emergence of the middle-class Indian diasporic communities, which were capable of investing “in the Indian state's political, economic, and cultural plans.”

Bollywood also cultivated strong ties with the Indian Foreign Ministry. According to Chatterji (2008), the Public Diplomacy Division of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs cooperated and financed *Saregama India Ltd* to produce a special volume of Indian popular songs, which was presented to diplomats and foreign dignitaries as a part of diplomatic courtesy. Interestingly, this album was presented to the officials of Pakistani Foreign Ministry for the first time when an Indian delegation visited Pakistan in 2006. The corporate sector in collaboration with the Indian government used soft power for economic gains as well. For example, iPods and CDs loaded with popular Indian music were distributed among delegates in the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2006 to boost Indian influence among global business and political leadership (Thussu,

2006). Similarly, Skamak Davar (a Bollywood choreographer) choreographed shows to enhance awareness about India's growing political and economic importance in the global community through an "India everywhere" public-private promotional campaign (Kavoori and Punathambekar, 2008). Baru (2009) argued that the External Publicity Division of the Indian Foreign Ministry not only promoted India abroad but also developed consensus on key internal policy issues among highly diverse domestic publics by efficiently using Bollywood and other mass media. The Indian government successfully applied the soft power potential of Bollywood to unite the country at national level and exported Indian values to other parts of the world. Nye (2005) termed the cultural prowess of a country as its soft power, which "rests upon the attractiveness of its culture, the appeal of its domestic political and social values, and the style and substance of its foreign policies" (2005: 11). Soft power was recognized as a significant promotional tool in various parts of the world, and Joseph Stalin – the leader of the USSR – had once proclaimed that he would have diffused communism globally if he had a powerful film industry such as Hollywood under his control (Miller *et al.*, 2005).

Passing through the flak filter: Bollywood as a tool of public diplomacy

The discussion in the preceding paragraphs delineated a synergistic relationship between Bollywood and the Indian government's international public relations strategies, which exploited the appeal of the culture industry to propagate state-sponsored ideology at national and international levels (Baru, 2009). This synergy existed almost everywhere in the world, and various states such as the United States, Germany and Japan actively used their film industries to promote their political and economic interests in different regions of the world (McQuail, 2010; Prindle, 1993). Bollywood also supported the internal and external policies of successive Indian governments (Baru, 2009). For example, the narrative of the Bollywood films invariably mirrored the Indian government position on Pakistan, despite Bollywood's massive Pakistani audience. The relationship between both South Asian countries had passed through many turbulent phases. In 1999, both countries fought a limited war in the Kashmir region, and the Indian government accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorism in India. An ongoing conflict brought the mutually hostile neighbours to the brink of a full-scale war as both countries amassed their armed forces on the borders during 2001–2002. After a couple of tense years, the two governments kicked off a process of détente. The Indian culture industry, being an equally popular entertainment industry in both countries, was not unresponsive in such convoluted geopolitical situations affecting millions of people on both sides of the border.

In the last two decades, Hindi films carried political themes and depicted wars in which Pakistan was invariably presented as a villain and a rogue state that sponsored terrorism. During the previous decade, four popular box-office hits from Bollywood – *LOC Kargil* (2003), *Lakshya* (2004), *Veer Zara* (2004) and *Main Hon Na* (2004) – focused on the nature of the changing relationship between India and Pakistan. A couple of these movies – *Lakshya* (2004) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) – contained jingoistic subject matter, as these films were about the Kargil War in the Kashmir region, while the other two – *Main Hon Na* (2004) and *Veer Zara* (2004) – focused on the normalization of relations and commended the peace process between the two countries. These movies were produced and distributed by important players in the Indian entertainment industry, and featured Bollywood heartthrobs equally popular in India and Pakistan (Chatterji, 2008). The flak filter in Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model adequately explains why

Bollywood was interested in addressing controversial issues between India and Pakistan at the beginning of the new millennium.

Herman and Chomsky (2002) defined flak as an adverse reaction of individuals, organizations and governments to unfavourable media content. Flak might entail verbal censure, threats, legal actions, financial sanctions, advertisement cuts, physical assaults, anti-press laws and a host of other reactions through which an unruly media could be tamed (McChesney, 2008). Large-scale flak usually brings misfortune to media if a large and powerful group or organization is unhappy with the media coverage of certain issues. Herman and Chomsky (2002) argued that direct or indirect flak could only be produced by actors in the corridors of power. Since governments and their allied political and business groups wielded unrivalled power in developing countries, media might have to bear the brunt of their “misconduct” and insurrectionary attitude. Therefore, advertisers and financiers of media tended to “avoid offending constituencies that might produce flak and their demand for suitable programming is a continuing feature of the media environment” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 26). The propaganda model explained how advertising and regulation were used in United States during the McCarthy years to deal with unfriendly media.

The Indian film industry experienced its first flak in 1918, when the Cinematography Act was passed by the British colonial rulers who were offended by the subtle nationalist undertones in the first Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, which was released in 1913 (Hasan, 1997). Several other movies were produced in India before independence that attracted the wrath of the rulers who used oppressive tactics and framed laws to control rebellious sentiments in the films. All the same, these movies were very popular among people who had access to cinema. After independence, criticism on the government was still not acceptable, and movies containing patriotic themes were huge successes on the silver screen. For example, *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1973), *Watan Ke Rakhwale* (1987), *Border* (1997) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) were war movies that received positive responses at the box office. Similarly, all movies depicting the Indo-Pakistan relationship in the first decade of the twenty-first century closely followed the government’s foreign policy agenda. It could be argued that patriotism ruled Indian cinema (Kaur and Sinha, 2005) and the moviemakers avoided raising issues that may not run parallel to the official policy for the fear of flak from the government and the audience. A negative reaction from the government would have adverse and exorbitant economic implications for the film industry, which was experiencing an economic boom. Content was carefully filtered in Bollywood products so as to please policy-makers, audiences and financiers.

The fear of flak has always worked, as Herman and Chomsky (2002: 18) suggested that “mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interests.” Mass media rely on information flowing from official sources because government sources are credible information-providers. Spokespersons of the governments and armed forces arrange regular briefings for media professionals in times of war and peace. While commenting on sensitive issues linked to the foreign policy of a nation, the governments always act as a filter through which only officially sanctioned content can pass. Prindle (1993) argues that despite its liberal bias, Hollywood seeks instructions from Washington before producing movies on sensitive diplomatic subjects. For a longer discussion of the Pentagon’s penetration of Hollywood, see [Chapter 6](#).

Similarly, the Indian government has cultivated a symbiotic relationship with Bollywood. The central government not only purveyed financial benefits to Bollywood by declaring it an

industry, but also facilitated filmmakers to shoot movies on Indo-Pakistan relations in militarily sensitive areas (Rasul and Proffitt, 2011). For example, the shooting of the film *Lakshya* (2004) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) would not have been possible without the Indian government's active involvement in the scripts of the movies because shooting at over 4,000 metres (14,000 feet) above sea level depended on the logistic support and information provided by the government (Kazmi, 2004). Considering the culture industry as an important propaganda tool, the Indian government had been keenly assisting Bollywood. On June 25th, 2009, the Ministry of Information's Films Division, in collaboration with the Armed Forces' Film and Photo Division, organized a two-day festival on war films, which was inaugurated by Major General (retired) E. D'Souza (Thaindian News, 2009). In the festival, a prominent Bollywood producer, Mahesh Bhatt, commented on the role of Bollywood movies in preventing a full-scale war between India and Pakistan. Traditionally, the Indian culture industry always followed the government's official foreign policy while selecting themes related to war and conflict with other countries, and the government's influence on the cinema filtered content on sensitive diplomatic issues through a one-sided supply of information.

The ideology of the state is also a determinant of the flak. According to the propaganda model, a filter that determined the flow of cinematic content was the anti-communist ideology in the United States. This ideology was invoked during McCarthy years and remained popular throughout the Cold War era. However, after the collapse of the USSR and the 9/11 attacks, the war on terror emerged as an ideological filter to purge media content of possible ideological contamination (Herman, 2009). McChesney (2008), in fact, added another dimension to the propaganda model that explained an intended or unintended connivance between American media and the Bush administration's war and energy policies. He argued that media offered uncritical support to the Bush administration in the post-9/11 scenario with little discussion on the repercussions of prolonged military operations.

Anti-terrorism ideology worked well in India, and Bollywood produced movies on terrorism in Kashmir and other parts of India. For example, *Maachis* (1996), *Border* (1997), *LOC Kargil* (2003), *Lakshya* (2004) and *Main Hon Na* (2004) were movies enclosing narratives related to the troubled Kashmir region. There had been an ongoing uprising in the Kashmir valley since 1990, and the Indian government accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorism in the disputed state. Both countries fought a limited war in the Kargil district of Kashmir, which provided Bollywood an opportunity to produce two movies – *LOC Kargil* (2003) and *Lakshya* (2004) – in the succeeding years. In 1962, India had a border conflict with China that led to a brief war. After a couple of years, Bollywood produced a movie, *Haqeeqat* (1964), that depicted China as an enemy. Conversely, almost all Bollywood war movies since the 1960s have portrayed Pakistan as an enemy. Herman and Chomsky (2002) argued that an ideology based on animosity mobilized and united people against the enemy and worked as a mechanism of political control. Politicians also used war rhetoric to win elections and distracted people from serious political debates on domestic issues, inefficiency and corruption of the government (Rasul and Proffitt, 2011; Van Zoonen, 2005). As politicians set an agenda for the public through their speeches, it is difficult for media to overtly oppose official foreign policies. Consequently, pressure of the government's ideological position and a fear of losing audiences turns media docile and filters the content in a direction deemed desirable by policy-makers. The Indian government actively promoted the film industry as a soft power, and an important tool to propagate a state-sponsored ideology. Accordingly, Bollywood movies on Indo-Pakistan relations displayed a symbiotic relationship

between Indian cinema and the Indian Foreign Ministry.

Concluding remarks

This study highlighted the significance of the flak filter in international public relations. The analysis of the movies supported the relevance of the five filters in determining the content of the Indian culture industry. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the movies on Indo-Pakistan relations involved the largest production and distribution firms in India. These firms were interlocked in joint ventures with one another as their owners acted, wrote, directed, produced and distributed mutual products and happened to be each other's relatives and some of the richest people in India (Thomas, 2010). The films on the Kargil war would not have been possible to produce without government and military support, which provided information to writers and offered logistical support as shooting in a militarily sensitive area, over 4,000 metres above sea level, was not possible for the film industry of a developing country. Thus, the Indian government acted as a source of information and a facilitator in the processes involving production. Similarly, fear of flak was visible in the content of movies as in war situations; no one wished to be labelled as a traitor. The role of ideology as a content filter was particularly relevant to the Bollywood's portrayal of Indo-Pakistani relations. Anti-Pakistan rhetoric in the Indian culture industry helped the government support the political status quo and enabled government functionaries to maintain internal control.

This study also supported the view that culture industry was a direct beneficiary of the government policies and managers of the Bollywood production houses strived to maintain a close liaison with government officials to avoid flak and protect their economic interests. Similarly, Brookes (1999) posited that media had a commercial interest in supporting the government because "the more the coverage of [the] government, the more power the media will have." Hence, the film industry filtered its content in consonance with the government policies and especially supported its foreign policy to avoid flak from government, citizens and pressure groups. Mosco (2009: 40) also supported this view by arguing that "political economy of communication has always contained an important international dimension." It is understandable, therefore, if Indian cinema advocated policy of the government by producing content in agreement with the government's external policies to exhibit its patriotism (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 2008). However, it remains to be seen whether Bollywood supports Indian foreign policy towards other countries of the region and future research on Bollywood's use in international public relations campaigns as a tool of public diplomacy could focus on other dimensions of film industry as a soft power.

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9

STILL MANUFACTURING CONSENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Disinformation, “fake news” and propaganda in the 2017 elections in Kenya

Jacinta Mwendu Maweu

Introduction

Kenya held its second general elections under the 2010 constitution on August 8th, 2017. In the disputed poll, the Independent Elections and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) declared the incumbent, Uhuru Kenyatta, winner with 54 per cent of the vote, beating his main challenger, Raila Odinga, who got 44 per cent of the votes cast. Odinga challenged Kenyatta’s win at the Supreme Court of Kenya. And on September 1st, the Supreme Court nullified the re-election of Mr Kenyatta and ordered a fresh vote to be held within 60 days. The repeat poll was conducted on October 26th, 2017. The majority of voters boycotted the repeat presidential elections with fewer than 40 per cent of registered voters turning up to vote.

The 2017 general elections were some of the most competitive, tense and drawn out in Kenyan history, and were highly challenging for media and other key stakeholders such as local and international election observers and the election management body, the IEBC. The nullification of the August 8th presidential results by the Supreme Court of Kenya and the order for a fresh election in 60 days only complicated matters further. This chapter examines how new media technologies were used to hijack democracy in the 2017 elections and to manufacture consent for the presidential election outcome through the use of fake news, disinformation and government propaganda on online media platforms. Social media platforms are increasingly becoming indispensable tools in Kenya’s politics – with mixed uses. On a positive note, political leaders avidly use them to pass crucial information to their supporters, to campaign, to spread peace messages and to mobilize their supporters. Citizens, on the other hand, use social media to exchange information on critical campaign issues, mobilize support for their preferred candidate and highlight issues which mainstream media may overlook, ignore or downplay for whatever reason, to spread peace messages and to keep mainstream media in check by eroding some of its agenda-setting power. But these same platforms have also been used by both political leaders and citizens to incite hatred and violence through ethnic hate speech and to spread fake news and disinformation. Ethnic hate speech, especially through text messaging, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp were partly blamed for the large-scale 2007/2008 post-election violence, 2013 and 2017 elections.

The widespread reach of social media in 2017 presented even greater opportunities and risks for the use of social media both positively and negatively during the electioneering period. The Communications Authority of Kenya estimates that there were over 40 million Kenyan Internet users as of 2017, with over ten million WhatsApp users, over six million on Facebook and over two million active monthly users on Twitter (BAKE, 2016). Due to this wide reach, the use of social media by both political leaders and citizens across the political divide was more evident with the main political parties and key political players hiring local and foreign firms and individuals to manage their social media accounts. A Geopoll media survey conducted four months before the August polls showed there was a high prevalence of fake news and disinformation surrounding the elections, with 90 per cent of respondents studied having seen false or inaccurate information and 87 per cent considering this information deliberately false (Geopoll and Portland, 2017). There were also several cases of fake news propagandists using fake Twitter and Facebook accounts of leading mainstream media houses and leading politicians to spread false information. In March 2018 details emerged of Cambridge Analytica's claims that it engineered a digital campaign that painted incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta in positive light while smearing his main rival Raila Odinga behind the scenes to sway public opinion in his re-election. There has since been a heated debate on the role of this foreign firm in manipulating the outcome of the 2017 presidential elections, other factors attributed to the flawed and contentious elections notwithstanding. The increased online activity by both political leaders and citizens brought with it an alleged increase of fake news and cyber propaganda that cast a shadow on the integrity of the election outcome. The contested results for the two presidential elections were largely dismissed as "fake computer generated results" due to the alleged corruption, hacking of the IEBC's website and the extensive spread of fake news and disinformation in the run up to the elections (Dahir, 2017; Miriri, 2017).

The Kenyatta government and his Jubilee political party also mounted mega government propaganda four months prior to the August election dubbed "Jubilee delivers" through the website www.delivery.go.ke. This was largely publicised through social media, especially Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms as well as political advertisements in print and broadcast media. These political advertisements were also accompanied by rampant spread of fake news and disinformation on the Jubilee government's achievements to sway and influence voters. Through a qualitative analysis and reading of some of the social media texts, this chapter will seek to establish the extent to which new media technologies may have facilitated the manufacturing of consent among voters through the use of half-truths, falsehoods, disinformation, misinformation and political conspiracy theories with "virality" being the main currency of trade rather than truth.

The chapter is organized into four sections including the introduction. The next section applies the propaganda model within the context of mainstream media in the 2017 elections in Kenya. This section will show how the filters of the propaganda model are still relevant in analysing the role of the Kenyan media. The normative roles of the media during elections will be highlighted in an attempt to show how the performance of these roles can be impaired if the media acts as propaganda tools for the political and economic elite during the electioneering period.

The third section focuses on the propaganda model, social media, fake news and disinformation in the 2017 elections in Kenya. The section will trace how social media use in elections in Kenya has evolved over time, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. The fourth section is the concluding part of the chapter and it summarizes the main issues and

observations raised in the previous sections.

The propaganda model and mainstream media in the 2017 elections

The propaganda model explains “the broad sweep of the mainstream media’s behaviour and performance by their corporate character and integration into the political economy of the dominant economic system” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: xii). Herman and Chomsky (2002) observe that although there are differences between the US media and media of other countries, at a basic structural and organizational level, the private-corporate media in other economically developed and developing countries operate under the restrictions imposed by the propaganda model.

Together, they outline five main “filters” that impact overall patterns of media performance in a democratic society, namely:

1. the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and the profit orientation of the dominant mass media firms;
2. advertising as the primary source of the mass media;
3. the reliance of the media on information provided by government, 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 through which those who own and control media power are able to “filter” out the news fit to be availed to the public premised on their private interests (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2).

For a detailed discussion on the modern strength of these filters, see [Chapter 3](#).

Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that political and economic elites often use propaganda as a means of thought control in a democratic society to manufacture consent within the majority subordinate members of that society. In the 2017 elections in Kenya, there was a lot of propaganda marshalled especially by the political elite throughout the electioneering period just like was the case in the 2013 elections. The media were also accused of mainstreaming the peace propaganda narrative (Maweu, 2017), of “accepting and moving on” after the contentious two presidential elections in August and October. In this section, the second and third filters are used to show how the media may have been used to play a propagandistic role on behalf of the political and economic elite.

The 2017 election witnessed some of the most hotly contested electoral battles in Kenya’s recent history with very high stakes involved at both the national and local levels (Ouma, 2018). The hallmark of democracy is in the ballot and the media is central to the success of democracy in any country. As custodians of public interest, the media have a moral and professional obligation to sensitize the public and hold the state and other stakeholders to account so that elections can be free, fair and credible (Peace Pen Communications, 2017). There were many things that went wrong in 2017 that culminated in two presidential elections. There were several contentious issues in the run up to, during the actual election days, after the nullification of the August 8th presidential elections, the repeat election on October 26th and after that put the media on the spot. There were several key areas of criticism, perceived weaknesses, media bias, propaganda and complicity in denying the people critical information, helping build certain

narratives through skewed stories, editorials, talk shows, “expert opinions” or failure to cover certain issues based on political considerations or fear. Most mainstream media editorials, commentaries and talk shows have been accused of a tendency to focus on the need for “peace, respect for the constitution and faith on the electoral agency and other state institutions” (Peace Pen Communications, 2017: 14) without critically probing the contentious issues raised about these institutions.

The mainstream media was also largely criticized for lack of proper focus and call for accountability and transparency by the IEBC arising from the apparent ineptitude, wrangles, and state capture, including a lack of interest in the murder of Chris Musando, the IEBC chief Information and Communication Technology officer murdered a few days before the August 8th polls. The IEBC’s lack of structured dialogue and responsiveness to the demands especially by the opposition were not sufficiently questioned, with the media largely portraying NASA, the opposition alliance, as intransigent, and making “unrealistic” and “irreducible” demands after the nullification of the August 8th presidential results (Ouma, 2018; Peace Pen Communications, 2017). There were also several cases of the executive explicitly intimidating the judiciary after the Supreme Court ruling nullifying the presidential results, but the media seemed to give this a wide berth.

As public watchdogs, the conduct of the media towards political players and electoral process is key to democracy, especially in transitional democracies such as Kenya. If this does not happen, the will of the people is subverted. The media as the fourth estate and public watchdogs have a professional and democratic responsibility to expose anything that goes wrong during the electioneering period including any apparent partial judgement by the electoral management body, election observers, or the misuse of public funds by the incumbent to sway public opinion. But the monitorial and watchdog role of the mainstream media in Kenya during the 2017 elections has been questioned after a seeming deliberate neglect of contentious subjects and an obsession with trivial issues such as focusing on an ordinary citizen who turned up to vote while eating “*githeri*,” a local delicacy of beans and maize, hence the branding “*githeri* media” by Kenyans on social media (Ogola, 2018). For instance, after the highly contested and controversial August 8th general elections, international observers in unison came out on August 10th, even before the vote counting was complete, and in the midst of allegations of gross vote rigging by the opposition to issue a statement that praised and hailed the elections as “credible, free, fair and transparent.” Instead of critically interrogating the claims of electoral fraud raised by the opposition, general public and some civil society organizations, the media chose to timidly endorse the verdict issued by the election observers. The principle of free and fair elections dictates that the media should monitor and keep watch over the entire electoral process, from campaigns, polling days, counting and announcements, to acceptance or rejection of outcome. The media is the primary means through which public opinion is shaped and at times manipulated during general elections. Its normative role during such critical times is not and should therefore not be to act as a mouthpiece for any government body, political party, local or international organization or particular candidate but to protect public interest.

But at the height of the soaring tensions over the disputed presidential election results in August 2017, the media seem to have been arguably compromised by the government and international election observer missions to protect the status quo, reversing the seeming initial attempts to report for democracy (Ouma, 2018). After the repeat elections on October 26th and the swearing in of Uhuru Kenyatta as president, the debate on the media’s role has increasingly

centered on whether or not it was part of the conspiracy to legitimize what has largely been regarded gross electoral injustice, thereby threatening the peace, cohesion and stability of Kenya as a democracy. There were key contentious issues around the elections that the media ought to have critically examined that they largely either downplayed or ignored altogether. Key among these included: the capacity, commitment and independence of the IEBC to ensure free and fair elections, internal wrangles and eventual fall out between the IEBC Secretariat and the Commissioners, significantly undermining the trust of some Kenyans in the electoral process, and the role of election observers and the actual transmission and tallying of results as well as the final declaration of the winner (Peace Pen Communications, 2017: 14).

The media has also been faulted for not showing a genuine commitment to promoting transparency and to calling the government and opposition failings to account (Ogola, 2018). Just like in the 2013 elections, “peaceocracy” became their preoccupation in the run up to and after the August 2017 elections, thereby failing to press for transparency in the tallying process. The media also largely avoided covering the clashes between security agencies and sections of opposition supporters, reckless and wanton police killings of perceived opposition supporters, harassment, threats and intimidation of civil society organizations perceived to be anti-establishment and instead attempted to sway the public into “accepting and moving on” from the heavily disputed presidential election results that the Supreme Court later annulled.

This seeming complacency in most media houses has been attributed to the Jubilee government’s strategy to coerce them into playing its tune by denying mainstream media government advertising in the run up to the 2017 elections. The Government Advertisement Agency (GAA) was established in 2015 under the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology to “centralize government advertisements to save government unnecessary cost,” but had the obvious hidden agenda of controlling editorial content in the media, and was effectively used to muzzle media freedom and responsibility in the 2017 elections. A state-owned publication dubbed *MyGov* produced by the Kenya News Agency was introduced, which carried government advertisements and was circulated by inserting it in major newspapers on weekly basis. The catch was that editorial content in *MyGov* could not be edited by media houses to meet the set standards due to contractual obligation of no alteration of what the government had presented, whether it is factual or not. This was a major blow to the editorial independence of these media houses and an obvious violation of the cardinal rules of fact checking, accuracy and balance in any news article published by any newspaper that is worth its salt. *MyGov* was used during the campaign period to spread unbalanced news stories on the achievements of the ruling Jubilee administration (Peace Pen Communications, 2017). Mainstream print media were therefore “forced” to embrace this government propaganda tool after the ban of direct placement of advertisements on newspapers by ministries and government departments.

The same propaganda was replicated in electronic media by the Presidential Delivery Unit’s documentaries and through advertisements that highlighted the achievement of Jubilee administration since coming to power in 2013. The idea of *MyGov* was mooted at a special cabinet meeting where senior government officials complained that the private media was not promoting positive image of the ruling administration in their editorial content, and there was a need to devise a new way of forcing the media to carry articles done by government-friendly journalists employed by Kenya News Agency.

The self-censorship by some media houses to remain in the good books of the Jubilee government due to the GAA’s tough guidelines and the move to toe the line drawn by the

government significantly impacted on how the media covered the 2017 general election. Journalists were accused of turning a blind eye to some of the critical electoral and post-election concerns. For instance, at the height of the post-election tensions and sporadic protests in opposition strongholds such as Kisumu, Mathare and Kibera where people were being killed, leading TV stations gave this a total black out. A senior editor with Kenya Broadcasting Corporation was reported to have directed his team not to cover the protests through a WhatsApp group (Peace Pen Communications, 2017). There seem to have been some silent policies in the newsrooms not to upset the ruling administration. After the contentious August 8th polls, the main opposition coalition NASA called on its supporters to boycott Nation Media products for alleged dissemination of political propaganda in favour of the ruling Jubilee government.

The alleged government interference in editorial independence of mainstream media finally came to public knowledge on January 30th, 2018, when the government made good its threat to shut down leading media houses for going against the executive order not to air the mock swearing-in of the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, as the people's president. This was followed by the resignation of Nation Broadcasting Division head and chair of the Kenya Editors Guild Linus Kaikai after a public disagreement over his insistence to cover live the January 30th events. This disagreement revealed that there had been intense behind-the-scenes intimidation and threats to media houses and individual journalists who were perceived as critical of the government. Linus Kaikai publicly declared that a section of media managers and select editors from the main media houses had been summoned to a meeting that was attended by the president, the deputy president, interior cabinet secretary, the ICT cabinet secretary and the attorney general at the State House, Nairobi. In the meeting, it was alleged that the president threatened to revoke the licences of media houses that would air the purported swearing in of Odinga. This came to pass with the actual shutting down of leading TV stations (NTV and Citizen TV) for airing it.

A series of events followed after this that pointed to the supposed interference of the executive in media freedom. One of the most popular columnists in the *Daily Nation* and a fierce critic of the Jubilee administration, Dr David Ndii, was also suspended soon after for being too critical of the powers that be. Soon after there was the resignation of a popular news anchor Larry Madowo and the mass withdrawal of six foreign and local based columnists from the leading media conglomerate in east and central Africa, the Nation Media Group, due to alleged editorial interference by executive power. This pointed to a serious threat to media freedom and responsibility that the leading media houses may have been operating under during the electioneering period. Such state interference was said to have been in collusion with editors in chief, who were accused of being keener on securing lucrative business deals for their shareholders than with public interest (Makokha, 2018; Mayoyo, 2017). This has partly been blamed for the mainstream media's apparent reluctance to hold power-holders to account. Ownership structure was also a major filter that played out in the way mainstream media performed in the run up to the 2017 elections. For instance, several local language radio stations were accused of peddling political propaganda and hate speech against perceived political opponents. Media relayed sensational, unbalanced, hateful and inflammatory content that profiled Kenyans as "Them vs. Us." TV and radio stations biased "right thinking" panellists as "experts" that are approved and funded by the political and economic elite to hoodwink the public further. Most of these media houses are owned and controlled or have links with powerful political and economic elites who were using them to endorse and reinforce their ideology. One

such media outlet was Kameme FM that broadcasts in the Kikuyu language and is owned by MediaMax Limited, a company linked to the Kenyatta family. The station thrived in broadcasting hateful content about Raila Odinga and his Luo community pitting the members of the Kikuyu community against the Luos.

The propaganda model, social media, fake news and disinformation in the 2017 elections

In the run up to the 2017 elections, political camps, mainly Jubilee and NASA, set up teams of paid bloggers, social media influencers, bots and data mining companies (Aristotle, Inc. for NASA and Cambridge Analytica for Jubilee) to shape public opinion online. There was extensive explicit disinformation, propaganda and hate speech targeted at individuals and organizations affiliated with the opposite political camp via Twitter hashtags, WhatsApp, Google Ads and Facebook sponsored posts. The issue of fake news shot into the public limelight in April 2017 during political party primaries when a doctored front page of Kenya's leading newspaper, the *Daily Nation*, was circulated in Busia County in Western Kenya, one of Raila Odinga's strongholds. It claimed that the opposition Orange Democratic Movement's Dr Otuoma had defected to the ruling Jubilee party. The story was designed to discredit him on the day of the nomination. Screenshots of these fake headlines were circulated widely on social media. A second example was a *Daily Nation* headline that read "It's a hard life for Uhuru and Raila on the trail" that was doctored to read "It's hard for Raila to beat Uhuru: polls."

Although Kenya has a long history with fake news and disinformation around election time (often referred to as political propaganda) that stretches back to the one-party rule under Daniel Moi, it is the magnitude and reach facilitated by new media technologies in the 2017 elections that is of prime concern. In a survey conducted by Geopoll and Portland (2017), 90 per cent of the respondents suspected having seen or heard false/inaccurate information regarding the election. Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were singled out as the most popular social media platforms to spread propaganda, disinformation and fake news in the run up to the elections. The survey of 2,000 Kenyans concluded that fake news is a core part of the country's news mix. The study also found that the fake news trend is growing in scale and sophistication with social media fuelling its distribution. In the run up to the elections there were also several fake websites designed to appear like credible news websites locally and internationally that were used to spread all manner of misinformation and propaganda. There were fake news stories and videos circulating and purporting to be from credible news sources such as NTV Kenya, CNN, BBC, Citizen TV, with the fabrication professionally done to minimize chances of detection. This information was widely shared on social media platforms aimed at swaying public opinion through distortion on key electoral issues and leading political figures.

Owing to the recognition by political leaders of the potential that social media has to mobilize supporters (Borah, 2014: 201), it has become a visible component of political campaigning in Kenya. The high accessibility, penetration and affordability of smartphones has liberated and given ordinary citizens more agency to participate in political affairs either constructively or destructively. At a relatively low cost, citizens and politicians alike can easily mobilize, lobby and co-ordinate collective action outside of a formal hierarchy if they have the right social networking tools and have an active audience (Bott *et al.*, 2014: 109). In Kenya, WhatsApp has an estimated over ten million users (BAKE, 2016) and it is the most popular channel of

communication among the urban population with numerous WhatsApp groups on virtually anything from friends' groups to funeral fundraising groups to colleagues' groups to political debate groups. Much of the time the content shared on WhatsApp finds its way to Twitter and Facebook. Anyone who has an Internet connection can tell their story, their version of events, and connect with audiences that may be inclined to agree or disagree with them. Social media was the go-to platform for information on the elections, especially for young people, who constituted more than half of the 19.6 million registered Kenyan voters this election (Nanjira, 2017). The mis/disinformation circulating online could easily mislead these young people, most of whom do not watch, read or listen to alternative sources of news on traditional media. According to the IEBC, 9.9 million (51 per cent) of the registered voters are aged between 18 and 35.

Although social media platforms can provide Kenyans with alternative spaces to voice their grievances on thorny unresolved past electoral injustices, the same platforms provided an avenue for dissemination of extensive fake news and political propaganda which may have compromised the electoral process. There were widespread and far-fetched exaggerations, falsities, half-truths and facts all presented side by side. In this section, I will examine some of the propaganda and disinformation mounted especially by the Jubilee camp that has been attributed to Cambridge Analytica. As is evident from most of the messages, there was extensive use of online platforms to circulate propaganda aimed at painting the opposition leader Raila Odinga as the enemy of democracy.

New media technologies seem to have created opportunities for new political tricks (Castells, 2007: 256), such as fake blogs (Rampton, 2007) and fake Facebook accounts (Pedro, 2011) for the political elite in Kenya to their advantage. There was, for instance, a fake Facebook account dubbed "The Real Raila" which is still operational even now. This was extensively used to craft messages that smeared the person, image and reputation of the opposition leader with damning, hateful and inciting messages aimed at painting him as unfit and unworthy to unseat Uhuru Kenyatta. It is evident from the messages that the incumbent Jubilee administration outdid their political opponents in using new media to take propaganda to a new level in the 2017 elections. The claims by the critics of the propaganda model that new media has liberated the masses and provided diverse channels for citizens to counter propaganda are therefore not entirely true. Money and power still largely plays a major role in controlling and "filtering out" political propaganda online.

The Real Raila Facebook account has nearly a quarter-million followers and produced endless short, professional-quality, highly edited attack videos against Odinga, conveying messages such as:

Dangerous Raila has a long history of creating poverty, inciting violence and dividing Kenyans. Raila will turn Kenya into Kibera if we don't stop him. On August 8th, choose progress, choose Uhuru. SHARE to stop Raila and save Kenya!¹

While Raila works to steal Kenya's money, Uhuru works to end the very corruption Raila demonstrates! SHARE if you agree!²

Uhuru stands for unity, peace and progression for all Kenyans while liar Raila represents corruption, violence and tribalism. LIKE if you want 5 more years of unity, peace and progression for all Kenyans under Uhuru!³

One particularly notable and viral fake news advert was circulated on the Internet just weeks before the 2017 national elections. The 90-second video, expertly shot in moody monochrome, presented a dystopia in which Raila Odinga won the August 8th vote and plunged the nation into

a violent and inept dictatorship, setting tribes against one another while terrorists run riot. It claimed an Odinga victory would lead to him dissolving the parliament, revoking the constitution, declaring himself president for life. It claimed his victory would result in martial law, an end to education, clean water, that women would have to give birth in the streets, starvation, and that much of Kenya would be subject to jihadist rule. “Stop Raila Save Kenya. The Future of Kenya is in Your Hands,” the video concluded. The caption accompanying the video was: “You decide if this becomes a reality on August 8th, 2017. Don’t let this happen to Kenya.” The 90-second hate/attack video was viewed nearly half a million times on Facebook and was endlessly circulated on Twitter and WhatsApp. It was uploaded to the fake Facebook account “The Real Raila.”

From the above messages it is evident that Raila’s political rivals were carefully orchestrating an online campaign of fear against him. This was meant to manufacture consent through the wide reach of social media that Kenya was better off without Raila, who was portrayed as its number one enemy. The creator hoped the messages would influence the presidential election outcome. The fact that this website is still up and running to date makes one wonder why its hateful and inciting content was not pulled down “in 24 hours” as promised by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) as the watchdog mandated to monitor hate speech during the elections.

As observed earlier, the Jubilee administration launched mega propaganda through both mainstream and social media dubbed #JubileeDelivers and #GOKDelivers. The Presidential Delivery Unit (PDU) championed aggressive online propaganda about the Jubilee administration’s achievements using government officials, which is contrary to the Election Act. Nevertheless, there were carefully orchestrated online propaganda messages in the run up to the August 8th elections. The public was bombarded with #GOKDelivers messages on YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook over and above those on broadcast and print media. For instance, senior politician Sicily Kariuki heralded the local administration’s food relief efforts using the #GOKDelivers hashtag⁴ with the Ministry of Lands doing the same, claiming to have issued more than three million title deeds, keeping their promise and surpassing their target.⁵ It is worth noting that land is one of the most contentious and emotive issues in Kenyan politics since independence and most post-electoral conflicts rotate around the land issue. The Jubilee online spin masters carefully capitalized on playing upon people’s emotions around this.

There were also fake videos carefully produced to appear like they were authentic news from leading international media houses such as CNN and the BBC. These two media houses came out swiftly and denounced any association with the purported news clips. Both videos included false opinion polls showing that Uhuru was leading. The two fake videos were obviously done by Jubilee supporters and were meant to paint Uhuru in good light after he snubbed the said presidential debate. One fake video report about Kenya’s election was made to appear as if it was from the BBC’s *Focus on Africa* programme. It was circulated widely on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. The report contained a fake opinion poll indicating that President Uhuru Kenyatta would win the August 8th elections.

There was also a fake but realistic-looking US diplomatic cables circulated that appeared to show embassy officials predicting instability, celebratory violence, “severe unrest and a massive breakdown of law and order” if Odinga were to defeat Kenyatta in the election. The US embassy quickly tweeted its own version of the cable with the word “FAKE” across it in bold red font,

noting “the US never supported one party or candidate in #ElectionsKE. Alleged Embassy document is fake. We call for all violence to end now.”

It can therefore be argued that social media in the 2017 elections in Kenya offered spaces for voters and politicians alike to find, support and share facts, falsehoods or feelings (Hermida, 2016). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp did not just bring together audiences for entertainment and social networking; these spaces shaped political views and news for their audiences, drawn from the choices of their social connections and regurgitated by algorithms to match personal preferences (Hermida, 2016). Due to the embedded social structure of these platforms, audiences are less likely to challenge messages deliberately designed to misinform, disinform or spread propaganda. The creators and distributors of such false information can therefore easily manufacture the consent of their followers to influence their viewpoints especially by playing upon the divisive “us versus them” strategy. Conspiracy theories about politics and politicians seem to have flourished in Kenya’s social media in the run up to the elections championed by skilful spin doctors such as Cambridge Analytica, acting for the Jubilee party, where the currency was virality rather than the truth. People deliberately shared false information provided it fit their view or their political leaning.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were used by politicians and citizens in the run up to the 2017 elections in Kenya to promote propaganda, fake news and half-truths with the aim of manufacturing consent for the election outcome. The widespread access to smartphones enabled individuals to produce and disseminate much more immediate and detailed audio, visual and text messages, many of which were fake news aimed at disinforming and misinforming the electorate about the elections. With an estimated ten million WhatsApp, 6.1 million Facebook and over 2.2 million Twitter users (BAKE, 2016), social media platforms are the latest frontier in Kenyan political engagement taking the spread of fake news, disinformation and political propaganda to a new, high-tech level. The importance of social media and the Internet, which was in a nascent state when *Manufacturing Consent* was written, was something that Herman and Chomsky could not have foreseen, and has changed the way we receive our news.

But this chapter has also highlighted how and why the propaganda model is still relevant in manufacturing consent in the digital era in Kenya. Through the use of government propaganda both online and offline and the deployment of highly aggressive propaganda campaigns on social media, it can arguably be observed that money and power still filter what is consumed by the masses both online and offline and that social media has become an alternative popular podium for spin doctors and PR teams to sway the masses on behalf of politicians in Kenya. The 2017 presidential campaign saw a drastic rise in the importance of social media for campaigns, in particular allowing politicians to propagate fake news and disinformation. The involvement of foreign firms such as Cambridge Analytica that used social media to mount far-reaching propaganda only shows that new media technologies have provided the political elite with additional avenues to manipulate the masses during elections. The #GOKDelivers campaigns through mainstream media and the use of the denial of advertising to coerce the media to play to the tune of the government further shows the relevance of the filters of the propaganda model in evaluating media performance during elections.

Notes

- 1 See: [www.facebook.com/TheRealRaila/videos/324664264673668/?__xts__\[0\]=68.ARD8CRzL9shUN7nY5zQyiztcItc3RJuaGZ_HQoeyl2XMju2ot-ohTEr8MVAwJHpvMs2KXjeeSIvVYLsn8Okz9oFxo9Z9e3D-7U5F9i7eZWEL4jSl4HOsJzc5S19ISdO-H0j998j4lTA_xVnkzXRHAw4LPF81dmPKPE_oTq7eJ-dpUFSN1TO9&__tn__=-R](https://www.facebook.com/TheRealRaila/videos/324664264673668/?__xts__[0]=68.ARD8CRzL9shUN7nY5zQyiztcItc3RJuaGZ_HQoeyl2XMju2ot-ohTEr8MVAwJHpvMs2KXjeeSIvVYLsn8Okz9oFxo9Z9e3D-7U5F9i7eZWEL4jSl4HOsJzc5S19ISdO-H0j998j4lTA_xVnkzXRHAw4LPF81dmPKPE_oTq7eJ-dpUFSN1TO9&__tn__=-R).
- 2 See: www.facebook.com/TheRealRaila/photos/a.249680662172029/328829540923807/?type=3&__xts__%5B0%5D=68.ARA-8KP_c6wQVY36wLB57IEAFaOg7Lcdaqcp1jBMTss_Y0i1jdiiXU4H_7_OMFWqfin97j-N4gnMJSYsT5MXvM0SPuy2uFUwtug6cCNeliH-y7sZEY9b5elfo0JiGgDjZEP2JSwgtNejVHD2kUvPla4BUACRoYvmiph-i-uZeqOa7InNckdC&__tn__=-R.
- 3 See: www.facebook.com/TheRealRaila/photos/a.249680662172029/328828647590563/?type=3&__xts__%5B0%5D=68.ARBS47HBQorC4VfIO3i5xsFV76X1medqZQzsw5AISacbufrC7E2SSOi3Wb56qJlvmvmpR.
- 4 See: <https://twitter.com/SicilyKariuki/status/893158560816918528>.
- 5 See: https://twitter.com/Lands_Kenya/status/893052737839083520.

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10

WORKING INSIDE THE RACKET

An insider's perspective to the elite media

Matt Kennard

As a reporter for the *Financial Times* (FT) for four years I was in constant close contact with the global elite, and this contact convinced me our world is owned and run by a racket. The racket is comprised of transnational corporations, investment and hedge funds, banks and many other different concentrations of wealth across the globe. While we may not know their names, this racket is who holds real power. They have the backing of the US government, and, if needs be, the might of the US military. If this is the case, why do we know so little about it? This is due, in no small part, to the mainstream media system, of which I was a part. I will try in this chapter to explain how it works.

First of all, the media itself is owned by the racket, so there should be no surprise that it reflects their interests and does not expose it. The media are not just cheerleaders for big business, they *are* big business. Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model's first, and possibly most important, filter in explaining media behaviour is that the mass media are big businesses controlled by wealthy individuals and have important interlocking interests with other major corporations, banks and governments (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 14). We are given the illusion of choice from a range of titles, but, in reality, in the United States, five companies own 90 per cent of the media. It is a similar situation around the world. For instance, in Britain just three corporations control 70 per cent of UK newspaper circulation (Media Reform Coalition, 2014), and even after the closure of the *News of the World*, Rupert Murdoch controls 34 per cent on his own (Eaton, 2013).

Second, there's a strong cultural dynamic in shaping the news to the liking of the racket. Herman and Chomsky noted that the desired output is not achieved primarily through crude editorial intervention but by

The pre-selection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centres of power.

(2002: preface)

This starts even before you reach the newsroom. After university I attended the Columbia School of Journalism, the most prestigious journalism school in the world. Thirty-nine per cent of New

York Times and 47 per cent of *Wall Street Journal* employees with journalism Master's degrees graduated from the university (Wai and Perina, 2018), conveying a distinct advantage to those who can afford the US\$105–146,000 per year Columbia itself (2018) estimates it costs to attend. I thought it would be an intellectually vibrant place. During my undergraduate degree at Leeds University in the UK I was exposed to all sorts of ideas from the left and right. But at Columbia, the training ground for the elite corporate media, nobody asks questions of the powerful. Chomsky (2003: 238) claims education is a system of indoctrination, training us to be unthinking, passive and conformist, and at elite universities (like Columbia), you find far more obedience and conformity than in other places.

One example of this is was when Henry Kissinger came to give a speech and hold a discussion with us at the journalism school. People asked him softball questions like “what do you think of China's human rights policy” and I was sitting there thinking, “this is Henry Kissinger, one of the worst mass-murderers of the twentieth century and nobody is even challenging him!” So I put my hand up and asked how he slept at night, mentioning his role in the overthrow of Allende in Chile and in the mass bombing of South East Asia.

A deathly hush came over my peers. I had crossed a line. The dean of the school got up to stand with Kissinger, literally backing him up and indicating I should shut up. After that, everyone at Columbia considered me a loony and a discredited attention-seeker. One of my professors even told me I had “disgraced myself.” That is the attitude towards power they had. Everything in my time in elite institutions attests to what Herman and Chomsky wrote about the culture and narrow ideology of the media.

At the *FT*, it quickly became clear that the racket and the media are one and the same, with journalists unconsciously and automatically doing its bidding. By the time you have reached an institution like the *FT*, you have already internalized what you can and cannot say and the presuppositions of the powerful. For example, we are *always* the good guys. The West is not like the rest of the world. Even if the United States or United Kingdom make mistakes, it is for a noble cause. Therefore, while we may criticize mistakes, there is no scrutiny of intent. That is the beauty of the system. It is not like working for *Pravda* in the USSR; you will not be put in jail for what you write or say. You simply will not rise or progress. Anyone providing too much genuine criticism will not be promoted, not have their contract renewed, or not be commissioned to write again. Those that do accept the preconceptions will be promoted. And that is why no one in the media ever even *thinks* these things; it is simply implicit within what they do. It is not a conscious decision journalists make; nobody thinks “I want to promote war or neoliberal economics to further my career.” But if everyone in the office is thinking it, it is very difficult to go into work every day and be at odds with everyone, you would go crazy. It is certainly not because they are stupid. Far from it: some of the smartest people around work for the *FT*. It is a form of thought control. You are so embedded in the system that you do not even realize it exists. And you are completely free to say what you like *if your bosses like what you say*.

I watched young journalists entering the profession and I noticed how they began to change or moderate their opinions as they adapted to what was necessary in these institutions. Winston Churchill once said that if you are not a socialist in your twenties you have no heart; if you are not a conservative in your thirties you have no brain. There is some truth to this in terms of the media. If you are not a conservative by your thirties it means you have not adapted to the conservative media institutions that you have entered. Journalists get less idealistic as they get older. That is how the system works. It roots out ideas that are a danger to it and promotes those

that reinforce it. Slowly, we stop expressing opinions that differ from the official line and shed our youthful idealism. Those that do not are generally not rehired. The few that carry on thinking as before quickly become labelled “mavericks,” “controversial” or “ideological.” The mainstream media, and particularly the *FT*, has a very fixed idea of how the global economy functions and should work and if you do not toe that line you are cast aside. That is how the power structure works. Dissidents or people who think independently and differently to everybody else in the office will not last long.

The “best” journalists are the ones that accept these rules naturally and unconsciously. As Rosa Luxemburg said, “those who do not move do not notice their chains.” If you do not move and start to push boundaries you will never know they exist. I started pushing boundaries. I read *Manufacturing Consent* before I started my Master’s degree and felt it was a convincing argument. Then I went to Columbia Journalism School and straight on to the *FT*. At the newspaper I decided to carry on writing as I would previously because I wanted to try out Herman and Chomsky’s ideas. So I continued to put in prepositions like “US-backed” when describing US-backed dictators when the convention is to only write “Russia-backed” or “Iranian-backed” when describing bad characters. What happens when you submit stories describing dictators as “US-backed”? Would editors remove it? And it was explicit: yes they would. And the amazing thing is that no one would ever know because most journalists would never even *think* to put that in. It is an incredible form of mind control because everybody thinks they are free; the best people to write censored articles are people who do not even realize they are performing self-censorship. And there is a reason for that: people like to think they are independent, fearless journalists that stand up to power, all the bullshit we are taught in journalism school.

I soon realized journalism was a racket. So I began planning to write an exposé. What you read in my (2015) book would never, in any form, get into a newspaper. I learned not to bother to even pitch stories that I knew would never even be considered. After I got rejected time and again pitching various interesting and important articles I just stopped. Was it self-censorship? Totally. But I learned the sorts of stories they wanted.

An example of this was Haiti. My real intention in visiting was to research the latest example of disaster capitalism (see Klein, 2007): how the US government and massive international finance institutions the IMF and World Bank had used the disaster of the 2010 earthquake that killed 300,000 and left millions homeless to force through mass privatization of the island, turning the Caribbean nation into a giant sweatshop for Western businesses to exploit. Haiti was to be the poster child of the free market, created and nurtured by international capitalism. In fact, the racket created a modern-day slave state in the ruins of the country, via a process usually described as “therapy” in the media. Of course, I knew none of this would be published and instead I filed bland reports about poor rates of recovery and a lack of private sector investment in the country (see Kennard, 2011; Kennard and Mander, 2012) aimed at the usual audience of *FT* readers.

Another factor influencing the media is time and space constraints. Working as a journalist you have to be concise. In the documentary *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky states on camera that:

The beauty of concision – saying a couple sentences between two commercials – the beauty of that is you can only repeat conventional thoughts. Suppose I go on *Nightline*, for whatever it is, two minutes, and I say “Gaddafi is a terrorist,” “Khomeini is a murderer” etc. I don’t need any evidence, everyone just nods. On the other hand, suppose you’re saying

something that isn't just regurgitating conventional pieties, suppose you say something that's the least bit unexpected or controversial, people will quite reasonably expect to know what you mean. If you said that you'd better have a reason, better have some evidence. You can't give evidence if you're stuck with concision. That's the genius of this structural constraint.

Concision is powerful. Even if we were inclined to challenge the dominant narratives there is no time to do it. As a journalist, if you are on a deadline you have just minutes to write a story, so you cannot go into an extensive analysis of why some term used by everyone is wrong. Therefore, the dominant narrative is bolstered. But most journalists do not see it as part of their role to challenge power because they have been taught in elite journalism schools to be neutral. They are neutral within a context they do not recognize is there. Neutrality within the corporate media and an unequal society means default support for the US or UK foreign policy position and to corporate power.

When I left the *FT* I tried to write for other newspapers I believed would be more sympathetic to my political persuasion. But I found out something more disheartening than what I had already experienced: the racket has a complete stranglehold over the media. Liberal and leftist mainstream publications like the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* are as compromised and bought off as conservative ones. They are often owned by the same people and are funded through advertisements from the same corporations, rely on the same sources and play by the same rules. These outlets are essential to maintaining the illusion of a fair, balanced, open and obstinate media. They pretend to be fighting the racket and to be on the side of the people, when, in fact, they underpin it. Whether right or left, it is largely the same class of people that inhabit the newsroom. Herman (1982: 149) wrote that journalists are “predominantly white middle class people who tend to share the values of the corporate leadership.” Over half of Britain's top journalists went to private schools, which account for only 7 per cent of the population and nearly 40 per cent attended Oxford or Cambridge University (Sutton Trust, 2006) while over 20 per cent of *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* employees went to an Ivy League school, and many more to Columbia (Wai and Perina, 2018). So many *Guardian* journalists coming from this elite background (38 per cent of *Guardian* employees attended Oxbridge (Elliott, 2011)) see themselves as liberal lions fighting against the system and the powerful. However, if you ever step to the left of them, you will be attacked. They zealously guard their left flank instructing everyone that theirs is the limit of acceptable discussion and anything more radical is beyond the pale. This is true of the *New York Times* as well. These journalists reserve their most scorching critiques for leftists, not for conservatives, whom they share largely the same outlook with. As Chomsky (1992) notes, the liberal press already considers itself so extreme in its opposition to power that anything more would be madness. The message is clear: this far and no further.

The *Guardian* is completely intertwined with the racket; it relies on it for its day-to-day reporting. For example, the “Cities” portion of its website is completely sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, which promotes neoliberal globalization around the world and even used to fund explicitly racist Nazi eugenics studies. Its “Global Development” section is sponsored by the controversial Gates Foundation. Meanwhile its “Social Impact” section of its “Sustainable Business Zone” is sponsored by the mining behemoth Anglo-American and its “Sustainable Living” section is paid for by food and consumer goods conglomerate Unilever. In these sections, these massive corporations are given space to publish propaganda about how they embrace corporate social responsibility – a naked attempt to improve their image so they can continue exploiting entire countries for profit.

The *Guardian* claims this sponsorship has no effect on its content. But my own experiences lead me to believe this is not completely the case. I reported on a town in El Salvador where many of its residents could not afford clean drinking water, despite living on top of a large aquifer (Provost and Kennard, 2014). Meanwhile, large businesses like brewing and bottling giant SABMiller were making huge profits from the water. When we contacted SABMiller, they reacted angrily. Only a few days later, the *Guardian* carried a news article (sponsored by the Gates Foundation) that was an interview with Karl Lippert, the president of the Latin American division of SABMiller, which responded to some of the issues brought up in our report. The piece was functionally identical to a corporate press release, and there was no interrogation of Lippert's claims. Why did the *Guardian* publish this as news? Was it because the newspaper had a "partner zone" sponsored by SABMiller on its website?

The racket's rules are imposed more forcibly by the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* than they are by the *Financial Times* or by Rupert Murdoch's publications because they are the definers of what is an acceptable, "respectable" progressive opinion. Their role is about restricting our imagination and getting the public to worship their oppressors and undermining popular political movements that challenge the racket. But at least the *Guardian* did not formally endorse the coup against democratically elected President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela like the *New York Times* did.

Two days after the coup, when new leader Pedro Carmona had suspended the constitution, sacked every elected official in the country and declared himself in sole charge of the country, The New York Times (2002) happily noted:

With yesterday's resignation of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator. Mr. Chávez, a ruinous demagogue, stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader, Pedro Carmona.

Venezuela, a country that challenged the racket openly, has been absolutely brutalized in the press since Chavez's election, not simply by the flow of negative articles, but also the complete censorship of any positive news, leading to a completely warped perception of the country. Studying how challenges to the racket are reported is perhaps the best way of understanding the capitalist id. A CBS news report in the wake of Chavez's death in 2013 perfectly encapsulates the inhuman priorities of the racket and its media, and, by extension, our entire political and economic system. The author describes the reaction of the oil market on the news of Chavez's death and informs us that Chavez invested Venezuela's oil wealth into social programmes like free health clinics and education drives, but, it continued, without a hint of irony, "Those gains were meagre compared with the spectacular construction projects that oil riches spurred in glittering Middle Eastern cities, including the world's tallest building in Dubai and plans for branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums in Abu Dhabi" (Karita, 2013).

This kind of calculation shows the priorities of the system. Under Chavez, poverty was reduced by half and extreme poverty by three-quarters, while Venezuela was declared illiteracy free in 2005 and undernourishment fell from 15 per cent to a "not statistically significant" number (MacLeod, 2018: 44–7). Yet these benefits for the poor majority that were systematically deprived of their share of the country's mineral wealth for centuries is unimportant. What is important are the gaudy buildings where the rich can feel important and puffed up. Chavez wasted the money on healthcare and schools when he could have built skyscrapers.

The day after Chavez's death, Daniel Hannan (2013) wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* that Chavez, and other Latin American leaders challenging the racket, like Ecuador's Rafael Correa and Bolivia's Evo Morales, had stayed in power not because of wealth redistribution or social programmes, but because of their foul-mouthed and vulgar tirades against civil society. Hannan ended by asking if there was any hope for Latin America. His answer was that it lay in Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe who had "achieved a level of popularity the Bolivarians [Chavez, Correa and Morales] could only dream of" because of his "privatization programmes." Likewise when Uribe left office, the *FT* (Rathbone, 2010) ran an article calling him "the saviour" of Colombia.

This "saviour" is a president who oversaw killings on an extraordinary scale, using his paramilitaries against the FARC rebels, but also unleashing them on dissidents and the population in general. Under Uribe, Colombia became the most dangerous place in the world to be an activist. More unionists and activists were killed in Colombia than all other countries of the world combined, and his paramilitaries presided over the massacre of thousands of civilians and left millions displaced. The *FT* concluded that he left a very big pair of shoes to fill. This is only true if your gauge is how many murders you can oversee as president. Hannan since became a Conservative member of the European Parliament, successfully moving from one part of the racket to another.

The portrayal of foreign leaders in the press is directly correlated to how accommodating they are to foreign investors. For instance, Lula da Silva, the reformist social democratic president of Brazil between 2003 and 2011 was treated positively in the Western media, precisely because his rule did not impact negatively on foreign investors. While he did redistribute state resources more equitably than previously, he did not nationalize, expropriate or antagonize big business. However, in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, leaders were voted into office that directly challenged international capitalism and gave power back to their people through nationalizations and the cancellation of exploitative contracts. As a consequence, they were vilified as anti-democratic dictators and terrorists. One *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "Bolivia's descent into rogue state status" claimed the country has become "a petri dish in which a culture of organized crime, radical politics and religious fundamentalism festers" (O'Grady, 2013). This distinction between governments was made by former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda (2006) in *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of the racket. He claimed Latin America was made up of "good left" governments that are "modern, open-minded and reformist" and "bad left" governments like Correa in Ecuador, Morales in Bolivia and Chavez in Venezuela that are "nationalist, strident and close-minded," "committing macro-economic folly ... driving their countries into the ground." If you challenge the power and the bottom line of the racket, this is the fate that awaits you in their press.

Reading the press, especially the financial media, is perhaps the best means to understand the sickness of our world because they are more open in their pathology. The day after the Marikana massacre, where 34 striking South African miners were killed, the *FT* (Wagstyl, 2012) noted that the murders "cast a long shadow." But this shadow was not the devastating impact on the families of the dead, or the criminal complicity of the company the strikers were protesting against. No, it was that "shares in Lonmin, the platinum mining group at the centre of the dispute, plunged by 10 percent" after the story made worldwide headlines. Even worse for the *FT* was that, "A tragedy of this scale will have a political, economic and social impact—which seems certain to affect the investment climate." The financial press does not care about human

life, only business profits.

The Economist's (2015a) article on Angola's economic problems was similarly revealing of the capitalist id. It noted that the government had announced an end to fuel subsidies, a "generally sensible move" that would "hit the poor especially hard in an already highly unequal society." If we unpack the sentence we learn that hitting the poor especially hard is generally sensible. And this is true – if you are a rich foreign investor who cares only about profit and not about human life. The state helping its most vulnerable citizens to heat their homes is unimportant.

Sometimes the suffering of the poor is not only sensible, but also necessary. In the same issue of *The Economist* (2015b), it discussed the "lure" of Egyptian dictator Abdel el-Sisi, whose security forces had killed almost 1,500 people in the last six months of 2013. The magazine instead lauded the Egyptian stock market's success, claiming:

Sisi has consolidated power and ruthlessly crushed dissent. His firm rule and programme of economic development have also attracted much-needed investment. Freedoms must be sacrificed in the service of progress, the president argues. For now, at least, he may feel vindicated.

Thus, Sisi's destruction of rights in Egypt is vindicated due to the stock market's performance. On Sisi, the *Wall Street Journal* (2013) wrote that, "Egyptians would be lucky if their new ruling generals turn out in the mould of Chile's Augusto Pinochet" who "took over power amid chaos but hired free-market reformers and midwifed a transition to democracy." The "chaos" and "transition" it references are a US-backed coup against a democratically elected president, Salvador Allende, and 17 years of fascist dictatorship that left thousands dead or disappeared along with total economic destruction. But a lot of investors became very wealthy. At least the financial press is honest about profit being the sole motive.

The racket has a tight grip on the mass media, and we will not be free until that grip is broken. But that hold has begun to weaken. We are living through an exciting transition period in the media. It is now easier than ever before to challenge it and all around the world new media ventures free of corporate control are springing up. What is happening now is an irreversible shift of power to the people. For centuries, the elites controlled the means of communication. But with the arrival of the Internet, there are many ways to get around it and to project your voice to the world. The elite are trying to maintain control, but they are failing.

We have seen the rapid rise of political movements all around the world that are challenging the hegemony of the elites. In Spain, Podemos rose to become a major political party in just a few years. In Greece, Syriza grew to take power, despite the strong opposition of the traditional media. However, they are now under enormous pressure from the racket – the European banks and their political mouthpieces. In the United States, Bernie Sanders shot to national prominence with his campaign to become the Democratic nomination for president, all while calling himself a socialist and bitter media hostility towards him. In the UK, the unlikely figure of Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in a huge surge of grassroots energy. Corbyn was written off as "unelectable" and described as a "laughing stock" and later as a threat to national security and a terrorist sympathizer by the media. Despite this, he has galvanized a new generation and may become the next prime minister of the United Kingdom. People have ditched the discredited old institutions, old media and old politicians, realizing that the truth does not lie in the "respectable" centre. Soon both old politics and old media will be confined to the dustbin of history.

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CONCLUSION

New media, same old rules

Alan MacLeod

The Internet was in a nascent state when Herman and Chomsky developed the propaganda model, and few could have predicted how profoundly it would change journalism and the world. Many hoped it would lead to an improved, more harmonious society and increased international unity, as barriers between nations were steadily eroded. However, the Internet has not set us free. Although it allows for instant global communication and access to near unlimited information, the modern period is beset by a rise in factionalism, nationalism and suspicion of foreigners, be they immigrants, refugees or other out-groups. Furthermore, Edward Snowden revealed how big media is working with the government to constantly monitor us while Yasha Levine's (2017) work has argued we should see Google as an extension of the surveillance state. Facebook and other big social media companies have begun to partner with US governmental organizations to control what the world sees in their feeds (MacLeod, 2018a). Through online advertising, Google has also contributed to the collapse of the funding model of traditional media, with total advertising revenue for US newspapers declining by two-thirds between 2005 and 2017 (Pew, 2018).

As such, journalism is in a period of economic and moral crisis, as staff around the world are laid off in record numbers. The United States has seen a 50 per cent cut in total newspaper staff since 2006 alone (Pew, 2018). This increases the pressure on those who are left and their susceptibility to powerful interests' propaganda. The 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman *et al.*, 2017) centres on the crisis over how to fund journalism and widespread concern about fake news and how media can combat it. However, is fake news not the predictable outcome of a media system increasingly driven by short-term profit and with a decreasing commitment to reporting and balance?

Only 43 per cent of the world trust the news in general, with 38 per cent of the American, 30 per cent of the French and 43 per cent of the British public believing so, while only 38, 33 and 41 per cent of respondents in those same countries agree that news media does a good job of sorting fact from fiction (Newman *et al.*, 2017). The increasing distrust in media has been spurred by attacks and condemnations on it from politicians around the world. In 2018 Donald Trump labelled the media "the enemy of the people." Perhaps more troubling, 26 per cent of Americans and 43 per cent of Republicans believe the president should have the power to close down media outlets engaging in "bad behaviour" (Ipsos, 2018). Nevertheless, as the neoliberal system atrophies and withers, and as political challenges to it from groups from all sides appear around the globe, the media's role as perhaps the prime agent in manufacturing consent for the political and economic system becomes clearer and the interest in and need for a theory that explains the

political economy of the mass media becomes ever more crucial.

Herman and Chomsky claimed their model was one of the best tested in the social sciences. In [Chapter 1](#) Noam claimed it could easily still be applied to modern events and he would not change its basic structure, arguing that although there has been a remarkable change in how we receive news, the Internet and social media have not affected the model's integrity whatsoever and most of the five filters are as applicable now, if not more so, than in 1988. That there has been increased academic interest in Herman and Chomsky's model, as a new generation of scholars understand its importance and applicability, is a welcome development, and [Chapter 2](#) explores and catalogues the modern developments, including increasing the scope of the model to media outside of the traditional, agenda-setting news and suggesting we consider race and gender structures as issues that filter our news.

[Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) discussed Chomsky's claim in more detail. Media ownership is more concentrated than ever before and is often merely a part of larger, international conglomerates. Advertising is more crucial than ever as a source of revenue and advertisers are in a stronger position vis-à-vis media, with industry experts agreeing the firewall (if it ever truly existed) between editorial and advertising has been extinguished. Studies have shown the media is more dependent on official sources than previously while it is far easier to contact and organize flak against journalists online.

Likewise, it is clear that the media continue to legitimize and delegitimize third world elections based solely upon their relationship with the one superpower in the world, and not on their own merits. For instance, the Venezuelan and Colombian presidential elections, both conducted in May 2018. The Venezuelan elections (a US enemy) took place under the watchful eyes of senior election observation missions from around the world, who testified to the process' legitimacy and cleanliness. The Latin American Council of Electoral Experts, made up of senior election organizers, many from countries openly hostile to Venezuela, noted that the vote reflected "the will of its citizens, freely expressed in the ballot box" while praising the process' "high level of security and efficiency" (CEELA, 2018). The African mission concluded it was a "fair, free, and transparent expression of the human right to vote and participate in the electoral process" and that the results were trustworthy due to the "comprehensive guarantees, audits, the high-tech nature of the electoral process" and "implored the international community" to recognize the results (Venezuelanalysis, 2018).

In comparison, the Colombian (a key US ally) elections took place amid a general state of terror, where the incumbent conservative political party under Alvaro Uribe had overseen the murder of 10,000 innocent civilians, where paramilitaries issued death threats against anyone voting for the left-wing candidate, Gustavo Petro, who narrowly survived an assassination attempt shortly before the vote, and where American election observers were mistaken for voters and openly bribed. There were over 1,000 official electoral fraud complaints (Kovalik, 2018).

Despite this, the media portrayed the Venezuelan elections as a sham, the *New York Times* describing them as "a contest that critics said was heavily rigged" (Neuman and Casey, 2018) while the *Huffington Post* christened it "a vote denounced as a farce cementing autocracy in the crisis-stricken OPEC nation" (Cohen and Aponte, 2018). In comparison, the media legitimized the Colombian elections, consistently emphasizing the high turnout and rarely, if ever, mentioned the aforementioned issues. When mentioned, they were often only euphemistically referred to. CNN noted there was a "taboo" against voting for leftists in Colombia (McLaughlin, 2018), while NPR described Uribe as "immensely popular" (Otis and McCallister, 2018). *The*

National Post (Armario and Goodman, 2018) did identify a danger in the elections, but only that Petro could swing Colombia “dangerously toward the left and rattle markets.”

Likewise, examples of worthy and unworthy victims in today’s media are manifold, for example, the coverage of the 9/11 and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, which left similar numbers of people dead (around 3,000 and 4,600 respectively). 9/11 became the largest media event of the twenty-first century while the devastation of Maria was largely ignored. A study by Media Matters (Sullivan and Power, 2018) found that CNN, MSNBC and Fox News collectively spent just over 30 minutes on the story. They covered the racist outburst of TV star Roseanne Barr for ten hours over the same period. The reason for this is the identity of the victims and the perpetrators. In 9/11 the victims were Americans working in finance while the perpetrators were terrorists from a region the United States was interested in invading. The victims of Hurricane Maria were largely working-class Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, the actions of the US government bore considerable responsibility for the death toll mounting, making Maria’s victims especially unworthy.

There have been a number of modern examples or updates to the model presented in this book. In [Chapter 5](#), Oliver Boyd-Barrett explored how centres of power such as governments understand the rules of journalism and manipulate the system by creating supposedly independent and credible sources for media to cite. Likewise, in [Chapter 6](#) we discussed the increasing role the state has in manipulating domestic popular culture, whether it is film, TV or video games. While there is no Soviet Union to use as an official enemy, [Chapter 4](#) argues that the anti-communist filter has been recently replaced with an anti-Russian filter that allows the powerful to smear any political challenge to their hegemony as agents of the Kremlin. Its effectiveness owes much to the decades of anti-Soviet propaganda those in the West were exposed to.

Although Herman and Chomsky claimed the propaganda model was explicitly for for-profit American media, they acknowledged its applicability to other countries with other media systems. In an interview with senior British journalist Andrew Marr, for instance, Chomsky argued that his model applies to the British media. As he said to Marr, “I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying. But what I’m saying is that if you believe something different, you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting” (Marr, 1996). Furthermore, much academic research has convincingly argued for the model’s applicability to the European (see Bergman, 2014; MacLeod, 2018b) and Canadian (see Klaehn, 2002) media, arguing that these countries share similar media systems, often dominated by large multinational, for-profit media companies sharing the same ideology based in countries with similar foreign policy goals as the United States and supported through advertising from similar corporations. Of course, there are differences in how media work in other regions, with many countries having much stronger labour unions and state broadcasting sectors than the United States and with a history of newspapers affiliated with political parties. Nevertheless, [Chapters 7, 8 and 9](#) explore the model in an African and Asian context, arguing that Herman and Chomsky’s ideas are key in understanding media performance today.

Therefore, this book shows that the propaganda model is as applicable as ever, and that the structural and cultural constraints that influence journalistic output continue to be relevant, as journalist Matt Kennard demonstrates in [Chapter 10](#). As he states, the “best” journalists are ones like Marr, who accept the constraints naturally and unconsciously. Those who do not start to push the boundaries will never know they exist. He started pushing boundaries.

Far from being obsolete in the new globalized age of the Internet and social media, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model remains an indispensable tool for understanding the political economy of modern media. The media is still manufacturing consent for elite interests. The theory's continued popularity among the public and its shunning by those in power is a testament to its salience today. It is therefore the duty of academics, intellectuals and all thoughtful people to fight against it, exposing the media for what it is, and to manufacture dissent.

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