

*From Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky (1988). Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. lix-lxiv*

## Preface

In this book, we sketch out a “Propaganda model” and apply it to the performance of the mass media of the United States. This effort reflects our belief, based on many years of study of the workings of the media, that they serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity,<sup>1</sup> and that their choices, emphases, and omissions can often be understood best, and sometimes with striking clarity and insight, by analyzing them in such terms.

Perhaps this is an obvious point, but the democratic postulate is that the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived. Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have support for this contention in the intellectual community.<sup>2</sup> If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to “manage” public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “special interests” in its commonsense meaning, not in the Orwellian usage of the Reagan era, where it designates workers, farmers, women, youth, blacks, the aged and infirm, the unemployed—in short, the population at large. Only one group did not merit this appellation; corporations, and their owners and managers. They are not “special interests,” they represent the “national interest.” This terminology represents the reality of domination and the operational usage of “national interest” for the two major political parties. For a similar view, with evidence of the relevance of this usage to both major political parties, see Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 37–39 and passim.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Gans, for example, states that “The beliefs that actually make it into the news are *professional* values that are intrinsic to national journalism and that journalists learn on the job... The rules of news judgment call for ignoring story implications...” (“Are U.S. Journalists Dangerously Liberal?” *Columbia Journalism Review* [Nov.–Dec. 1985], pp. 32–33). In his book *Deciding What’s News* (New York: Vintage, 1980), Gans contends that media reporters are by and large “objective,” but within a framework of beliefs in a set of “enduring values” that include “ethnocentrism” and “responsible capitalism,” among others. We would submit that if reporters for *Pravda* were found to operate within the constraints of belief in the essential justice of the Soviet state and “responsible communism,” this would be found to make any further discussion of “objectivity” pointless. Furthermore, as we shall document below, Gans greatly understates the extent to which media reporters work within a limiting framework of assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Neoconservative critiques of the mass media commonly portray them as bastions of liberal, antiestablishment attacks on the system. They ignore the fact that the mass media are large business corporations controlled by very wealthy individuals or other corporations, and that the members of what the neoconservatives describe as the “liberal culture” of the media are hired employees. They also disregard the fact that the members of this liberal culture generally accept the basic premises of the system and differ with other members of the establishment largely on the tactics appropriate to achieving common ends. The neoconservatives are simply not prepared to allow deviations from their own views. In our analysis in chapter 1, we describe them as playing the important role of “enforcers,” attempting to browbeat the media into excluding from a hearing even the limited dissent now tolerated. For an analysis of the neoconservative view of the media, see Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead, “Ledeon on the Media,” in *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection* (New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1986), pp. 166–70; George Gerbner, “Television: The Mainstreaming of America,” in *Business and the Media*, Conference Report, Yankelovich, Skelly and White, November 19, 1981; Gans, “Are U.S. Journalists Dangerously Liberal?”

The special importance of propaganda in what Walter Lippmann referred to as the “manufacture of consent” has long been recognized by writers on public opinion, propaganda, and the political requirements of social order.<sup>4</sup> Lippmann himself, writing in the early 1920s, claimed that propaganda had already become “a regular organ of popular government,” and was steadily increasing in sophistication and importance.<sup>5</sup> We do not contend that this is all the mass media do, but we believe the propaganda function to be a very important aspect of their overall service. In the first chapter we spell out a propaganda model, which describes the forces that cause the mass media to play a propaganda role, the processes whereby they mobilize bias, and the patterns of news choices that ensue. In the succeeding chapters we try to demonstrate the applicability of the propaganda model to the actual performance of the media.

Institutional critiques such as we present in this book are commonly dismissed by establishment commentators as “conspiracy theories,” but this is merely an evasion. We do not use any kind of “conspiracy” hypothesis to explain mass media performance. In fact, our treatment is much closer to a “free market” analysis, with the results largely an outcome of the workings of market forces. 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.

There are important actors who do take positive initiatives to define and shape the news and to keep the media in line. It is a “guided market system” that we describe here, with the guidance provided by the government, the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives, and the assorted individuals and groups who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives.<sup>6</sup> These initiators are sufficiently small in number to be able to act jointly

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<sup>4</sup> See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1921; reprint, London: Allen & Unwin, 1932); Harold Lasswell, “Propaganda,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928); M. J. Crozier, S. P. Huntington, and J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). For further discussion, see Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), chapter 1, and references cited, particularly, Alex Carey, “Reshaping the Truth; Pragmatists and Propagandists in America,” *Meanjin Quarterly* (Australia), vol. 35, no. 4 (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 248. Lippmann did not find this objectionable, as “the common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely, and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality” (p. 310). He was distressed that the incorrigible bias of the press might mislead the “specialized class” as well as the public. The problem, therefore, was how to get adequate information to the decision-making elites (pp. 31–32). This, he believed, might be accomplished by development of a body of independent experts who could give the leadership unbiased advice. Lippmann raised no question about possible personal or class interests of the “specialized class” or the “experts” on whom they might choose to rely, on their ability, or their right, to articulate “the common interest.”

<sup>6</sup> For example, Claire Sterling and the experts of the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies—Walter Laqueur, Michael Ledeen, and Robert Kupperman—have been established as the authorities on terrorism by the mass media; on the Sterling and Paul Henze role in working up the Bulgarian Connection in the plot against the pope, see chapter 4. In the case of Latin America, the media have been compelled to avoid the usual resort to the

on occasion, as do sellers in markets with few rivals. In most cases, however, media leaders do similar things because they see the world through the same lenses, are subject to similar constraints and incentives, and thus feature stories or maintain silence together in tacit collective action and leader-follower behavior.

The mass media are not a solid monolith on all issues. Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate. But views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors will be excluded from the mass media even when elite controversy over tactics rages fiercely.

We will study a number of such cases as we proceed, but the pattern is, in fact, pervasive. To select an example that happens to be dominating the news as we write, consider the portrayal of Nicaragua, under attack by the United States. In this instance, the division of elite opinion is sufficiently great to allow it to be questioned whether sponsorship of a terrorist army is effective in making Nicaragua “more democratic” and “less of a threat to its neighbors.” The mass media, however, rarely if ever entertain opinion, or allow their news columns to present materials suggesting that Nicaragua is more democratic than El Salvador and Guatemala in every non-Orwellian sense of the word;<sup>7</sup> that its government does not murder ordinary citizens on a routine basis, as the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala do;<sup>8</sup> that it has carried out socioeconomic reforms important to the majority that the other two governments somehow cannot attempt;<sup>9</sup> that Nicaragua poses no military threat to its neighbors but has, in fact, been subjected to continuous attacks by the United States and its clients and surrogates; and that the U.S. fear of Nicaragua is based more on its virtues than on its alleged defects.<sup>10</sup> The mass media also steer clear of discussing the background and results of the closely analogous attempt of the United States to bring “democracy” to Guatemala in 1954 by means of a CIA-sponsored

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academic profession for expression of approved opinion, as the profession largely rejects the framework of state propaganda in this instance. It has therefore been necessary to create a new cadre of “experts” (Robert Leiken, Ronald Radosh, Mark Falcoff, Susan Kaufman Purcell, etc.) to whom they can turn to satisfy doctrinal needs. See Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), for examples. On the process of creating experts to meet system demands, see our chapter 1 under “Sourcing Mass-Media News.”

<sup>7</sup> Like other terms of political discourse, the word “democracy” has a technical Orwellian sense when used in rhetorical flights, or in regular “news reporting,” to refer to U.S. efforts to establish “democracy.” The term refers to systems in which control over resources and the means of violence ensures the rule of elements that will serve the needs of U.S. power. Thus the terror states of El Salvador and Guatemala are “democratic,” as is Honduras under the rule of the military and oligarchy, and the collection of wealthy businessmen, bankers, etc., organized by the United States as a front for the Somocista-led mercenary army created by the United States is entitled “the democratic resistance.” See further, chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> In the eighty-five opinion columns on Nicaragua that appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in the first three months of 1986, during the “national debate” preceding the congressional votes on contra aid, not a single one mentioned this elementary fact. For a detailed review, see Noam Chomsky, “Introduction,” in Morris Morley and James Petras, *The Reagan Administration and Nicaragua*, Monograph 1 (New York: Institute for Media Analysis, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Only two phrases in the eighty-five opinion columns cited in the previous footnote mentioned that the Nicaraguan government had carried out reforms; none of them compared Nicaragua with El Salvador and Guatemala on this important question.

<sup>10</sup> See Dianna Melrose, *Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example?* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1985); see also chapters 3, 5, and 7, below.

invasion, which terminated Guatemalan democracy for an indefinite period. Although the United States supported elite rule and helped to organize state terror in Guatemala (among many other countries) for decades, actually subverted or approved the subversion of democracy in Brazil, Chile, and the Philippines (again, among others), is “constructively engaged” with terror regimes on a global basis, and had no concern about democracy in Nicaragua as long as the brutal Somoza regime was firmly in power, nevertheless the media take government claims of a concern for “democracy” in Nicaragua at face value.<sup>11</sup>

Elite disagreement over tactics in dealing with Nicaragua is reflected in public debate, but the mass media, in conformity with elite priorities, have coalesced in processing news in a way that fails to place U.S. policy into meaningful context, systematically suppresses evidence of U.S. violence and aggression, and puts the Sandinistas in an extremely bad light.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, El Salvador and Guatemala, with far worse records, are presented as struggling toward democracy under “moderate” leaders, thus meriting sympathetic approval. These practices have not only distorted public perceptions of Central American realities, they have also seriously misrepresented U.S. policy objectives, an essential feature of propaganda, as Jacques Ellul stresses:

The propagandist naturally cannot reveal the true intentions of the principal for whom he acts... That would be to submit the projects to public discussion, to the scrutiny of public opinion, and thus to prevent their success... Propaganda must serve instead as a veil for such projects, masking true intention.<sup>13</sup>

The power of the government to fix frames of reference and agendas, and to exclude inconvenient facts from public inspection, is also impressively displayed in the coverage of elections in Central America, discussed in chapter 3, and throughout the analysis of particular cases in the chapters that follow.

When there is little or no elite dissent from a government policy, there may still be some slippage in the mass media, and facts that tend to undermine the government line, if they are properly understood, can be found, usually on the back pages of the newspapers. This is one of the strengths of the U.S. system. It is possible that the volume of inconvenient facts can expand, as it did during the Vietnam War, in response to the growth of a critical constituency (which included elite elements from 1968). Even in this exceptional case, however, it was very rare for news and

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<sup>11</sup> In an article highly critical of the Reagan “peace plan” for Nicaragua in August 1987, Tom Wicker says, “Whatever his doctrine, the United States has no historic or God-given right to bring democracy to other nations; nor does such a purpose justify the overthrow of governments it does not like” (“That Dog Won’t Hunt,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1987). Wicker does not contest the claim that Reagan seeks democracy in Nicaragua; it is just that his means are dubious and his plan won’t work. We should note that Wicker is at the outer limits of expressible dissident opinion in the U.S. mass media. See further, chapter 3. For additional references and discussion, see Chomsky, *Culture of Terrorism*.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in response to the Guatemala peace accords of August 1987, the United States immediately escalated the supply flights required to keep its forces in Nicaragua in the field to the phenomenal level of two to three per day. The purpose was to undermine the accords by intensifying the fighting, and to prevent Nicaragua from relaxing its guard so that it could be accused of failing to comply with the accords. These U.S. initiatives were by far the most serious violations of the accords, but they were virtually unmentioned in the media. For a detailed review, see Noam Chomsky, “Is Peace at Hand?” *Z* magazine (January 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda* (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 58–59.

commentary to find their way into the mass media if they failed to conform to the framework of established dogma (postulating benevolent U.S. aims, the United States responding to aggression and terror, etc.), as we discuss in chapter 5. During and after the Vietnam War, apologists for state policy commonly pointed to the inconvenient facts, the periodic “pessimism” of media pundits, and the debates over tactics as showing that the media were “adversarial” and even “lost” the war. These allegations are ludicrous, as we show in detail in chapter 5 and appendix 3, but they did have the dual advantage of disguising the actual role of the mass media and, at the same time, pressing the media to keep even more tenaciously to the propaganda assumptions of state policy. We have long argued that the “naturalness” of these processes, with inconvenient facts allowed sparingly and within the proper framework of assumptions, and fundamental dissent virtually excluded from the mass media (but permitted in a marginalized press), makes for a propaganda system that is far more credible and effective in putting over a patriotic agenda than one with official censorship.

In criticizing media priorities and biases we often draw on the media themselves for at least some of the facts. This affords the opportunity for a classic *non sequitur*, in which the citations of facts from the mainstream press by a critic of the press is offered as a triumphant “proof” that the criticism is self-refuting, and that media coverage of disputed issues is indeed adequate. That the media provide some facts about an issue, however, proves absolutely nothing about the adequacy or accuracy of that coverage. The mass media do, in fact, literally suppress a great deal, as we will describe in the chapters that follow. But even more important in this context is the question of the attention given to a fact—its placement, tone, and repetitions, the framework of analysis within which it is presented, and the related facts that accompany it and give it meaning (or preclude understanding). That a careful reader looking for a fact can sometimes find it with diligence and a skeptical eye tells us nothing about whether that fact received the attention and context it deserved, whether it was intelligible to the reader or effectively distorted or suppressed. What level of attention it deserved may be debatable, but there is no merit to the pretense that because certain facts may be found in the media by a diligent and skeptical researcher, the absence of radical bias and de facto suppression is thereby demonstrated.<sup>14</sup>

One of our central themes in this book is that the observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions, of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda, is highly functional for established power and responsive to the needs of the government and major power groups. A constant focus on victims of communism helps convince the public of enemy evil and sets the stage for intervention, subversion, support for terrorist states, an endless arms race, and military conflict—all in a noble cause. At the same time, the devotion of our leaders and media to this narrow set of victims raises public self-esteem and patriotism, as it demonstrates the essential humanity of country and people.

The public does not notice the silence on victims in client states, which is as important in supporting state policy as the concentrated focus on enemy victims. It would have been very difficult for the Guatemalan government to murder tens of thousands over the past decade if the

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<sup>14</sup> A careful reader of the Soviet press could learn facts about the war in Afghanistan that controvert the government line—see chapter 5, pp. 226–27—but these inconvenient facts would not be considered in the West to demonstrate the objectivity of the Soviet press and the adequacy of its coverage of this issue.

U.S. press had provided the kind of coverage they gave to the difficulties of Andrei Sakharov or the murder of Jerzy Popieluszko in Poland (see chapter 2). It would have been impossible to wage a brutal war against South Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, leaving a legacy of misery and destruction that may never be overcome, if the media had not rallied to the cause, portraying murderous aggression as a defense of freedom, and only opening the doors to tactical disagreement when the costs to the interests they represent became too high.

The same is true in other cases that we discuss, and too many that we do not.

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