Media Master Class

Media Reading Pack

Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media - Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky.

The media is usually described as '**the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines that reach or influence people widely**'.

Whilst the means of communication is a neutral phenomenon the last part regarding influence is not always the same. According to Herman & Chomsky:

...among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy. This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, **but** by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy.

Structural factors are those such as ownership and control, dependence on other major funding sources (notably, advertisers), and mutual interests and relationships between the media and those who make the news and have the power to define it and explain what it means.

These structural factors that dominate media operations are not all controlling and do not always produce simple and homogeneous results. It is well recognized, and may even be said to constitute a part of an institutional critique such as we present in this volume, that the various parts of media organizations have some limited autonomy, that individual and professional values influence media work, that policy is imperfectly enforced, and that media policy itself may allow some measure of dissent and reporting that calls into question the accepted viewpoint. These considerations all work to assure some dissent and coverage of inconvenient facts. The beauty of the system, however, is that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda.

The point that we want to stress here, however, is that the propaganda model describes forces that shape what the media does; it does not imply that any propaganda emanating from the media is always effective.

The past few years have witnessed a rapid penetration of the Internet by the leading newspapers and media conglomerates, all fearful of being outflanked by small pioneer users of the new technology, and willing (and able) to accept losses for years while testing out these new waters.

Anxious to reduce these losses, however, and with advertisers leery of the value of spending in a medium characterized by excessive audience control and rapid surfing, the large media entrants into the Internet have gravitated to making familiar compromises-more attention to selling goods, cutting back on news, and providing features immediately attractive to audiences and advertisers. The *Boston Globe* (a subsidary of the *New 10Tk Times)* and the *washington Post* are offering e-commerce goods and services; and Ledbetter notes that "it's troubling that none of the newspaper portals feels that quality journalism is at the center of its strategy ... because journalism doesn't help you sell things." Former *New York Times* editor Max Frankel says that the more newspapers pursue Internet audiences, "the more will sex, sports, violence, and comedy appear on their menus, slighting, if not altogether ignoring, the news of foreign wars or welfare reform."

Studies of news sources reveal that a significant proportion of news originates in public relations releases. There are, by one count, 20,000 more public relations agents working to doctor the news today than there are journalists writing it.

Fourth Estate or Manufacturers of Consent?
New Left Project | Articles | Fourth Estate or Manufacturers of Consent?

The conception of the media as "fourth estate of the realm" is grounded in liberal democratic theories of its role in a functioning democratic polity. Much of the historical mythology such theories carry with them has been convincingly challenged (see, for instance, Curran 2002), but in general their normative content remains useful in evaluating media systems' performance. Curran provides a concise formulation of the concept in Power Without Responsibility:

"As the "fourth estate", the press scrutinizes the actions of the executive, and relays public opinion to lawmakers. The press also keeps people informed about what is happening in the world, and provides a forum of public debate. It thus lubricates the working of democracy by facilitating the formation of public opinion." (Curran and Seaton 2003: 246)

Or, more concisely: "informing the public; scrutinizing government; staging a public debate; and expressing public opinion" (ibid).

To these, Curran suggests, should be added a recognition of specifically economic power, so that, in terms of their normative role, "the media are conceived as being a check on both public and private authority." (2002: 219)

In contrast to this normative ideal, the descriptive framework developed by Herman and Chomsky, principally in Manufacturing Consent (1994), outlines a "propaganda model" of the mass media (specifically the contemporary US media) in a "free market" system. This media's selective activity is a direct consequence of several core institutional constraints, or "filters": ownership (by large-scale media oligopolies, generally incorporated into larger corporate entities); funding (through the sale of lucrative audiences to advertisers); reliance on sources (reflecting both the resource constraints of the media themselves, and the relative prominence of resource-rich sources, typically employing techniques derived from the P.R. industry); "flak" (high-profile criticism, complaint and retaliation); and ideology (specifically, in Manufacturing Consent, "anti-communism"

– though with the demise of the Soviet Union various more appropriate successors have been identified, among them a quasi-religious "faith in the market" [Herman 1999:269] and the "War on Terror" [Mullen 2006]).

From "control" to "chaos"?

A considerably more optimistic descriptive framework has recently been expounded by Brian McNair in Cultural Chaos (2006a). Following the model of chaos theory in the natural sciences, McNair proposes an analogous paradigm for understanding contemporary media systems, emphasising their largely unpredictable complexity. While the desire for control over the media on the part of elites remains, McNair argues, their ability to impose it has been undermined by such

factors as decreasing entry costs, the proliferation of different outlets, and the rise of new media – in particular the internet, which for McNair represents a genuinely Habermasian "public sphere". With the end of the Cold War, he argues further, an ideological transformation has overcome the Western media: the frame of the "national security state", and its threatening enemy in the form of the Soviet Union, have fallen by the wayside. With this change, and with deference to authority generally declining, a new objectivity and pluralism have entered journalistic discourse. The main danger, according to McNair, is in fact an overly critical, "hyper-democratic" media promoting "corrosive cynicism" and frequently exaggerated hype; though, he suggests, this may be a necessary evil in democratic societies.

An examination of the contemporary media, however, reveals some rather significant problems with this optimistic assessment. In fact, as I will argue, while certain changes and developments are worth taking into account, McNair's optimism is often naïve and largely unfounded, the contemporary media tending not to refute but to vindicate Herman and Chomsky's thesis.

See also James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without responsibility* (2003)

Submission on Media Pluralism to Ofcom

Submission by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom to Ofcom Consultation 'Measuring Plurality across Media' 16 November 2011

1. A broad definition of media pluralism

Ofcom asserts (1.6) 'The underlying principle is that it would be dangerous for any person to control too much of the media because of his or her ability to influence opinions and set the political agenda'. This is a reasonable and straightforward statement about why pluralism matters and many would agree that it states why pluralism matters most.

The Council of Europe (CoE) has adopted a broad definition of media pluralism as the scope for a wide range of social, political and cultural values, opinions, information and interests to find expression through the media. The CoE understands media pluralism to encompass 'the diversity of media supply, use and distribution, in relation to 1) ownership and control, 2) media types and genres, 3) political viewpoints, 4) cultural expressions and 5) local and regional interests'.

The Consultation on Media Ownership (DTI/DCMS 2002) acknowledged the argument that plurality 'maintains our cultural vitality […] A plurality of approaches adds to the breadth and richness of our cultural experience'.

2. Measuring plurality

The breadth of plurality concerns has implications for the measurement and assessment of plurality. No single form of measurement is adequate to capture the range of plurality concerns that arise. The recent Independent Study on Indicators for Media Pluralism, prepared by an international expert group, shows how varied, and complex, is the task of finding suitable indices.

It is possible to start more simply. We advocate the use of ownership and market share measures to determine thresholds. While there are difficulties in determining control, there are standard and reliable measures to assess the number of enterprises supplying services in a particular market. Market share analysis is also beset by complexities but is comparatively easy to assess for most media markets. These provide the most important sets of measure for determining plurality of ownership and are the central, or at least relevant, consideration across all assessment of plurality by type. However, the assessment of plurality is necessarily varied, taking account of different considerations and involving qualitative assessment and judgment. We also believe that the assessment of media plurality requires effective democratic involvement and oversight in determining whether activities serves the public interest in protecting media pluralism.

We believe that the assessment of media pluralism should involve analytical tools, such as market share analysis, and fair and transparent processes that are as objective and rigorous as possible. However, assessment should not be limited to economic and market analysis but encompass the range of relevant indictors to provide a reasoned, evidence-based assessment of plurality concerns and risks. Above all, we believe that determining what is in the public interest must be achieved through effective democratic participation, as proposed in our revised public interest test.

Neil Thurman, 'Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media', *New media & society* (2008)

The development of user-friendly, low-cost online content management tools like Movable Type, Blogger.com and Manila have helped facilitate a rapid growth in the number and popularity of independently published websites that overlap the space traditionally occupied by the mainstream news media (see Thurman and Jones, 2005: 254). Matheson (2004: 449) has written of the 'many news-related weblogs maintained by people who are not journalists', estimating that perhaps half of all weblogs deal frequently with public affairs. With nearly nine million weblogs – or blogs – indexed by the search engine *Technorati.com*, 1 there is no doubt that those who have traditionally consumed news are increasingly ready and willing to produce content. This so called 'citizen journalism' is not restricted to individual efforts: *Wikinews* 2 – a collaborative news publishing experiment – has sites in 19 languages.

The professional news media are also providing opportunities for news consumers to participate: *OhmyNews.com*, a South Korean online newspaper, has more than 37,000 registered contributors, and is expanding into the English3 and Japanese language markets; Britain's second most popular news website, *Guardian.co.uk*, hosts a 'News' message board to which readers contributed

647,798 4 messages or 'posts' between 1999–2005; and the 10 most popular topical polls hosted by *ThisisLondon.co.uk* – the website of London's best-selling newspaper *The Evening Standard* – averaged 48,000 votes a piece (Williams, 2004).

(I) LINES OF DEFENSE: PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS UNDER FIRE?

News values and standards A belief in the need to control, moderate or sub7 users' submissions so that they met the standards of professionally produced output was strongly held. For example, editors at the *BBC News* website wanted to 'provide . . . users with a good edited read' (Smartt, 2004), by 'correct[ing] bad spelling and put[ting] capital letters in where there should be' (Clifton, 2004). Some participants suggested that editorial intervention should extend beyond grammar to the selection of what was published in the first place.

The editor of *theSun.co.uk* believed strongly that there was 'a premium to be paid for editing experience' and that readers wanted him 'to sift out content for them'. He suggested that the reason why people buy newspapers and magazines or view websites is to 'read a well-crafted news story or feature by someone who is trained and experienced in that field' (Picton, 2004).The founding editor of the *BBC News* website suggested that user contributions were often duplicative, providing a strong justification for editorial intervention. 'Most people are making the same point. You'll find that there will only be maybe ten points of view' (Smartt, 2004).

Having worked in newspaper or broadcast environments where the amount of space or time available for content is limited, most online editors seek out content that has a broad appeal. The niche audiences reached by most bloggers are very different. This disparity helps explain why the managing editor of *TimesOnline.co.uk* believed that 'ninety-nine per cent' of blogs were 'extremely dull or . . . of very marginal interest' (Bale, 2004), and why the head of BBC News Interactive said, 'there are a lot of very mediocre blogs out there' (Deverell, 2004).

For some editors, in order to make the grade, user-generated content needed not only to be of more than 'marginal interest' but also to be balanced, something that the editors of *TimesOnline.co.uk*, *Independent.co.uk*, and *FT.com* were concerned was not always the case. Bale (2004) believed that forums could 'become just anchors for crackpots' – a problem the editor of *Independent.co.uk* perceived with his, now defunct, message boards.

He described the users as: a bunch of bigots who were shouting from one side of the room to the other and back again without even bothering to listen to what the other side of the room were saying. If someone did try to put a reasonable, balanced view it was an exception. (King, 2004) King suggested that editors were 'abrogating some of [their] responsibilities if [they] allow articles to appear on [their] product that have not been at least checked for decency [and] taste' (2004).

The *FT.com* reported that 'racist comments' in their message boards were a problem of sufficient import to prompt a move away from a 'straight-to-air', post-moderated model to a system of pre-moderation where journalists publish a selection of readers' contributions (Corrigan, 2004).