Consensus without Consent

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Abstract

For a critique of media technologies this paper aims to utilize the Propaganda Model (PM) from the first chapter of the book by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988) which centers on the hegemonic role and power of media in the political process. A synoptic review of the model and more recent scholarship along similar lines affords a revitalization of Herman and Chomsky's radical critique. Their project seeks to reveal that democratic practice is merely staged, since public participation, critical discourse and economic decisions are already filtered by the media. In particular, the PM highlights the dichotomous nature of media, and it predicts their persuasive performance and effects. Media communication technology tends to colonize and monopolize our economic power, and it reshapes continually the legitimizing practices and effects of democracy. Consent as a democratic quality is staged and engineered by elites and corporate owners. Modern democracy, therefore, is merely manufactured. Thus, media should be evaluated and rechecked as a social and political apparatus, even as an institution of power, which whenever left unchecked may cause some rupture in the democratic landscape.

Keywords: Propaganda Model; Media; Consent; Hegemony; Modern Democracy; Political process

Консенсус без согласия

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Аннотация
Для критики медиа-технологий в статье используется модель пропаганды, представленная в первой главе книги Эдварда С. Хермана и Ноама Хомского "Производство согласия. Политическая экономия массмедиа" (1988), в центре которой гегемонистская роль и власть СМИ в политическом процессе Краткий обзор модели и более поздние исследования на ту же тему позволяют оживить радикальную критику Германа и Хомского. Их проект направлен на то, чтобы показать, что демократическая практика является всего лишь постановкой, поскольку участие общественности, критический дискурс и экономические решения уже фильтруются средствами массовой информации. В частности, модель пропаганды подчеркивает дихотомическую природу СМИ и эффективность убеждения и воздействия. Технологии медиакоммуникаций имеют тенденцию колонизировать и монополизировать экономическую власть и постоянно видоизменяют легитимизирующие практики и эффекты демократии. Согласие как демократическое качество инсценируется и создается элитами и владельцами корпораций. Таким образом, современная демократия является просто искусственной. Таким образом, СМИ следует оценивать и перепроверять как социальный и политический аппарат, даже как институт власти, который, если его не контролировать, может вызвать некоторый разрыв в демократическом ландшафте.

Ключевые слова: Модель пропаганды; СМИ; Согласие; Гегемония; современная демократия; Политический процесс

This essay is grounded in the critical assumptions of the Propaganda Model (PM) from Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book, *Manufacturing Consent*. The general assumption is that power, generated by the Propaganda Model (PM), is deliberately determined by moderately few privileged individuals and corporately owned business sectors. As such, this prompts a selectivity of reports, sorting out of information and sterilization of news stories with the goal that what reaches the public is just that which reinforces the motivation of those privileged elites and media owners to advance individual power and corporate benefit (Herman, & Chomsky, 1988, pp. xv, 4, 8, 10-14).[1] Public consent and individual decision are, therefore, manufactured (Herman, & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi; Mitchell & Schoeffel, 2002, pp. 16-17).[2]

The PM is a model framed and rooted in the critical-Marxist tradition of political economy and traditional media systems (Klaehn, & Mullen, 2010, pp. 10-11).[3] The PM is a theory which holds that media, in general, and the political process form a dialectical relation wherein one consumes and subsumes the other.

For Herman and Chomsky, consent is (being) manufactured by the elite class or specialized group who owns powerful corporations and has substantial influence and power to dominate the culture industry and economic space, since these few profit-making owners and business venturers abjure the free flow of news and analysis that are against their corporate interest. Manufacturing of consent is necessary in order to elude public opinion and veer the public mind to less serious issues. Such recalibration of opinion or issues can only be handled by a "specialized class" who are keen enough to figure out what will be shown or heard by the people for public consumption (Chomsky, 2002, p. 15).

As opposed to a democratic model within which media play a suitable role to enhance deliberation, the PM is more efficacious in utilizing media communication technologies. The main idea of Herman and Chomsky's book is centered on the assumption that the "power-relation" in a media-centered society refers to relatively few elite groups and corporations, leading to the meticulous selection, filtering, and refining of important news stories with the end goal that what reaches the general public is only that which supports or fortifies the intentions and interests of the predominant private interests.[4] In this context, media unremittingly shapes public opinion and the political process (Herman, & Chomsky, 1988, pp. 41-43).

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[1] The more dominant media firms are those huge corporations that are owned and controlled by elite and wealthy people who forms symbiotic relations with the current government, leading banks, media organizations, academic institutions, and the like.

[2] Walter Lippmann first used the term the "manufacture of consent" in order to protect the "intelligent minorities" from the "bewildered herds."

[3] See also Shemelis (2017). In an interview by Chomsky with James Peck, the former found the common reading of Marxist literature quite bleak and dreary. He prefers the left-wing Marxist tradition, i.e., something unorthodox or a more dissenting approach in understanding social theory.

[4] In this case, I use "power relation" as a dialectic term that mediates ideology and communicative power in a vertical relationship. This vertical relation of power corresponds to the social model of class stratification. Concerning the PM of media, it marks the intersection of communicative power and political economy in modern capitalist society. In contrast, for Foucault this term alludes to the horizontal immanence of power. It enables us to see the horizontal relations of various procedures in disputes on

Mass delusions in a democratic society can happen when the strategies of control of a PM are effectively deployed. The PM implies creating fantasy enfranchisements. This "necessary illusion and emotionally potent oversimplification" (Chomsky, 1989, p. 33) achieves the rhetorical persuasion by media apparatuses in the public sphere.

Political propaganda is one of the two main reasons why "fake news" or "deep fakes" spread like a brushfire. Former US President Donald Trump coined the phrase "fake news" to describe assaults by the news media. However, fake news is infiltrating conventional media via Weibo, WeChat, and other Chinese-language social media platforms. According to Shanghai International Studies University journalism professor Peiqin Chen, when someone posts erroneous information on Weibo, it may be repeated by a prominent publication using a Weibo account. Other major media outlets have picked up on it since then. She also stated that mainstream press in China performs the most critical part in verifying and disseminating misleading news.[5]

On the other hand, according to Gifty Appiah-Adjei from the University of Education in Ghana, the purpose behind fake news is not necessarily political. For her, it is propagated usually for economic advantage or financial gain from increasing internet traffic, or merely for amusement, and other individuals make up stories simply for the pleasure of it (Schoeman, 2019).

As critical viewers, according to Schoeman, we must learn the difference between "misinformation" and "disinformation." Misinformation is defined as false information disseminated without the goal of causing harm. The goal of disinformation is to propagate misinformation and influence people. Media misinformation regarding migration, climate change, and Brexit, for example, was categorized as "probably true," "mainly false," "unfounded," or "unverifiable" (Schoeman, 2019). However, not everyone is critical about this since in our present time, journalists and media personnel are treated like TV personalities in some countries, such as the Philippines. When they reach a certain level of prominence and social media presence, the majority of them run for political office. For this reason, there is a proliferation of the banality of TV celebrities even in politics. I call it the "cult of celebrity spectacle."

According to French philosopher, Guy Louis Debord, the general mindset of the public and public opinion is charmed by celebrity personalities. In his book, *Society of the Spectacle* (1977), he said, the image and lifestyle of the celebrities, as the spectacular representation of modern living, promote the banality and illusion of equitable opportunity to the totality of consumption and provide a point of identity with the shallow-appearing lifestyle that must substitute for the fragmented meaningful specializations of the present life. For him, "They embody the inaccessible results of social labor by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: power and vacations – the decision-making and

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resources and benefits. For him, there are no pregiven social characters that dominate since it is not a relation of domination but self-determination in the very fabric of the social life. See Foucault, 1978, pp. 82-85; 1985, pp. 6-7.

[5] Lynee Schoeman. 2019. "Training journalists in the era of fake news." AFP News. July 16, 2019. https://news.yahoo.com/training-journalists-era-fake-news-033742201.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall

consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned" (Debord, 1977/2002, §60, p. 26). More so, "The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion and the spectacle is its general expression" (Debord, 1977/2002, §47, p. 21).

Media communication technologies, more than just informing and disseminating news for the public, operate as a business enterprise and function as a commercial space. Without the right ethos to regulate this corporate practice, any form of business can be debased, and any saleable product can be (re-)directed merely for profit-making. Having this as media's reference, any news and information can be altered or distorted from its initial form. For Herman and Chomsky, such phenomena in mass media can be traced to the use of media filters. For them, there are five systematic operative filters that create the impression of objectivity of news, namely media ownership, advertising, the media elite, flak, and anti-communism or another common enemy (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). For them, media communication technologies are propelled by these interrelated filters (Mitchell & Schoeffel, 2002, p. 13). These filters largely determine how business rules play out especially in the hands of advertisers (Mitchell & Schoeffel, 2002, p. 24-30).

The present relation between the media and the political process can be likened to a dialectical dynamic where one devours the other. For Herman and Chomsky, it is the media-mediated system that gobbles up the political process. In so far as media is owned and managed for the most part by a few elite groups and corporate tycoons, no news and reports will ever be unfiltered or unbiased, since it will and must always serve the system and not the individual, or personal profit and not the productive organization of human passion. According to Shemelis, the government is the main source of news and the reporters are efficiently utilized by the government to organize the crowd (Shemelis. 2016, p. 1; Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 21). News is interesting to the audience when it fascinates their imaginations or teases their sensibilities. Media injects its message to the audience in a straightforward fashion and shapes its point of view considerably (Rahman & Marjan, 2013).

The traditional Jeffersonian understanding of the role of media as a "watch-dog", counterweight, and critical check on the power of the government, allowing for better participation in the political process, has significantly shifted to an ideological market force which targets the political economy and supports market strategies (Jebril et al., 2013, pp. 6-7). According to Shemelis (2016), the PM provides the framework within which mainstream media should be assessed. Capitalism is at its peak when there is increasing privatization of properties and an expansion of power among the elites (Taylor, & Harris, 2008, p. 16). Media is the "necessary evil" to fortify the market ideology. Media marked the proceedings, landmarks, and background upon which cultural populism[6] is possible and cultural industry[7] becomes inevitable.

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[6] Social scientist Jim McGuigan (1992) scrutinized active viewers for exaggerating human agency in media and underplaying political, social, and monetary variables. He describes this 'cultural populism' as completely fanciful and ideologically credulous.

[7] The "culture industry" is the commercialization of culture which highlights mass production of goods, services, and products. Amidst a diversity of cultures, this industry tends to homogenize and

Democracy and freedom of the press are crucially dependent on each other: If there is no free press there is no democratic practice (Howard, 2004). According to the PM, the current state of affairs in most dominant and progressive media corporations is characterized by the mutually compounding interventions into the spectrum and presence of media by the government and other major stakeholders, namely elite groups and their experts. Direct suppression, social coercion, psychological manipulation, and the like move into focus in the democratic space once the government and media fuse their relation (Coliver & Merloe, 1997, p. 19).

According to Audra Diers (2011), we must redefine our traditional conceptualization of media merely as the dissemination of information and move to a more analytic engagement with social reality. Media is not merely an operational tool but a mode of engagement where public approval and contestation is vital for the socio-political growth of the state.

Herman and Chomsky's assumption is conditioned as an aftermath of the industrial revolution, capitalism, and material possession of properties. When the government, the private sector, or the media elite which owns and manages large corporate shares of the media take the market economy, commercial production, and political process into their hands, then the whole enterprise of democratic practice is compromised.

Media has a macro-political influence, and it penetrates our micro-social behavior. In politics, this is called hegemony. In religion, it is called homogeneity. In critical theory and social philosophy, we call it populism. In mass media and now also social media, we call it the propaganda model. Its conceptual nuances are interwoven in a dynamic and systematic structure of preserving power and sustaining the capitalist mentality of control over individual and personal choices. Media as such is not disinterested in its functional behavior rather it is a predisposed apparatus. To create a tolerable sense of reality, media needs to feed the public mind with their heart's desire and content, eventually to isolate from political debate, that is, to paralyze them, making them believe that participation means isolation.

For example, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and similar social media sites create an appearance of political discussion while, in fact, presenting only a minimal segment, if not a fictitious display of the actual range of contestation. The discussion that takes place may seem plausible at times since these media implicitly serve as a political platform that restricts relevant information to safely debatable topics. For example, who would read the business news in some major newspapers nowadays especially since "the market for news about money and stocks is much greater than the market to news about issues which matter to working people" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 122).

The PM is premised on three interrelated assumptions. First, there is indeed a consensus but only in so far as it is an elite consensus on certain issues. This does not

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standardize the mode of production and impose rigorous schemas to maintain social control and regulate antagonism in society (see Adorno. 1991, p. 98-106). Adorno conceived the notion of 'culture industry' as an enticing structure that produces cultural wares for mass spectators, while supporting predominant political and financial interests. Ponzanesi (2014) attempts to underscore the confusing and conflictual dynamic functions of the cultural industry (p. 2).

mean that the general public needs to be aware of this consensus, rather it needs to be distracted or redirected to peripheral matters, since its "voices" do not really contribute to consensus-formation, despite the open space sharing and collection of opinions in social and media networks (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 19; Klaehn & Mullen, 2010, p. 12). Second, in the liberal democracies Herman and Chomsky are thinking about, public media work under corporate control and management, not entirely a government jurisdiction. Media assume an elitist perspective, the opinions and decisions of the people are already influenced and downplayed by the selected options of the few (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 18; Klaehn & Mullen, 2010, p. 12-13). Third, the media embody corporate and elite interests. The outcomes of major and crucial public decisions relating to these interests should remain within the boundaries that accord with their privileged status in society. This involves a general articulation of what sort of information needs to be fed to the public, since "Only the corporate sector has the resources to produce public information" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 21). While one tolerates diverse opinions from the public, one still needs to satisfy the needs and interests of consumers, traders, and the market. The PM is thus essentially the mode of being of modern media.

It is crucial to comprehend what kind of medium is employed in this scenario of eluding political power while maintaining elite control over the masses. McLuhan (1964) emphasizes that "Medium is the message" (p. 7). For him, "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 9). Disagreements and pluralistic opinions make an essential contribution to the political arena. The medium upon which differences of ideas are conveyed is crucial in the exercise of political will and rational consensus. McLuhan offers an optimistic view of media, but Herman and Chomsky are apprehensive of its essential nature and deterministic tendencies especially in exercising political power.

At the dawn of the century of media enfranchisement, this manufacture of consent penetrates our social and political system rapidly – unwittingly shaping the way we settle on how we should experience our lives. This radical engineering and (re-)formation of modern tools heightens our interest in anything spectacular or unnatural, while the commodification of cultural values comes within reach. To this effect, certain groups of individuals would capitalize and upgrade the utilization of technologies to rule the private and public mind and create an ambiguous picture of reality – a reality that is duplicitous and hedges power.

The use of media communication technology is the modern imperialist's mode of recalibrating and maneuvering the political economy. In liberal democracies, the political space is at odds with itself with financial managers, corporate technocrats, and

business capitalists in power, and the media enhancing their own power through a systematic and invisible web of filters.[8]

In connection with the progressive practices of democracy, modern media tend to create a homogenized language which brings into open the tendency to marginalize others in actual discourse.[9]

This global phenomenon[10] gives rise to the emergence of a global village – a village where modern media hegemonize our political and economic decisions both in the public and private sphere.[11] Modern media creates a landscape of multiple possibilities and a plethora of exigent problems. Media tends to expand human needs through unnecessary wants. Moreover, the hegemony of public media emphasizes their unresolved dominance, elusive power-steering, and fluid recalibration in the decision-making process of individual and public opinion in general (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 303). In a society where new technologies have emerged and where these are considered a lifestyle, the communicative power and the usage of modern media tools shares a rhizomatic character (Deleuze, & Guattari, 1984, p. xi-xii, pp. 3-4).

The initial conception of the PM does not entirely disregard the increasing popularity and radical progress of media systems, like social and digital media. In the meantime, social networking sites have grown exponentially which translates into massive business enterprises (Lim, 2008). The PM provides a critical perspective on the nature, behavior, and repercussions of media in the democratic process, grounding the assumption that they work like corporations, capitalizing their designs through advertising and other filtering mechanisms.

In this context, news and information becomes distorted and reformatted from its initial state, framed according to plan and placed within a framework of interpretation that is provided by a selection of experts. Chomsky mentions that "This process of creating the needed body of experts has been carried out on a deliberate basis and a massive scale [since] … their work was funded and their outputs were disseminated to the media by a sophisticated propaganda effort" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 24). News reports presented by media outlets are already filtered and sterilized before they reach the general public (Herman, & Chomsky, 1988, pp. 23-24). For this reason, consent does not emerge from political and economic decisions of citizens anymore,

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[8] Democracy demands active involvement of the citizenry. Normatively speaking, public media should enable citizens to participate in the business affairs of the government by educating, informing, and organizing them.

[9] Modern media here include but are not limited to mass media, since these have diverse models (viz., social media and digital media) while resembling each other in terms of the media apparatus. For the sake of consistency in this discussion, I will be referring to the general idea and varieties of mass media.

[10] "Globalization is the result of powerful governments" who push beyond the boundaries of reasonable business exchange and commerce in order to dominate the economic and political landscape. (Chomsky, 1999, p. 13)

[11] The term 'global village' means a world viewed as a community in which distance and isolation have been dramatically reduced by electronic media such as television and the Internet. This term was popularized in the 1960's by Marshall McLuhan (1964) found in the book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man* (p. 31).

instead, it is manufactured. The greater the disparity between wealth and power, the more prominent and effective becomes the PM in the deliberative space of any democracy .

In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, the interest to protect personal and corporate wealth requires systematic propaganda. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private in the first place and formal censorship is not required.

> A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which *money and power can filter out the news fit to print* [italics added], marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2)

> … A propaganda approach to media coverage suggests a systemic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 35)

In the media context, it is not the information itself that is crucial but the implication of the information that we get. Media organizations, print media and other media platforms recognize assorted strategies for distributed impact over our political and economic decisions. These strategies shape how we view the world, help envision social issues, and direct our interest to social matters that are deserving of consideration. Thus, the media play a critical role in the political and economic life of the citizens.

Mass media provide the landscape and context within which social, political, and economic issues are publicly discussed. Currently, for the most part, they define the public sphere. Media set their own acceptable boundaries and tolerable limits in the arena of public debate and opinion.

On the one hand, traditional media usually report and convey vital information to the general public. Here they serve as an ideal platform to exercise our constitutional rights, basic privileges, and individual achievements. It provides an effective communicative (re)channeling of information which acts as a conduit to raise and discuss moral concerns, political issues, economic matters, or even personal questions. As such, media amplifies the exercise of the democratic spirit. On the other hand, in the current state of media practice, it tends betray its original position when it tends to filter the news, to isolate and segregate the real issue from public interest.

For Herman and Chomsky, mass media generally control the social-political atmosphere in a dynamic and impenetrable system of manufacturing consent. It tends to (re-)construct certain news or stories to control general perceptions and reactions of the public, to muster, and redirect the public mind to more extraneous issues. Some news and information tend to exaggerate or sensualize the story to divert public opinion to a more trivial matter. Lastly, it can also produce mass hysteria to paralyze or steer the general public by fetishizing mass demonstrations and genuine public contestations.

For these reasons, deliberative practice in liberal democracies has become distorted, if not a mere parody of itself, based on the rhetorical use of power relations

between the government, the powerful shadow elites, and business moguls, which delimit the framework of political life. The hegemonic specter of modern communication technologies undermines the core values and spirit of democracy, which is embodied in the strategic and radical engineering of media consent – a consent without real consent (Chomsky, 1999, p. 43).

Consent is best realized in a democratic society. Real democracy will flourish dynamically if consent is unshackled from dominant interests. But the kind of democracy one typically experiences in the current setting is merely a parody. It is a parody in so far as it highlights the preservation of a privileged minority as against the impoverished majority and redirects public interests away from the most pressing issues.

In a democratic society, people or the majority are expected to act as "participants," expected to constantly engage in the political process. However, with the advent of private and corporate ownership, people are reduced to mere "observers" indulging their uncritical fascination with anything intriguing and trivial (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 17). According to the PM, this has become possible by way of rhetorical control by ruling interests.

If it wants society to thrive and flourish, the primary economic responsibility of the government will be grounded in control of public opinion and safe-guarding of the interest of the few. The more popular any government is, the easier for it to manage-control the public mind. Privileging the few and marginalizing the majority is the mode of production of modern media. This majority in a capitalist society is either voiceless or dissuaded to engage or participate in the political process. Genuine and healthy democratic practice is possible if there is constant and diverse questioning or contestation of power across all segments of society, without the façade of a benevolent appeal to authority or pity.

It is therefore the arduous task of philosophy to reconcile opposing forces or find a way out to reasonably explain the ambivalence of democratizing modern media in the public sphere.[12] For this reason, "It is the responsibility of the intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies" (Chomsky, 1987, p. 60). He added that "[i]ntellectuals are typically privileged; privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities" (Chomsky, 2016, p. 21).[13]

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[12] This term figures centrally in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1991), see chapter II (4, 5 & 7), chapter III (8), and chapter VI (20). The latter chapter speaks of the public sphere as a platform for advertising. This is briefly discussed also in chapter VIII of Habermas (1996).

[13] In the first chapter of this book, he identified two categories of intellectuals, viz., the "value-oriented intellectuals" and the "technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals." As Chomsky said, "The distinction between the two categories of intellectuals provides the framework for determining the responsibility of intellectuals" (Chomsky, 2016, p. 9).

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