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▲ Home

◀ Contents

The Applicability of Herman's and Chomsky's Propaganda Model Today

by David Model

When I was in the Soviet Union in 1985, it was interesting to observe the extent to which all the major sources of information, including television and newspapers, spewed out government propaganda 24 hours a day. It was also clear from my conversations with young people in Moscow that they were profoundly indoctrinated with the official Soviet position on all issues.

On the other hand, in North America, we take pride in our freedom of the press and freedom of expression. In Canada we have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in the United States they have the First Amendment to the US Constitution. This misguided faith in our freedom of the press is a reflection not only of the subtle nature of the propaganda in the mass media in North America but also of the lack of a powerful source of alternative points of view. **Briarpatch** magazine cannot compete with **Maclean's**.

Since the early twentieth century, there have been numerous warnings about the dangers of the growing concentration of corporate ownership of the mass media. As early as 1920, Walter Lippmann claimed that propaganda was already "...a regular organ of popular government." He referred to the propaganda in the media as the "manufacturing of consent". Ben Bagdikian in the **Media Monopoly**, first published in 1983, warned that "It is the overwhelming collective power of these firms, with their corporate interlocks and unified cultural and political values that raise troubling questions about the individual's role in the American democracy." In **The Making of the President**, Theodore White cautions us that the "power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; ... It determines what people will talk and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties, and mandarins." Another media critic, Robert McChesney warns that "A new specter haunts the world ... A global commercial media system dominated by a small number of super-powerful, mostly US-based transnational media corporations that works as a system to advance the cause of the global market and promote commercial values."

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their seminal work, **Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media**, created a mechanism for analyzing the extent to which information in the mainstream media reflects the interests of corporate elites. They constructed a propaganda model, which in their own words " ... describes the forces that cause the mass media to play a propaganda role, the process whereby they mobilize bias, and the

patterns of news choices that ensue." The Propaganda Model consists of five filters which describe the method by which favourable information passes through the filters to appear in the news and how information threatening to corporate interests is prevented from reaching the public.

The five filters are: ownership; advertising; official sources; flak; and marginalizing dissent.

- Ownership refers to the choice of the media as to which stories to cover, which stories to either ignore or marginalize, and how to frame the story.
- Since corporate advertising is the major source of revenue for the mainstream media, fear of losing or not getting advertising strongly influences the choices of what stories to cover and how to frame them.
- A story's source of information is a major determinant of its focus and viewpoint. For example, the mainstream media frequently rely on government and business sources. In the 1991 bombing of Iraq, for instance, the mainstream media were organized into press pools and one reporter a day was designated to cover a story chosen by the military. During the invasion of Panama in 1989, Pete Williams, the official Pentagon spokesperson, was a major source of information for the mainstream media and his lies about mass graves, executions, and the burning of entire neighborhoods were dutifully reported in the mainstream media. On the other hand, the alternative media seeks its information from sources such as refugees, victims, the International Red Cross, human rights groups, aid groups, doctors, and ambulance drivers. When the Pentagon reported the number of dead in Panama as 250 and the alternative media as about 3000, the difference reflected their respective sources of information.
- Flak can be the fear of punishment or the actual punishment for reporting stories unacceptable to those with power. Bill Maher, the Dixie Chicks and Howard Stern paid the price for criticizing George W. Bush or the War in Iraq. When Joseph Wilson wrote a column in the **New York Times** condemning President Bush for repeating the story about Iraq acquiring uranium from Niger after Wilson had investigated the claim and reported it to be false, some high-ranking member of the administration leaked to Robert Novak the fact that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA agent. Flak also occurs when the media is denied access to a story such as in the case of the Panama invasion when the military stopped the media from covering certain areas in Panama such as the poor districts where most of the damage occurred.
- Marginalizing dissent is an attempt to discredit a source through personal attacks to reduce the source's credibility and hence reduce the probability that anyone will pay attention to their information. In other words, shoot the messenger before the message is delivered.

To demonstrate that the propaganda model is as valid today as it was in 1988 when **Manufacturing Consent** was published, I will concentrate on the bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Serbia is an excellent example of how the American and NATO leaders created a myth about the Serbs perpetrating ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo and the media reporting these lies without raising any questions or challenging any sources. When the media becomes so uncritical in their reporting, they have been referred to as stenographers for power.

The crimes of the Serbs in Bosnia have become legendary, a testimony to the power of the American propaganda machine. In 1992, Bosnia voted to secede from Yugoslavia. Although the Muslims who constituted 41 percent of the population were in favor of secession, the Serbs who constituted 32 percent of the population were opposed and feared persecution in an independent Bosnia. The European powers had called for the vote and accepted the results despite a requirement that all constituent peoples consented. A civil war broke out in Bosnia between the Serbs on one side and the Croats, Muslims and NATO on the other. NATO began air strikes on Bosnian Serb military units in 1994 and in 1995 engaged in carpet-bombing of all Serbian territory in Bosnia. Serbian efforts to protect their territory were translated into ethnic cleansing. In fact, both sides committed atrocities

Sarajevo has become synonymous with ethnic cleansing. Western condemnations of Bosnian Serbs were self-serving intended to bolster support for the inevitable attack on Serbia. For example, the three infamous marketplace massacres in Sarajevo in 1992, 1994 and 1995 were blamed on the Serbs when in fact evidence clearly demonstrates Muslim responsibility.

The propaganda about Serb atrocities in Kosovo was equally effective. Kosovo, a province of Serbia, had been seeking independence since the early 1980's. Kosovo was inhabited mostly by ethnic Albanians and partly by Serbs. In 1991, a group of Albanians who were impatient with the lack of progress formed a group called the Kosovo Liberation Army or KLA for the purpose of adopting violent methods to accelerate the process towards independence. The first organized violence occurred in 1996 against Serbian civilians and police, followed by an attack against Serbian refugee camps with grenades. A civil war ensued. A US offer to mediate negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia resulted in the United States tabling a draft peace agreement known as the Rambouillet Treaty which was designed to provoke the Serbs into rejecting it. Serbia was then confronted with an ultimatum: sign the Treaty or face war.

The mainstream media collaborated uncritically with the Clinton administration's propaganda campaign to justify the war against Serbia. On May 10, 1998, a **New York Times** editorial commented that "The White House has not ruled out the use of force to prevent

Serbian aggression in Kosovo." On June 2, 1998, Chris Hedges reported in the **New York Times** that "President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia has started a major campaign to wipe out a separatist rebel movement in the Serbian province of Kosovo, senior NATO officials and Western diplomats say." In the same article, Hedges stated that "Mr. Milosevic's decision to unleash his troops on the rebels undermines the American diplomatic effort to bring the two sides together." According to the **Los Angeles Times**, May 11, 1999, "The State Department issued a 30-page compilation of Serbian atrocities in Kosovo. The report "details what we know from refugee interviews, from overhead imagery and other sources," Albright said. "And it makes clear beyond any doubt that horrific patterns of war crimes and crimes against humanity are emerging in Kosovo".

What the mainstream media did not mention was that the Serbs were subjected to attacks by the KLA and that Serbian troops were sent to Kosovo to protect the Serbian population there and to preserve Kosovo as a province of Serbia. Atrocities were committed on both sides in a civil war in which the Americans were supporting the KLA whom they had once condemned as a terrorist group.

An article by Steven Erlanger in the June 10, 1998 edition of the **New York Times** is further evidence of uncritical reporting of the conflict in Kosovo. Erlanger reports that "The third tier of potential NATO military action and air strikes is vital to deterring Mr. Milosevic from violence against civilians." In the same article he recounts that, when asked about Kosovo, "President Clinton said the United States favors the use of 'all necessary means' to try to avoid 'ethnic cleansing' and the loss of human life...The main thing is, I am determined to do all I can to stop a repeat of the human carnage in Bosnia and the 'ethnic cleansing'."

These mainstream media articles are examples of official sources and ownership. They chose to base their reporting on the administration's version of events ignoring sources with first hand knowledge of the conflict.

The propaganda continued after the United States and NATO decide to bomb Serbia. On March 24, 1999 NATO bombers began dropping bombs on targets in Serbia that the media reported as military in nature. The administration's line was that every effort was undertaken to minimize the damage to civilian targets while acknowledging that some collateral damage was inevitable.

On March 25, 1999, CNN showed William Cohen, Secretary of Defense, reassuring Americans that "We are attacking the military infrastructure that President Milosevic and his forces are using to repress and kill innocent people." Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State appeared on CNN on March 24, 1999, and stated that "NATO's goal is not to hurt innocent people."

The **Los Angeles Times** reported on May 14, 1999, that

"Meanwhile, NATO warplanes kept up their "extensive and effective" pounding of targets in Yugoslavia, although the weather worsened after nightfall, Shea [NATO spokesman] said. On Wednesday night and Thursday morning, NATO attacked Yugoslav troops, armor and artillery in Kosovo west of Djakovica and south toward Pizren."

The impression created by the mainstream media was that targets were carefully selected with the approval of top administration officials including President Clinton and extreme caution was exercised to avoid civilian targets.

Max Boot wrote in the **Wall Street Journal** on April 1, 1999, that "Though it may seem odd to link foreign policy to altruism, it seems clear that NATO's purposes in Kosovo are primarily humanitarian."

According to **Time** magazine, in an article on April 5, 1999, "The targets were reviewed with great care at the White House, where Secretary of Defense William Cohen and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Hugh Shelton, sat down with President Clinton to go over the list. Some important ones were struck off because they were too close to civilian buildings." Also on April 5, 1999, **Newsweek** stated that "The cruise missiles fired from B-52 bombers and a US Sixth Fleet battle group in the Adriatic slammed into targets in Kosovo and Serbia: bombs from F-15s, F-16s, Harriers and F/A-18s hit Yugoslav air-defense systems, fuel and ammunition dumps and military barracks." On May 10, 1999, **Time** reported that "Alliance spokesmen insist Serb forces are being 'degraded', but reporters have begun to snooze during the daily videos of smart bombs blasting - most of them long-deserted buildings." Then on May 17, 1999, **Time** commented that "For weeks, NATO's war against Serbia seemed a polite affair, marked by strict rules of engagement, pinpoint attacks on army units and lots of examples of NATO planes returning to base with their bombs because they couldn't be sure of dropping their payloads on the right place."

Based on this sample of reports from the mainstream media, the impression created was that NATO was aiming at military targets and primarily striking military targets.

This impression is not misleading or distorted. It is completely false. First hand observers, refugees, relatives of victims, ambulance drivers, the International Red Cross, Human rights Watch or Amnesty International would have created a completely different impression. Ramsey Clark, former attorney general under President Kennedy and President Johnson traveled to Serbia twice during the bombing to record the killing of civilians and the strikes against non-military targets.

There were numerous strikes against villages where there were no possible military targets and the bombers used cluster bombs which are outlawed by the Geneva conventions because their only purpose is to kill people. The non-military targets included a maternity hospital,

schools, utilities without which the Serbs were deprived of electricity and heating oil, bridges, and factories. It is unquestionable that these targets were selected deliberately. Rescue workers and ambulance drivers reported that after the initial strike while they were attempting to rescue the wounded the bombers would return and strike again. Such a tactic is not only deliberate but unconscionable.

After his second visit, Ramsey Clark produced a documentary titled NATO Targets chronicling the atrocities perpetrated by NATO and took it to all the major American networks. They all refused to show it or base a news story on its contents. The refusal is a clear example of the ownership filter. The networks rejected the offer to disclose information threatening to the United States' and NATO's humanitarian image. By depending only on the administration and military's account of events, the networks and newspapers were ignoring sources that would have exposed the official sources as dishonest.

This example is definitive proof that the Propaganda Model was applicable in the case of the so-called humanitarian intervention in Serbia. Lacking the time to apply the model to other stories, I can only suggest that the Model is as useful now as it was in 1988 in analyzing stories in terms of a systematic bias in favour of entrenched power.

This article was first presented as a paper at the third annual conference on Popular Culture, Science and Technology in Toronto on June 30, 2005. **David Model** teaches political science at Seneca College in King City, Ontario. He can be reached at david.model@senecac.on.ca

◀ Contents

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