

A quick guide to the 'propaganda model'

by Dan Josefsson

In their book **Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media**, (*Pantheon, 1988, USA*) **Noam Chomsky** and **Edward S. Herman** claim that propaganda is not primarily something used in dictatorships to make people believe what the power-holders want. In dictatorships, the two researchers say, the elite stays in power through violence and acts of reprisal, and propaganda is not a determining factor. Instead, it is the power-holders in democracies who most need propaganda.

In a democracy it is theoretically possible for the majority of the population through their votes to bring about changes which do not favour those with most power and resources. Therefore, propaganda serves the important purpose of inducing the population not to use its power.

In the 412-page book, the two researchers present the so called propaganda model, which is a detailed theory on the process of turning critical journalists into propagandists who safeguard the interests of the elite - often without knowing it themselves.

Chomsky and Herman name five filters which effectively remove news that could threaten the current societal order and thereby the interests of the elite in the USA. These filters are equally applicable to Swedish conditions.

The propaganda model has caused some journalists to accuse Chomsky and Herman of believing in conspiracy. These journalists have argued that there are no secret rooms where the editorial boards decide what the journalists may and may not cover in their reports. According to them, the journalists decide themselves what to write. But anyone who actually reads *Manufacturing Consent* soon realises that Chomsky and Herman have never claimed that the elite would need to conspire behind closed doors in order to stop unwelcome news. The propaganda model works very well without this.

The five filters of the Propaganda Model:

1. Concentration of ownership and profit orientation of the mass media

The media are run as businesses with a primary motive to create profit for their owners. Hence, they can never seriously criticise the power of the market or threaten large capital owners - that would mean threatening their own owners.

2. The advertising licence to do business

Since most media are dependent on advertising, ideas which seriously threaten the consumption society can never be spread through these media. The advertisers' choices thus influence media prosperity and survival. The ad-based media are also given a price-marketing-quality edge, which allows them to further encroach on and weaken their ad-free rivals.

3. The dependence on sources

Since news is a tradable good, which must be produced fast at as low a price as possible, news journalists are dependent on co-operative sources that can quickly provide them with information. This leads to the development of symbiotic relationships with powerful institutions in the market and in politics. The journalist who exposes weaknesses risks losing his or her contacts, which makes it difficult for him/her to do a good job.

4. 'Flak' and the enforcers

Journalists who report in a way which threatens economic or political power holders in society can also become the target of threatening and costly counter-attacks. For instance, a journalist in Sweden who writes critically about nuclear power can count on angry phone calls from people employed in the nuclear power lobby. Even if the journalist him/herself can deal with this, it may induce a hesitant editor-in-chief to clamp down on reporting that elicits criticism. Flak can also mean outright reprisals against journalists. [Note: 'Flak' is the word for anti-aircraft gunfire in a war.]

5. Uncritical belief in market liberalism/ anti-communism as control mechanism

In the USA, it was possible for many years to use the fear for communism to also suppress ideas which were not related to communism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, anti-communism has partly been replaced by a blind belief in the free market as the ultimate organising principle for society, and this in turn guides the choice of news. In Sweden, during

the past few years we see the same pattern evolving. Economic journalists are unable to see the deficiencies and risks inherent in the global capitalist system of today. Hence, their articles become propaganda for a system of which most readers are probably more or less critical.

In the book, the following is said among other things regarding the working conditions of journalists:

"There are also real advantages in conformity beyond the rewards and privilege that it yields. If one chooses to denounce Qaddafi, or the Sandinistas, or the PLO, or the Soviet Union, no credible evidence is required. The same is true if one repeats conventional doctrines about our own society and its behavior - say, that the US government is dedicated to our traditional noble commitment to democracy and human rights. But a critical analysis of American institutions, the way they function domestically and their international operations, must meet far higher standards; in fact, standards are often imposed that can barely be met in the natural sciences. One has to work hard, to produce evidence that is credible, to construct serious arguments, to present extensive documentation - all tasks that are superfluous as long as one remains within the presuppositional framework of the doctrinal consensus. It is small wonder that few are willing to undertake the effort, quite apart from the rewards that accrue to conformity and the costs of honest dissidence.

There are other considerations that tend to induce obedience. A journalist or commentator who does not want to have to work too hard can survive, even gain respectability, by publishing information (official or leaks) from standard sources; these opportunities may well be denied to those who are not content to relay the constructions of state propaganda as fact. The technical structure of the media virtually compels adherence to conventional thoughts; nothing else can be expressed between two commercials, or in seven hundred words, without the appearance of absurdity that is difficult to avoid when one is challenging familiar doctrine with no opportunity to develop facts or argument."

I believe many journalists around the world will recognise the situation described above. The challenge remains for all of us. □

Dan Josefsson works as a journalist at the Swedish magazine ETC where this article was originally published. His email address is dan.josefsson@etc.se