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‘Smooth Operator?’ The Propaganda Model and Moments of Crisis

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Abstract

The propaganda model is a powerful tool for explaining systematic flaws in media coverage. But does it explain the cracks and tensions within the commercial media that are capable of arising at moments of political crisis and elite disagreement? To what extent does the model privilege a flawless structuralist account of media power at the expense of focusing on contradictory dynamics inside the capitalist media? This article looks at a key moment where critical media content was generated by a mainstream media organization: the coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War in the British tabloid paper, the *Daily Mirror* in 2003. It reflects on the consequences of such a moment for resisting corporate media power and asks whether it suggests the need for a revision of the propaganda model or, rather, provides further validation of its relevance.

What is a ‘moment’? A situation whose duration may be longer or shorter but which is distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process, and demands that a *decision* be taken over the *future direction of the process*. That is to say the tendencies reach a sort of zenith, and depending on how the situation concerned is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the ‘moment’ (Lukacs 2000, 55).

The propaganda model (PM), as developed initially by Herman and Chomsky (1988), is a powerful reminder that the mainstream media are a crucial tool for legitimizing the ideas of the most powerful social actors and for securing consent for their actions. Through a combination of capitalist property relations and an orientation to profit, the existence of advertising as a key source of capital, the domination of elite sources, the systematic rebuttal of material that challenges these sources, and the construction of an ‘enemy’ against which populations (and media agendas) can unite, the mainstream media environment is structured in such a way as to control dissent and steer public action towards the interests of ruling elites. Through detailed empirical analysis of, for example, media coverage of US interventions in Central America and South-East Asia, Herman and Chomsky demonstrate that ‘the “societal purpose” of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state’ (ibid., 298).

Although Herman and Chomsky developed the PM in relation to the US media, the model is nevertheless relevant to a UK media environment that, despite the resilience of an underlying public service remit, is increasingly subject to market disciplines (Freedman 2008). It has been adopted, in particular, by British media campaigners David Edwards and David Cromwell, the creators of Media Lens, a website that seeks to expose the ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ of the corporate media and, in particular, its most liberal constituents. In its regular ‘media alerts’, Media Lens refutes claims by news organizations like the BBC and the *Guardian* that they are independent arbiters of truth and reality and subject media coverage – in terms of sources used, frames adopted and arguments put – to detailed scrutiny. In a recent alert on the British media’s coverage of the Israeli assault on Gaza at the end of 2008, Media Lens (2009a) provides a persuasive account of how, despite criticisms of specific actions of the Israeli army, the vast majority of coverage accepted the Israeli government’s claim that the invasion of Gaza was designed *simply* to put an end to the firing of rockets into Israel by Hamas. Quoting from both advocates and critics of the invasion, Media Lens argues instead that Israel’s intentions were far more ambitious and offensive, and that ‘Israel has repeatedly and deliberately set out to kill Palestinian and other civilians in order to terrorize them into abandoning their efforts to resist Israeli expansion’ (ibid.). The BBC’s refusal to broadcast the Disasters Emergency Committee’s Appeal for Gaza is all the more ‘monstrous’, it claims, because the Corporation had broadcast many other appeals in controversial circumstances, most notably for Kosovo during NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999. This is yet one more illustration of Media Lens’ conviction that ‘the corporate mass media ... constitute a propaganda system for elite interests’ (Edwards and Cromwell, 2006, 2).

Figure 1. ‘You are not powerless’



So how do we explain this rather unusual front cover of the British tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mirror* (Figure 1), with a readership of over 5 million?

On that day, 21 January 2003, the newspaper launched its petition to then Prime Minister Tony Blair opposing the proposed war on Iraq, a petition that was eventually signed by over 220,000 people. The *Mirror* campaigned tirelessly to rebut the arguments of the British and US administrations that sought to justify a war. Celebrity gossip and scandal, once the staple of the *Mirror*'s news agenda, were kicked off the front page to be replaced by hard-hitting critiques of the pro-war lobby. Memories of

front pages dominated by celebrities, the royal family and *Big Brother* goings-on seemed a long way off.

Perhaps the first place to turn to explain this curious example could be Herman and Chomsky themselves in *Manufacturing Consent*. 'The mass media are not a 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' (1988, xii). Indeed, throughout their writings and those of others who have continued to develop the propaganda model, we find a recognition that, as David Miller puts it: 'It is certainly true that there is some scope for dissent in the mainstream media although this is without doubt limited' (2004, 95). Herman actually argues that dissent can even go beyond limited, tactical disagreements: 'there are often differences within the elite that open space for some debate and even occasional (but very rare) attacks on the *intent* as well as the tactical means of achieving elite ends' (2000, 103).

The acknowledgement by the creators of the PM that the mainstream media do sometimes offer up conflicting and oppositional viewpoints offers a pre-emptive strike against those critics (on the left) who have described the model as 'perfectly unidimensional' (Hallin, 1994, 12) and as proposing an overly instrumental approach that sees media structures as 'solid, permanent and immovable' (Golding and Murdock, 2000, 74). Indeed, Ed Herman denies that the PM closes off the possibility of oppositional viewpoints or marginalizes the importance of resistance claiming that it is, instead, 'a model of media *behavior* and *performance*, not of media *effects*' (Herman, 2000, 103), that it is about 'how the media work, not how effective they are' (ibid., 107). While this may be true – and therefore many of its critics are accusing the model of failing to do something that it was never intended to do – it is nevertheless not that easy to insulate the whole question of media performance from that of effectiveness. Indeed, Herman himself immediately follows up his claim about the distinction between 'behavior' and 'effects' with the following assertion:

The power of the US propaganda system lies in its ability to mobilize an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward. (ibid., 103)

The media's performance, in this example, is intimately linked to its ability to generate a compliant citizenry. While resistance may be possible, the PM is predicated on the basis that there is a 'default' position of media consensus, elite power and audience passivity.

My main criticism of the propaganda model, therefore, is not that it is *unable* to acknowledge the exceptions, gaps and cracks within the corporate media system as well as the fact that many people over the years have rejected corporate media content and challenged dominant frames. It is rather that, because those activities are not its real focus and its advocates, therefore, rarely provide examples of such exceptions, it finds it difficult to offer a fully worked-out picture of consensus *and* conflict. The real interest of PM supporters lies, understandably enough, in exposing the *lack* of diversity in mainstream media coverage and in laying bare the media's unspoken assumptions about the desirability of market systems and the legitimacy of domestic pro-war ideas. So, as Colin Sparks puts it: 'To the extent that the PM accepts the existence of "tactical" disputes, it is of course prepared to accept some diversity, but it poses uniformity as the normal state of the media' (2007, 81).

I want to do the opposite: to focus on the exceptions, when the 'default' position breaks down, precisely because, as someone who is committed to the transformation and democratization of the existing media, they provide such important lessons. This is not because of any inherent pluralism in the mainstream media. The degree to which there are different positions expressed in the media relates to the existence of conflicts among capitalist elites as well as the need, in a competitive market, to address (in however skewed a way) the interests of different audiences. My interest in the exceptions is more about how meaningful possibilities of transformative action become clearer in moments of crisis than in moments of stability (as suggested by the quote from Georg Lukács at the beginning of this article). Because they are about times at which established structures start to wobble, when previously hidden tensions emerge and when new actors are called for, abnormal circumstances are crucial in alerting us to the possibilities of both new kinds of political action and new kinds of media coverage.

The *Daily Mirror* and the War in Iraq

So let us focus on one such unusual example: the *Daily Mirror's* public and very determined opposition to the Iraq War in 2002 and the first part of 2003. The paper had supported British involvement in two of the most recent conflicts, the 1991 Gulf War and the 1999 campaign in Kosovo. It did have a long-established anti-war tradition, however, having opposed both the Suez invasion in 1956 and the Falklands War in 1982. But in opposing the war in Iraq, the *Mirror* was confronting the military plans of a *Labour* government for the first time, and was in danger of alienating the Labour supporters who formed the core of its readership.

Why would it take such drastic action? The *Mirror's* anti-war stance could be seen as the logical conclusion of a rebranding exercise that had started following the events of 9/11, and the perceived desire among the reading public for a more analytical and serious approach to news in order to understand both the roots and

dangers of terrorism. Piers Morgan, the *Mirror's* editor, shifted the paper away from an unremitting emphasis on celebrity scandal and human interest stories towards a focus on international coverage that included a particularly critical stance towards the US and UK's bombing of Afghanistan in late 2001 and their ever-increasing threats to invade Iraq.

Figure 2. 'Mirror attacks "poodle" Blair'



This approach was consolidated with the £19.5 million formal relaunch of the *Mirror* in spring 2002, when the paper's traditional 'red top' masthead was exchanged for a more sombre black one and when 'heavyweight' journalists like John Pilger (the leading investigative reporter and long-time *Mirror* writer), *Vanity Fair's* Christopher Hitchens and the *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland were all given regular columns. According to Morgan, the changes were all about the *Mirror* becoming a 'serious paper with serious news, serious sport, serious gossip and serious entertainment' (*Daily Mirror* [DM], 16 April 2002). This was an unusual form of 'product differentiation' – a phenomenon more often consisting of 'scoops',

competitions and giveaways – but not an entirely unreasonable one given signs of growing resistance to the Blair government and a fast-growing and very popular anti-war movement that had, at the time, little resonance in the mainstream media.

The relaunch and new radical tone was not just in response to a changed political climate but was also a much-needed measure to address the long-term circulation decline of the *Mirror* and to close the gap with its principal competitor, the *Sun*. In the 1960s, before the *Sun* even existed, the circulation of the *Mirror* exceeded 5 million; by the mid-1980s and the highpoint of 'Thatcherism', the *Mirror's* circulation was 3.5 million, some 500,000 less than that of the *Sun*; by 1999, the *Mirror* had fallen into third place behind the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*; and by 2002, it was hovering just over what was seen as the critical 2 million mark (Cozens, 2003). Indeed, this relaunch was only the latest in a long line of *Mirror* rebranding exercises – it had started life in 1903 as a title aimed at women before switching allegiance to Liberal politics and finally settling on a pro-Labour identity and demographic – that is part of a wider history of the political realignment of the British press (see Thomas, 2005). The relaunch of 2001/2 was, therefore, a

business decision supported (at least initially) by its corporate owners at Trinity Mirror.

The *Mirror* followed up its hostility towards the British and US bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 with a series of articles that warned against going to war with Iraq as a distraction from the real fight against international terrorism. The problems involved in challenging George Bush and Tony Blair's war plans soon became clear. The *Mirror* celebrated American Independence Day with the headline MOURN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY (DM, 4 July 2002, see Figure 3) and a two-page article by John Pilger that described the US as 'the world's leading rogue state ... out to control the world'. In response, the fund

Figure 3 'Mourn on the Fourth of July'



manager of one of Trinity Mirror's large American* investors, Tweedy Browne, phoned up the *Mirror's* chief executive to complain about the article – a very clear example of the kind of flak talked about in the propaganda model. Morgan defended Pilger and emphasized his popularity with *Mirror* readers (if not American investors), but the episode showed that an anti-Bush, let alone an anti-imperialist, position would generate real resistance.

Figure 4. 'I SHELL not EXXONerate Saddam Hussein'



the front page. As preparations for war intensified, the *Mirror* escalated its own

Throughout the rest of the year, the paper developed its argument that an attack on Iraq would be counterproductive and would 'make us less secure, not more' (DM, 1 January 2003). Responding to opinion polls showing a lack of popular support for an invasion of Iraq, the *Mirror* attempted to articulate this anti-war sentiment in bold and imaginative ways. On 6 January, the paper adapted a cartoon by US labour cartoonist Gary Huck (Figure 4), which suggested that Bush's motive for attacking Iraq lay in his desire to control oil resources in the region, and ran it on

anti-war profile by launching its 'No War' petition – which allowed it to feature pictures of celebrities signing the petition every day – and distributing a free 'No War' poster. The first six or so pages of the paper each morning became devoted to the subject of the impending war and how to resist it. Morgan sanctioned further polemical, campaigning and highly controversial front pages, including one featuring Tony Blair with a headline of BLOOD ON HIS HANDS (*DM*, 29 January 2003) and lots of red ink on the prime minister's hands.

The *Mirror's* coverage in the early part of 2003 failed to stem the decline in circulation, but did at least win it critical acclaim and much-needed publicity. David Seymour, the *Mirror* Group's political editor and leader writer, recalls that the anti-war position was 'overwhelmingly supported by the readers' and that editorial staff were encouraged by opinion polls showing a significant anti-war constituency in the UK.

I was at a conference with the political editor of the *Sun* in the run-up to war and he said to me 'how many readers have you lost because of your stance on Iraq?' I said 'why should we lose readers when what we're saying is what the British public is saying?' It was the *Sun* that was flying in the face of British public opinion. (quoted in Freedman, 2003, 100)

This confidence encouraged the *Mirror* to venture into other controversial areas, most notably over the issue of asylum seekers and refugees. On 20 January, the paper ran a full-page feature on 'Why immigration is good for Britain', and followed this up in early March with a three-page special exposing the myths and reality about asylum seekers and pointing out Britain's poor record of accepting refugees, despite the contribution they make to the country (*DM*, 3 March 2003). The *Mirror* was, for a time, the model of an accessible, popular, campaigning and challenging daily newspaper.

Furthermore, the *Mirror* did not simply challenge the arguments for going to war but helped to mobilize opposition to the US and UK governments. It reported on the global anti-war protests in January and firmly identified itself with the national demonstration due to take place in London on 15 February. Two days before, it published a four-page guide to the march that included a map of the route and contact details of local transport to get to London. The *Mirror* paid for the video screen in Hyde Park at the end of the march and printed thousands of 'No War' placards with the paper's logo at the top. The following Monday, the paper featured 10 pages on preparations for war as well as a 12-page commemorative report on the protest march (Figure 5). By the time the war started, the *Mirror* was devoting up to 15 pages a day in a popular tabloid condemning the arguments of the US and UK administrations and urging the public to raise its voice against a war.

Figure 5. *The Mirror's* special issue on the huge anti-war



However, as soon as the war started, the *Mirror* adopted a far more cautious political position. It maintained opposition to the war itself but focused more on celebrating the courage and dedication of British soldiers. As the conflict continued, its coverage and editorial position became less distinctive, reducing its identification with the anti-war movement, curtailing its criticism of Tony Blair and returning gossip and showbiz news to more prominent positions in the paper. On 11 April, it was revealed that the *Mirror's* circulation had dropped below

the key psychological barrier of 2 million copies a day, while its main rival, the pro-war *Sun*, had actually added readers during the war (Cozens, 2003). The following morning saw the paper's first non-war related front page since the beginning of March and the emergence of a more 'balanced' news agenda, juggling celebrity stories, domestic news and the aftermath of the Iraq War.

There are some key lessons about the role of the press to be learned from the *Mirror's* performance during the Iraq War. The first is that, at a time of profound social crisis, when elites are divided amongst themselves and the public is willing to challenge and mobilize against these elites, a space can open up in which radical ideas start to circulate. In the context of a mass movement against Tony Blair's attempt to involve Britain in a US-led invasion of Iraq and serious international disagreement about the legitimacy of such military action, the *Mirror* was able to articulate and reinforce the views of this movement and to air opinions that would otherwise have been marginalized in the mainstream media. When the movement was on the up in the months preceding an invasion, the *Mirror* was happy to draw on a wide range of anti-war voices and to organize opposition to an invasion. It shifted from a newspaper which addressed its readers in fairly passive and restricted terms to one in which readers were conceptualized as active, thoughtful and capable of making an informed contribution both to the paper and the wider world. The significance of a mass-circulation tabloid newspaper, with approximately 5 million readers, taking on such a perspective should not be underestimated.

However, when 'product differentiation' takes a highly political form that has already antagonized investors, shareholders and government itself, it becomes clear

that a newspaper whose ultimate responsibility is to make a profit is not a reliable ally for a radical anti-war movement. Although the *Mirror* was initially keen to express the overwhelming anti-war sentiment in the UK, when military action started and opinion polls revealed a more ambivalent attitude towards the war among both its own readers and the general public, the *Mirror* was less willing to be identified with what it saw as minority views. Constrained by a 'responsibility' towards the bottom line, the paper was unable to maintain a consistent opposition towards the war and changed its coverage. Such is the logic of the newspaper business. Moments of social crisis can open up spaces for innovative and radical coverage but they sit uneasily with the market disciplines of a 'free press' that privilege, above all, profitability and competitiveness.

So What?

Given this argument, how useful is it to concentrate on how well the *Mirror* performed and not on how badly the rest of the British press did in relation to the war in Iraq? Perhaps the main reason is that examples like this reveal that media businesses, described by Edwards and Cromwell of Media Lens as 'totalitarian structures of power' (2006, 187), are far from all-powerful. Despite Herman and Chomsky's insistence that 'the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state' (1988, 302), there is a strong sense in the writing of PM advocates that, because of the structural features revealed in the PM, the media – in their everyday behaviour – tend to act as a sealed unit, and that departures from the norm are not dynamic and critical moments, but serve only to publicize the idea that the bourgeois media are free and diverse and, therefore, to legitimate them as democratic and pluralistic institutions.

Consider, for example, Jonathan Cook's Media Lens alert (Cook, 2008) that initially acknowledges the vital contribution of journalists like John Pilger, Seamus Milne, George Monbiot and Robert Fisk, who are virtually unique in stepping outside the boundaries of 'acceptable debate' and challenging mainstream agendas. But he also warns that their existence at the fringe of the liberal press provides the mainstream media with a radical fig leaf.

However grateful we should be to these dissident writers, their relegation to the margins of the commentary pages of Britain's 'leftwing' media serves a useful purpose for corporate interests. It helps define the 'character' of the British media as provocative, pluralistic and free-thinking – when in truth they are anything but. It is a vital component in maintaining the fiction that a professional media is a diverse media. (ibid.)

There are several problems with this account. First, it is not the case that the writers named by Cook have simply been shoved to the 'margins'. The *Independent's*

Robert Fisk is widely considered by his peers to be an outstanding expert on the Middle East; George Monbiot is an influential campaigner and prominent representative of the anticapitalist movement in the UK that emerged after 1999; John Pilger's work, especially his broadcast programmes, commands significant audiences and has actually brought 'marginal' issues, like US and UK complicity with the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, into the 'mainstream'; finally there is no evidence and no reason to believe that Seamus Milne's radical politics and his high-profile position at the *Guardian*, where he was comment editor for six years, are in any way welcomed by 'corporate interests'. These journalists have large, loyal audiences partly because they are talented writers and partly because they articulate the interests of popular movements – environmental, anti-imperialist, anti-war and pro-union.

Second, there is nothing new in my opinion in this rather despairing account of the position of radical ideas within a bourgeois environment. It reminds me, in particular, of Herbert Marcuse's concept of 'repressive tolerance' where:

... within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game. To take a most controversial case: the exercise of political rights (such as voting, letter-writing to the press, to Senators, etc., protest-demonstrations with a priori renunciation of counterviolence) in a society of total administration serves to strengthen this administration by testifying to the existence of democratic liberties which, in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness. In such a case, freedom (of opinion, of assembly, of speech) becomes an instrument for absolving servitude. (1969, 97)

Warnings about the danger of co-option may be useful but they tell us little about how best to maximize the divisions within elites, to mobilize popular forces in the pursuit of social justice, and to create mediated spaces within which new sets of ideas can emerge and circulate to wide numbers of people. The logical consequence of arguing that a system of 'total administration' is able to neutralize and marginalize virtually all forms of political action is to downplay attempts to build mass movements and campaigns in favour of more atomized challenges to political – and, in this case media – power.

For example, in 2008, a Media Lens alert heavily criticized Nick Davies' powerful condemnation of the PR-driven nature of contemporary journalism, *Flat Earth News* (2008) partly on the basis that:

Flat Earth News invites us to focus on staffing levels, on a lack of journalistic time and resources. It invites us to tinker at the edges of a system which in fact is rotten to the core. Or rather it invites 'insiders' to address these issues. But authentic reform of hierarchical, exploitative social systems – of which the

corporate mass media is a classic example – has only ever been achieved by democratic pressure from outside. (Media Lens 2008)

The problem here is two-fold: first, there is little mention anywhere on the Media Lens website as to the kind of 'democratic pressure' that is required and, instead, a consistent emphasis on writing to individual journalists and editors as the most immediate (and effective?) response to the mystifications of mainstream media coverage. There is scarcely a mention of the possibility of collective action or the role of, for example, the National Union of Journalists, which has mobilized its members not simply on 'bread and butter' issues but also around threats to journalistic independence and opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second issue is that the world is seen in this analysis as composed of a struggle between 'outsiders' and 'insiders', without an understanding of how 'insiders' are affected by the world 'outside'. Do we not want 'insiders', many of them ordinary journalists and media workers (as opposed to editors and proprietors), to push for change at those times when they – and their readers and viewers – start to question 'normal' assumptions (about the efficiency of the market, the legitimacy of corporate bonuses or the humanitarian nature of foreign policy)? Do we want to reject those who support 'tinkering' in favour of a principled commitment to all-out change?

This creates an unnecessary polarization between 'radical' and more cautious approaches to change and raises the danger of an abstract approach to politics. Proponents of radical transformation would be well advised to join forces with those who may initially only want to 'tinker' and then to argue with them that 'tinkering' is not likely to be enough to secure the sort of change they *both* would like to see: a more equitable financial system, a foreign policy that is not based on imperialist interests, or a truly democratic and inclusive media system. Colin Sparks, for example, argues that journalistic resistance is rarely 'articulated in terms of class struggle' and more usually expressed in terms of 'professional standards and autonomy' (2007, 80). Journalists and media workers have shown, however, that they are willing, superficially on the basis of upholding professional values, to take more drastic forms of action. This has involved journalists walking out on strike in August 1985 against the censorship of a *Real Lives* documentary on Northern Ireland, printers at the *Sun* who refused to publish a front page during the 1984/5 miners' strike featuring a photograph of miners' leader Arthur Scargill that made him look as if he was giving a Nazi salute, and newsroom staff at the *Daily Star* who, in 2006, forced the paper to drop plans for a spoof *Daily Fatwa* on the basis that it was offensive to Muslims. At moments where elite disagreements connect with mass mobilizations – most obviously during the Vietnam War (analysed by Hallin, 1986) or the Iraq War (discussed in Crouch 2004) – these tensions are particularly likely to result in opportunities for more fundamental and strategic questions to be debated and publicized.

While, as we have seen, Ed Herman argues that the PM is a tool with which to assess media performance and not media effects, he nevertheless claims that 'limits on media effectiveness in propaganda service' arise from alternative media, grassroots information sources and 'public scepticism' (2000, 103). Indeed, it could be argued that the *Mirror's* critical yet bounded coverage of the Iraq War actually backs up the PM's claim that we should *expect* some anti-war positions to be circulated in the mainstream media given the extent of elite disagreement and public mobilization. Yet what is underplayed by advocates of the PM is the possibility of critical material that emanates both from internal contradictions generated by intra-capitalist competition and disagreement, and in response to movements for whom the 'usual' explanations are found wanting and where there is thus a perceived need for more critical and unorthodox coverage. The PM does not, by any means, preclude examples of critical media coverage, but it does not seek to theorize their existence and potential beyond saying that they are a consequence of political division and are necessary to lend the illusion of pluralism to mass media environments.

This is, once again, why moments of crisis, like the British government's decision to go to war in Iraq, are so important, as they are likely to involve not simply a 'public scepticism' towards mainstream agendas but a willingness on the part of large numbers of people to participate in campaigns and movements that expose them to new ideas and generate this need for more challenging media frames. Their experience, in other words, pushes them to challenge received 'wisdom' and to make more demands of their media. According to John Pilger:

My experience in popular journalism, in the press and on television, is that when people are engaged on issues that touch their lives and move them, and help them make sense of the world, they respond in remarkable ways and never cynically.... When the *Daily Mirror* devoted almost an entire issue to stricken Cambodia, it not only sold out completely, it raised millions of pounds, unsolicited, mostly from readers who could ill afford to help a faraway people. When my film on East Timor, *Death of a Nation*, was broadcast late at night on ITV, it was followed by 4,000 phone calls every minute into the early hours – a storm of public interest and concern. That's the 'hidden public' that's so often well ahead of journalists who dismiss or patronise its power. (quoted in *Media Lens* 2009b)

When this public emerges from its hiding places, as it did so notably and powerfully with the 2 million-strong march in London in February 2003 against the invasion of Iraq, this creates unparalleled opportunities, not just for alternative and grassroots media outlets but for activists trying to exploit mainstream media's *contradictory* desire to maintain 'normal' conditions of service at the same time as wanting to relate to a shift in popular consciousness. This is precisely what the *Mirror* did in the conditions of anti-war radicalization and its own declining

circulation. This single example illustrates the argument that the media – and those who work within it – are far from a homogeneous and static bloc but rather a series of groups and institutions that, while overwhelmingly tied to powerful interests, are not immune from the movements and social forces that wish to challenge these interests.

The propaganda model is a concise and efficient mechanism for identifying the *everyday* deficiencies and systematic biases of the corporate media. It is less interested in those moments when 'normal' relations are disturbed, but also less adept at highlighting the contradictions in the behaviour of a media system in which there is a simultaneous desire for (a narrow bourgeois) consensus and yet a structural need for difference; a system in which audiences are treated as commodities but in which they do not always play this role; a system in which those who work within it have every reason not to rock the boat (for self-protection and advancement) but, in exceptional periods, have many reasons to do precisely this. Recognizing *and acting upon* these contradictions is necessary, as Mike Wayne puts it (2003, 261), 'if we are to avoid sliding into some species of functionalism or pessimism'. We need an approach to the media that focuses on its internal contradictions – tensions that are most clearly expressed in moments of crisis – that not only explains the generally lousy performance of the mainstream media, but also encourages us to mobilize with others in seeking to open up critical spaces, to press for more accountability, and to inspire a democratic and genuinely diverse media. In the opinion of this author, a set of ideas that emphasizes both structure *and* agency, contradiction *and* action, consensus *and* conflict – embodied, for example, in the work of theorists such as Marx, Lukács and Gramsci (assessed very persuasively in relation to media studies by Mike Wayne, 2003) – is more likely to assist this rather ambitious process, even if the propaganda model continues to play an invaluable role in exposing the limits of the contemporary media.

Note

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