The Legacy of Edward Herman

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Abstract

This article reflects on the legacy of the American media critic and political economist Edward Herman; his influence on the field of media scholarship, and on the author's own work. Its notes that Herman's contribution has often been underappreciated due to Chomsky's enormous stature as a public intellectual, and argues that as the principal author of the 'propaganda model' Herman made a significant contribution to scholarly and public understanding of the private news media. It notes a number of weaknesses in *Manufacturing Consent*, some of which are well known and have been addressed by the authors: an overemphasis on 'closure' and homogeneity in media systems, and a related 'media centrism' that may engender a certain political fatalism; an underdeveloped conception of the role of ideology; and a lack of empirical evidence on the operation of the five 'filters' as casual mechanisms giving rise to media content. It concludes that such weaknesses notwithstanding, Herman's model is an exemplary piece of sociological theorising, and is only deterministic or simplistic insofar as it is ambitious and schematic.

Keywords

The American media critic, Edward Herman, died in November last year at the age of 92. Herman is best known as the co-author with Noam Chomsky of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, first published in 1988. That book, though initially not especially well received by media scholars (Klaehn and Mullen, 2010), became a classic text in the media studies canon, and remains probably the most influential single radical critique of the corporate news media.

Inevitably perhaps given Chomsky's enormous stature as a public intellectual, Herman's contribution to *Manufacturing Consent* has too often been overlooked. He was, after all, first author, and in fact was largely responsible for the development of

what he referred to in a subsequent afterword as 'the analytic underpinning of the book': the 'propaganda model' (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 189). In 2013, at an event at the British Library, Chomsky acknowledged in conversation with the British journalist Jonathan Freedland, that: 'Most of the work on the propaganda model itself was due to my colleague Edward Herman… and I mean, I agreed with it, but I can't take the credit for it' (Chomsky, 2013).

Herman's 'propaganda model' is both a description of the institutional structure of the US news media and a theory of media performance. The opening chapter of *Manufacturing Consent* describes the size, ownership structures and profit orientation of the US news media; its dependence on advertising as the major source of revenue; its reliance on elite sources for information; and its susceptibility to political pressure and anti-communist ideology. These factors were described by Herman as 'filters' that shape reporting in such a way that 'media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values' (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 2).

The opening chapter of *Manufacturing Consent* concludes by presenting the propaganda model as a hypothesis about media content: if the corporate news media is as described – a set of institutions embedded within the US corporate-state nexus – how would we expect it to report? We would, Herman and Chomsky suggest, expect to find 'a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests' evident in the 'choices of story and in the volume and quality of coverage' (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 33). The remainder of the book consists of a number of detailed case studies analysing press coverage of US and US-sponsored atrocities in Latin America and South East Asia that together convincingly support the authors' hypothesis.

The propaganda model proved over time to be enormously influential politically. In scholarly circles, though, it has often been regarded either as overly deterministic, overly simplistic, or both (Schudson, 1989; Golding and Murdock, 1991; Goodwin, 1994). Schlesinger's (1992: 302) claim that it offers 'a highly deterministic vision of

how the media operate' that tends 'to stress the tendency towards virtual closure of the US national media system...in the service of the powerful' is a typical assessment. This seems a fair criticism of the thrust of the original text, if not the explicit claims made therein, and it is a point clarified by Herman and Chomsky in the foreword to the 2002 edition:

> 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 (Herman and Chomsky 2008, xii).

In an earlier text Herman went further, stating that differences within the elite can occasionally lead to 'attacks on the *intent* as well as the tactical means of achieving elite ends' (cited in Freedman 2014: 122). Schlesinger's point, then, would seem to be well taken by the authors, and even if the original formulation downplayed contradiction and contestation within the corporate media (Freedman, 2014), the authors' broad claims about patterns of reporting are nevertheless well supported by the evidence they present, of which I am not aware of any convincing refutation.

There remains, however, a question around causation. That the 'mainstream media' tends to reflect the interests of powerful groups in society is, as Chomsky has noted, 'one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences' (Chomsky et al., 2002: 18). But why is this the case? *Manufacturing Consent* essentially tags some strong evidence on media performance onto Herman's theoretical model, without adducing any evidence as to the causal relationship between the two. Contrary to claims made in some quarters, both are sophisticated and empirically informed, but what we do not see in *Manufacturing Consent* are Herman's five filters in action. This is less a criticism

of Herman and Chomsky – one study can only do so much – than the way in which their contribution to media theory has been received; although one cannot completely divorce one from the other. Herman and Chomsky's sole focus on institutional structure on the one hand, and media performance on the other, and their disinterest in the ideology and practices of journalists that mediate the two, obviously leaves one aspect in the media system unexplored. They argue that this is 'fully justified' given the consistency of reporting patterns (Herman and Chomsky, 2004: 106), which is fair enough. But it is an oversight which could easily have been addressed through more engagement with the existing sociological literature (for a discussion of the model's relationship with sociological theory, see Hearns-Branaman, 2018 and Klaehn and Mullen, 2010).

In my view, Herman's analysis should have invited less straw man criticism and either greater efforts at empirical refutation, or more ethnographic and comparative studies to examine the assumptions made about the influence of different 'filters'. This in fact was one of the motivations behind my own work on the BBC (Mills, 2016; Mills, 2018), which sought to examine the relationship between media performance, organisational culture and political economy in a media organisation quite different to the US press, and in recent years others have sought to engage more directly with the applicability of the propaganda model in different contexts (see for example Sparks, 2007; Freedman, 2009; Pedro, 2011a; 2011b).

This sort of work is important not only for testing the robustness of Herman's theory, but for escaping some of its potential intellectual and political limitations. *Manufacturing Consent* effectively debunked a set of erroneous assumptions about the corporate media in the United States, which were related to broader and equally erroneous assumptions about American society in general, and its role in the world. But the schematic formulation Herman offered was certainly parochial and has in my view been applied too readily to distinct institutions and in distinct contexts.

Herman's theory perhaps too easily also engendered itself to political fatalism. The book became enormously influential in the 1990s, when history ended for a time, and its totalising theory of media propaganda certainly resonated with the political inertia

and capitalist triumphalism of that period. The ideological power of the media power in such contexts can often be exaggerated and a related problem with how *Manufacturing Consent* was received politically is that it too easily lent itself to a media-centric analysis. This arguably stems from the fact that Herman's theoretical model, which was really a theory of media performance, used the term 'propaganda', which is suggestive of media institutions themselves as producers of politically motivated disinformation, drawing attention away from the interests in society which shape media reporting (Robinson, 2018).[1] Again this is at odds with the theory as actually presented in the text, which outlines the media's embeddedness within wider structures of corporate-state power – indeed it is notable that only two of Herman's five 'filters' are related to the structure of the media – but the ambiguity about the media's ideological power is certainly there.

Whilst Chomsky has focused more broadly on elite intellectual culture, Herman was overwhelmingly concerned with media reporting in his writing, but with a clear awareness of the active role of wider networks of power and publicity. His joint work on terrorism experts (Herman and O'Sullivan, 1989), for example, which was a starting point for my forthcoming manuscript with David Miller on this same subject, focused on an 'industry' of experts with close connections to the US state and conservative think tanks who disseminated a shared ideological perspective on political violence. As with his work on the media, the focus was on how patterns of reporting differed according to US interests, but in this case the focus was on 'the institutional apparatus – government, thinktanks, security firms, and experts that expound and elaborate' a 'onesidedness and huge bias in the mainstream' (Herman, 1996: 89).

It is arguable that the resolutely critical thrust of Herman's writings have, as Gavan Titley suggests (2016), led on occasion to an unwarranted scepticism about atrocities not attributable to the US and its allies – a charge levelled at Herman personally by George Monbiot in his criticisms of Herman's co-authored book, *The Politics of Genocide* (Monbiot, 2012). But there's no doubt that in *Manufacturing Consent* and his other work Herman made a hugely significant contribution to our understanding of the politics of private news media. To my mind, his model is also much more

sophisticated than it is often given credit for; effectively integrating critical political economy with organisational, professional and political ideology and practices, even if the latter elements remain underdeveloped. In this sense it is an exemplary piece of sociological theorising and is only deterministic or simplistic insofar as it is ambitious and schematic.

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Notes

[1] Thanks to David Miller for this point.

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