

BEYOND PROPAGANDA AND THE INTERNET: THE ETHICS OF JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

According to Herman and Chomsky's "propaganda model", the information conveyed by the news media is largely determined, both with regard to the agenda-setting and the framing of the news, by the "persuasion industries". Unlike those media, the Internet offers, at least for now, the possibility that different, alternative voices of citizens and civic and non-governmental organizations are freely heard. At the same time, the Internet challenges the monopoly of traditional news media to offer relevant, credible information. This possibility of citizens and organizations to use Internet to oppose to propaganda is, probably, one of the causes of the current crisis of journalism. The survival of journalism to this crisis lies not in forgetting its ethics but rather in the systematic and consistent reaffirmation of that ethics. Thus, ethics reveals itself as a necessary condition, even if not a sufficient one, to the pragmatic success of journalism.

KEYWORDS

Propaganda; internet; journalism; ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

Following long decades of a suspicious silence in theory of communication, recent work has gradually rediscovered the power of propaganda – which, in the meantime, styled itself less negatively as "public relations", "advertising", "strategic communication", and so on.

And much like in the time when it was first theorized by such thinkers as Ivy Ledbetter Lee (1915)¹ or Edward Bernays (1928) – the first decades of the twentieth century – modern propaganda finds itself intimately connected with the media. One might even say that propaganda could not exist if the media themselves did not: in fact, propaganda is propaganda *for* the media and *through* the media, even if and when it is produced outside the latter.

For some time now Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, the authors of the so-called "propaganda model", have underlined the very conveniently forgotten relation between media and propaganda. Even if such a relation is not conceded by the majority of professionals of the media, it exists – and it does so, first and foremost, in the sense that both the agenda and the framing of the media are largely influenced by the "persuasion industries" (Trevor & Goldsworthy, 2008), along the companies and institutions for whom the latter work.

¹ Who Upton Sinclair, devoting to him a chapter on one of his books, meaningfully dubbed "Poison Ivy" (Sinclair, 1919, pp. 311-313).

The Internet, with its free and open nature – at least, for the time being – has significantly contributed to prevent that the established powers in politics, economics and the media totally control public discourse, by imposing propaganda as the rule. Within the context of the diverse media, the Internet offers the possibility for alternate voices to be heard, voices which otherwise would not have “a voice”: individual citizens, civic and non-governmental organization concerned with the defence of the environment, of human rights, of the consumers, etc.

This possibility to use the Internet in order to counteract propaganda is one of the likely causes of the current crisis in journalism, inasmuch it tends to ward off citizens from a kind of journalism too much in line with the dominant interests.

Journalism is therefore placed before the following dilemma: either to run counter to those dominant interests, and thus risk bankruptcy following the loss of advertisement and sponsorship deals, or get in line with the dominant interests and consequently lose credibility and audience to the Internet, particularly to such media as blogs, social networks, etc.

2. THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF JOURNALISM

Journalism entails a basic ethical dimension because it is a power, and one of a very special nature: that of constructing (a) reality and, through that construction, to serve as a guide for each of our lives. Hence the fact that issues such as the objectivity, veracity, honesty, or impartiality of journalistic information have, pretty much since its inception, been considered as crucial demands of journalism as a profession.

This ethical dimension of journalism is clearly identified by Walter Lippmann when he emphasises that “[e]xcept on a few subjects where our own knowledge is great, we cannot choose between true and false accounts. So we choose between trustworthy and untrustworthy reporters” (Lippmann, 1922: 223). Similarly, Robert Park (1940) underlines, in his famous essay on the subject, that news are, alongside science and common sense, “a form of knowledge” on which our orientation in the world and society, as well as our political participation, rely – from which one can infer that the reliability of such knowledge is of the utmost importance.

The alternative to the journalism conducted by “trustworthy reporters” is not only the bad journalism of “untrustworthy reporters”, but also – and most of all – propaganda: “A group of men, who can prevent independent access to the event, arrange the news of it to suit their purpose” (Lippmann, 1922: 42). In other words, propaganda is not exactly a lie, but rather a “truth” told in a creative, biased and interested manner.²

It is precisely the awareness of the power of journalism in contemporary societies and its irrevocable ethical dimension which explains why, throughout its development, journalism and journalists have frequently been criticised on a lack of ethics – with the

² In this sense, the following quatrain by the Portuguese popular poet António Aleixo is surely one of the best descriptions of the nature of propaganda: “P’ra mentira ser segura / e atingir profundidade, / tem de trazer à mistura / qualquer coisa de verdade” (For a lie to be safe / and get to be deep / it must be combined / with something of truth).”

majority of those criticisms being reflexively incorporated in the very process of the construction of journalism as a profession and a deontology.

Examples of criticisms directed at journalists and journalism at the onset of the so-called “objective” journalism, are abundant. In what follows we mention solely four, two of them referring to Portugal, and the other two to the United Kingdom and the USA.

In the case of Portugal, we have in mind Eça de Queiróz’ barbed criticism of the “paid and made to order” journalism of Palma Cavalão and his *Corneta do Diabo*, as portrayed in *Os Maias* (Queiroz, 1888: 266-286); or even Fialho de Almeida’s raw disparagement, in his *Pasquinadas* (1890), of the journalists and newspapers which had sold out to the personal, political and economic interests of his time:

The newspapers that sustain themselves all have some sort of secret order purpose: apart from one or another, almost all have been founded in view of the political glorification of a name, the defence of a syndicate, or the profit of some imbecile.³

As far as the United Kingdom is concerned, in one of his Father Brown short-stories, Chesterton portrays the correspondent Francis Finn writing to Mr. Edward Nutt, “the industrious editor of *The Daily Reformer*”, that “journalism largely consists in saying ‘Lord Jones is Dead’ to people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive” (Chesterton, 1914: 164) – a claim that not only attests to the fact that journalism constructs social reality, but which can also be interpreted to signify that such construction is often conducted with disregard for the everyday reality of ordinary people, replaced by the distant world of the noteworthy. In another text, meaningfully intitled “The tyranny of bad journalism”, Chesterton denounces the press as

“a conspiracy of a very few millionaires, all sufficiently similar in type to agree on the limits of what this great nation (to which we belong) may know about itself and its friends and enemies” (Chesterton, 1917: 201).

Regarding the USA, writer Upton Sinclair, addressing the severe crisis affecting the world of his day (post-WWI), emphasises the importance of real information on the whole of the social body, which should allow for swift and enlightened decisions on any problems that may arise. Now, Sinclair (1919: 9) wonders (claims), “[w]hat if the nerves upon which we depend for knowledge of this social body should give us false reports of its condition?”

3. THE PROPAGANDA MODEL REVISITED

According to the familiar words of one of the founding fathers of modern propaganda, Edward Bernays – Sigmund Freud’s famous nephew – propaganda is the “conscious

³ “Os jornaes que se sustentam, teem todos um intuito qualquer d’ordem secreta; á parte este ou aquelle, quasi todos foram fundados para a aerostação politica d’um nome, para a defesa d’um syndicato, ou para fazer ganhar dinheiro a um imbecil” (Almeida, 1904, p. 216).

and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses”, with the creators of such manipulation constituting “an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country” (Bernays, 1928: 9).

Similarly underlining the manipulative nature of the activity at hand, Harold Lasswell, another theorist of modern propaganda, namely in its political dimension – since Bernays focussed more on its commercial application – defined it as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols. The word attitude is taken to mean a tendency to act according to certain patterns of valuation” (Lasswell, 1927: 627). And, like Lasswell implies, the perfect propaganda – or the “perfect crime”, as Baudrillard (1996) would later put it – is that which can lead the individual to think it was himself who deliberated doing what in fact propaganda lead him to do (Lasswell, 1927: 628).

The negative and even pejorative connotation that the terms “propaganda” and “manipulation” took on from the Nazi-fascist and communist practices prior to and during the Second World War have induced its theorists to replace them with more innocuous and acceptable terms such as “public relations”, “communication”, and so on.

One can, nevertheless, eventually ask oneself whether changing the words has indeed changed the thing itself; whether it was not, in this aspect as well, a mere nominal question. The answer provided to this question of ours by the authors of the so-called “propaganda model”, Chomsky and Herman, is that, by that or any other name, we have never ceased to be subject to the influence of propaganda.

According to the “propaganda model”, news media filter the information that they deliver to the public based on factors such as ownership (capitalist and concentrated), advertising (the main source of funding), sourcing (with a predominance of sources of political and economic power), flak (as a way to discipline the editorial line) and anticommunist ideology (which is assumed to have lost relevance in recent times). As the creators of the model accentuate, these filters “fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988: 2).

And if, like it is claimed by the theory of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), news media establish the public agenda and its framing, thus constituting what we call “the reality”, then the “propaganda model” can also be regarded as an explanation of how that agenda and that framing are established: who says, what, how, and with which objectives (if not even to which effects).

4. THE PERSUASION INDUSTRIES AND THE MEDIA

The persuasion industries (Pearson & Turner, 1965) – agencies of public relations, advertising, communication and the like – whose activity is centred on providing the media with “information” and “news”, assuredly constitute the most powerful of the filters mentioned by Herman and Chomsky.

Indeed, according to the calculations of some authors (Trevor & Goldsworthy, 2008: 24-5), whether in the UK or the USA, about half the “news” that one reads/ hears/ watches in the media originate in the offices of the persuasion industries. Other authors,

like Stauber and Rampton (1995), make use of a large amount of cases which evidence the way in which the persuasion industries and the media work together to misdirect citizens and consumers – not by lying, as we have pointed out previously, but by telling the “truth” in a very creative fashion, one suited to the interests of the corporations and institutions in whose service the former function.

This relationship between persuasion industries and the media, this intentional confusion between propaganda and news, is obviously not a new creation – in fact, it constitutes the very essence of modern propaganda. As Bernays puts it in his classic work on the subject,

Page one of the *New York Times* on the day these paragraphs are written contains eight important news stories. Four of them, or one-half, are propaganda. The casual reader accepts them as accounts of spontaneous happenings. But are they? (Bernays, 1928: 23)

In the same way, and after mentioning some of the successful campaigns led by the American propagandist, Larry Tye concludes that “Bernays’ special expertise here, as in all of his foreign assignments, was handling the press” (Tye, 2002: 183).

In spite of the works we have cited, as well as others similar to them, proving that the “crime” is not (yet) perfect – so much so that propaganda sometimes produces its own discredit – we will never know the real dimension of the deception to which we are daily subjected. We can, nonetheless, suspect it.

This suspicion is undoubtedly one of the main causes of the crisis of confidence we now face concerning the economy, politics, the media, and other diverse sectors of society. In all of these sectors, citizens feel that what they know is but a small part of the story, a small portion of what they should know, perhaps not even the most important one; and that decisions whose causes or real purposes they ignore irrevocably rule their lives.

However, as one of the authors of the “propaganda model” acknowledges, this does not imply that there are no “alternative media, grassroots information sources, and public scepticism about media truthfulness” (Herman, 2003: 3).

The Internet is definitely the meta-medium or platform that supports many of those “alternative media” allowing citizens and civic or non-governmental organizations to produce, spread and share contents not delivered or seconded by mainstream media – thus making publicly visible subjects, framings and perspectives which would not otherwise become visible. Now, information regarding those subjects, framings and perspectives which do not conform to the dominant political and economic interests is a requirement of the free and egalitarian discussion that, such as emphasised by authors like Habermas (1989), is an essential condition for democratic deliberation and decision-making.

That information may even sometimes prevent or reorient decisions given to be irrevocable by the persuasion industries and the corporations and entities for whom they work, as we will strive to demonstrate with the following two examples.

5. THE CASES OF ENVIRONMENT AND CONSUMER DEFENCE

If there are areas to which the alternative information made possible by the Internet is essential, they are definitely those of environment and consumer defence – be it because they are both critically important for all of our lives, because they are the arena where powerful and often obscure interests confront each other, or even because the news media tend to look at them as the source of relatively minor news topics.

In what pertains to the first area, the environmental association Quercus (www.quercus.pt) is well-known in Portugal. On their website, Quercus describe itself as follows:

Quercus is a Portuguese Environmental Non-governmental Organization founded on the 31st of October of 1985.

It is a nation-wide, independent, non-partisan, and non-profit association, constituted by citizens who gathered around a shared interest in the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources and the Defence of the Environment in general, under a perspective of sustained development. [...]⁴

During the last few decades, Quercus has conducted in Portugal – often in association with its foreign counterparts in their respective countries – a number of significant campaigns on environmental issues, such as the ones against genetically modified foods, the resource to nuclear power, or hydroelectric dams.

In the area of consumer defence, the main Portuguese reference is DECO (<http://www.deco.proteste.pt/>), which presents itself as follows:

DECO – the Portuguese Association for Consumer Defence embraces the mission to defend the rightful and legitimate interests of consumers. Founded on the 12th of February of 1974, DECO has gradually reinforced its image as a relevant institution of public interest, a status acquired in 1978, collecting along the years a high number of associates, presently registering around 400 000 associated members. [...]⁵

DECO has equally conducted highly relevant campaigns in the last decades, in matters such as the prices of electricity and gas, the fees for banking services, service loyalty contracts, or, more recently, the compulsive switch from analogical television to TDT (Grounded Digital Television), concerning which DECO actually decided to take legal action against ANACOM (the National Authority of Communications).⁶

The campaigns of Quercus and DECO are usually conducted in the face of reigning political and business interests, along the persuasion industries that serve them – as the case of EDP's (the Portuguese company in charge of managing electrical energy resources) project for the construction of a new set of hydroelectric dams in rivers such as

⁴ <http://www.quercus.pt/home/quemsomos/apresentacao>

⁵ <http://www.deco.proteste.pt/informacao/associacao>

⁶ Press release on 22-10-2013: "DECO filed today an action suit against ANACOM and asks that the regulating authority be obligated to pay a global compensation fee of 42 million euros on damages to the consumers" (<http://www.deco.proteste.pt/tecnologia/televisores/comunicado-de-imprensa/tdt-deco-leva-anacom-a-tribunal-por-falhanco-na-mudanca>).

the Sabor or Tua, approved by the Portuguese government in 2009, and which we have analysed in great detail in another text (Serra, 2010).

Despite being true that some of the information produced by associations like Quercus or DECO is propagated by mainstream media – at least some of them – it is equally true that the forces in conflict here are incommensurable, and that the *de facto* silencing of the weaker party is nearly always the case. And we are not simply referring to mainstream media's greater predisposition to broadcast the "information" coming from more powerful corporations and entities, but also to the means that the latter employ on marketing, advertising and PR campaigns (EDP's campaign over the construction of the new dams is a clear example).

It is here that the Internet, with all its media – the websites, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, etc. – has played a crucial role, including, in some cases, even that of agenda-setting for mainstream media. In the particular case of the website of each of these organizations, it offers a wealth of essential information on the issues at hand and the rights of citizens which the latter could not find, or would only do so with great difficulty, in any other medium – something which certainly represents an empowerment of citizenship.

6. INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The "propaganda model" can largely be regarded as an explanation of the habermasian thesis on the refeudalization of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). More specifically, the model tries to explain the role that not only the persuasion industries – and the corporations that employ them – but also mainstream media and its journalists play in this refeudalization.

What can be observed in most of the campaigns of Quercus and DECO that were previously mentioned is that, much like Gans (2004) pointed out, there is a general tendency on the part of journalists to give priority to "powerful sources", and consequently consider press releases or information coming from the latter as true "news".

According to Gans, journalists do this in order to deal with the issues of time and credibility of sources – and, obviously, with the economic problem (the need to save money). This is, however, a practice that ultimately discredits journalists, insofar it evidences the silence that they impose on less powerful sources and, therefore, their lack of impartiality.

In such a context, the Internet can prove to be – and in fact does so – a critical medium for citizens and civic and non-governmental organizations, along with their respective causes. The Internet provides these citizens and organizations with a voice which, paraphrasing Bateson's claim about information, might very well be a difference that makes a difference. And that is increasingly significant when we consider that the Internet is not only a medium in continuous and exponential growth, but also the one gradually preferred by younger and more highly educated people – thus robbing mainstream media of some of their dominance in our societies.

What we have just claimed does not evade the fact that the Internet is also, in itself, a medium densely populated by corporations and other pre-established organizations,

including media organizations. Or even that, for instance, the majority of blogs does tend to be based on news supplied by mainstream media. Nevertheless, and unlike the latter, the Internet allows for a dispute between powers and counter-powers which does not exclude the refusal and the revolt of the economically and politically weaker. As Foucault underlines,

Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals. [...] The characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men's conduct - but never exhaustively or coercively. [...] There is no power without potential refusal or revolt. (Foucault, 1981: 253)

The openness of the Internet and absence of centralized control make it practically impossible for persuasion industries to silence all voices. With the Internet, in the Internet, there is always someone to tell the story, or the other side of the dominant story.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Out of what we have said so far one can surmise, firstly, that the current crisis of journalism is largely due to the fact that citizens, displeased with the propaganda present in mainstream media, look to the Internet and media not specifically devoted to news as alternative sources of information. And one must even concede that the latter are often the only places where credible and relevant information can be found.

Thus, journalism finds itself literally wedged between propaganda and the Internet, in an increasingly narrow and perilous path. The risk may not only be the collapse of journalism as we know it, but also, with that collapse, the occlusion of public sphere and public life as we have known it for the past two centuries. This is particularly evident when we consider that the Internet is a chaotic space of information, where it is often difficult to discern between credible and relevant information, and that which is not – hence it too demanding that journalists act as providers of credible and relevant information to be propagated and feed media like blogs and so on.

At this point, one could ask: but what does all this have to do with the ethics of journalism? The second conclusion we intend to make from what we have claimed is precisely that ethics provide the only way for journalism to counteract the growing desertion of its public not only to the Internet but, even within the latter, from news media to more “communal” ones – that is, more fenced off and parochial – such as Facebook, Twitter or certain blogs.

Granted, ethics is usually regarded as being opposed to pragmatism. Thus, while the former is oriented towards the ends, the latter is oriented towards the means (in view of certain ends); while the former is guided by values such as liberty, equality, and respect for the human person, the latter is guided by values like success and efficacy.

In the case of journalism – or discursive practices in general – however, success depends, first and foremost, on respect for moral values; pragmatism depends on ethics. Without respect for the other human beings and the values that it entails, such as veracity, honesty, and impartiality, journalism is, sooner or later, doomed to failure.

Therefore, and in conclusion: between the iron cage of propaganda and the anarchy of the Internet, journalism must (again) strive to find its own path – a path centred on investigation, on veracity, and on impartiality. //

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