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“Selective Information is Misinformation”

Edward S. Herman

The Keynote Address given at the 2002 UDC Conference.

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The quotation in my title is from a recent decision by Judge Damon Keith of the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati in which he ruled against Attorney-General John Ashcroft's attempt to keep deportation hearings behind closed doors. The judge noted that "when government begins closing doors, it selectively controls information that rightly belongs to the people. Selective information is misinformation."¹

How profoundly applicable this is to the private commercial media who close doors to dissident opinion as a matter of course and also select information in their news columns in accord with favored agendas! They select the topics to be covered, the sources to be tapped and ignored, the frames used and context deemed appropriate (if any), and what facts and allegations are to be admitted or excluded on the permitted topics. They regularly participate in propaganda campaigns that serve the state and divert attention from more mundane matters. In the light of the current "war on terrorism" by a business administration, how salient is Thorstein Veblen's observation made back in 1904 that "Business interests urge on an aggressive national policy and businessmen direct it. Such a policy is warlike as

well as patriotic. The direct cultural value of such a warlike policy is unequivocal...[channeling] the popular interest to other, nobler, institutionally less hazardous matters than the unequal distribution of wealth or of creature comforts."² And how well the mainstream U.S. media serve today to direct the popular interest in this useful direction!

The results under a free commercial media system are often staggering in their bias, even Orwellian. One of my favorite illustrations, because of its Orwellian qualities, was the media's treatment of the Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984, and the Nicaraguan election of 1984. The Reagan administration supported the Salvadoran government and elections were held there to put that government in a good light and make U.S. support for the military-dominated government palatable to the U.S. public—they were "demonstration elections."³ In the same time frame the Nicaraguan government was under attack by the Reaganites, who tried to discredit its election. A problem for the Reaganites was that the Salvadoran government was a terror regime that killed an average of 800 civilians a month in the year up to the March 1982 election. In addition, the left was off the ballot by law and death threats, and voting was required by law, reinforced by transparent plastic voting boxes, registration of votes, and state terror. The government of Nicaragua wasn't killing civilians, didn't keep anybody off the ballot, and voting was secret and not mandatory. Nevertheless, in precise accord with the Reagan agenda, the mainstream media across the board found the Salvadoran election a "triumph" (Dan Rather) and the Nicaraguan election a "sham" (*New York Times*).⁴

Even more beautiful for media analysis, and bringing us into the realm of George Orwell, the media focused on different subjects in the approved and disapproved elections. For El Salvador, the focus was on the turnout of voters—the large turnout was the "triumph" and the requirement to vote, the absence of secrecy, and the system of terror, were ignored. The destruction of two independent newspapers and the inability of the left to run in El Salvador were also not newsworthy. On the other hand, for Nicaragua, the large turnout was seen as of little interest, whereas the harassment—not destruction—of the anti-Sandinista newspaper *La Prensa*, and the voluntary withdrawal of a candidate (who, it was belatedly revealed, was on the CIA payroll), were considered fatal to election integrity.⁵ We may

recall Orwell's line in his book *1984* on how, under Big Brother, it was standard procedure to forget something "and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion?"—like limits on freedom of the press and the ability of dissident candidates to run, which the mainstream media drew back from their oblivion in El Salvador to help the media (and the Reagan administration) delegitimize an election in Nicaragua.

This Orwellian process has wide application in the Free Press. Sticking to Salvadoran elections, back in 1981 the Salvadoran army issued a death list of 138 Salvadorans, including virtually all dissidents on the left. The media ignored that at the time of the 1982 election, when publicizing it would have suggested a less than democratic election. However, in 1989, when the left in El Salvador felt able to participate tentatively in an election there, the *New York Times* finally mentioned the 1981 death list, drawing it back from oblivion when it could be used to put the 1989 election in a good light.⁶

For a more up-to-date case, Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons against Iran in 1984 and the Iraqi Kurds in 1988, but at that time he was supported by the United States (and Britain), and his use of those weapons was materially aided and diplomatically protected by the Reagan administration (and its British ally). The United States supplied Saddam with "crop spraying" helicopters that could be used for the delivery of chemicals against human targets, approved and provided him with at least 80 shipments of biological agents (including anthrax), and the United States was the only country to vote against a March 1986 Security Council condemnation of Iraq for using chemical warfare.⁷ In those years the mainstream media followed the government agenda, giving Iraq's use of chemical warfare little attention. However, at the time of a standoff over inspections in 1998, and especially in the summer and fall of 2002 when the Bush II administration was trying to make a case for attacking Iraq, Saddam's use of chemical weapons in the 1980s became a matter of great interest and high indignation to the U.S. administrations. The media followed in the official wake, bringing it back from virtual oblivion.

Thus, for example, *Washington Post* editorials in 1998, 1999 and 2002 repeatedly and indignantly called attention to the fact that Saddam Hussein "has used chemical weapons against his own

people," and the editors concluded in 2002, that "only Saddam Hussein's removal from power can ultimately erase the threat that Iraq currently poses to the world."⁸ But back in the 1980s, when Saddam used chemical weapons against Iran and "his own people," but was a U.S. ally, whose use of chemical weapons was accepted and even helped along by the U.S. leadership, the *Post* suggested that it was "a bit odd" to "worry overly about any particular method" of warfare.⁹ During those years it didn't feature in the news or object editorially to continuing U.S. aid to Saddam, nor did it suggest that he be removed from power. In fact, it cautiously defended a unanimous Senate resolution of 1988 for mild sanctions against Saddam on the ground that it might induce him to stop using chemical weapons against the Kurds, which would "help establish a more solid basis on which a relationship can continue!"¹⁰ What a difference official support and hostility can make to editorial positions, and to the structure of news as well!

When the U.N. inspectors were withdrawn from Iraq in December 1998, in preparation for further U.S. and British attacks on Iraq, the media reported this basis of withdrawal as straightforward fact: thus the *Los Angeles Times* noted that "Immediately after submitting his report on Baghdad's non-compliance, [UNSCOM head Richard] Butler ordered his inspectors to leave Iraq," and NBC's *Saturday Today* also reported that "the U.N. ordered its inspectors to leave Iraq this morning." But four years later, when the Bush administration was trying to put Iraq in a bad light and claimed that Iraq had ordered the inspectors out, the media changed their story to accommodate: the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that "it is not known whether Iraq has rebuilt clandestine nuclear facilities since U.N. inspectors were forced out in 1998," and *Saturday Today* said that Iraq was talking about readmitting U.N. weapons inspectors "after kicking them out four years ago." This straightforward Orwellian rewriting of history on this matter was done across the board in the mainstream media.¹¹

This points up another Orwellian principle very applicable to the work of the U.S. mainstream media: in Ingsoc, the language of doublethink in *1984*, "any past or future agreement with him [the demonized enemy] was impossible.... The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia so short a time as four

years ago." Well, during and after the Gulf War of 1991 you would never know from the mainstream media that the United States had been in alliance with Saddam Hussein up to the day of his invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990.

There are many other illustrations of the media's adherence to the Ingsoc principle of conveniently forgetting prior alliances with demonized enemies. The Cambodian communist leader Pol Pot, whose violent rule in Cambodia extended from April 1975 to December 1978, was furiously assailed by U.S. leaders and the media as "another Hitler" during his time in power. He and his forces were driven into exile in Thailand by Vietnam in December 1978. But as the enemy of Vietnam, the United States quietly supported him after his ouster for more than a decade, giving him aid directly and indirectly, approving his retention of Cambodia's seat in the UN, and even bargaining to include him in the election process of the 1990s. The U.S. media kept this support for "another Hitler" under the rug. Subsequently, after the Vietnamese left Cambodia in 1995, and Pol Pot was no longer useful as an enemy of our enemy, he resumed his status as a villain and war criminal and there was much talk of whether he could be brought to trial for war crimes. But you would never know from the U.S. mainstream media that the villain had been supported by—and was in a de facto alliance with—the United States for more than ten years.¹²

The U.S. invaded Panama and captured its leader Manuel Noriega in 1989, allegedly because of his involvement in the drug trade, but actually because he failed to meet U.S. demands for support in the war against Nicaragua. Noriega had been involved in the drug trade for more than a decade in earlier years without causing any withdrawal of U.S. support. During the period of the invasion, capture, and trial of Noriega, the mainstream media did not discuss and reflect on the significance of the earlier support of and agreement with this demon.

The Taliban government in Afghanistan moved beyond the pale in 1998, following the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa by Al-Qaeda cadres affiliated with Osama bin Laden, who made his headquarters in Afghanistan. Following 9/11, the Taliban, along with bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, was even more thoroughly demonized by both the U.S. government and mainstream media. But here again, while not impossible to find, it would take some effort to locate

mainstream news reports or commentary recounting the fact that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda had been organized and supported by the United States and its allies Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the 1980s to fight Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and that the United States had backed the Taliban's assumption of power in 1996 because it brought "stability" (and perhaps might make possible the construction of an oil pipeline through Afghanistan).¹³

Another Orwellian process that is commonplace in the mainstream media is "disappearing" people. When the government agenda calls for this, the media oblige to a remarkable degree. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and I focused on how victims are dichotomized as "worthy" and "unworthy" by the media, the worthy are given intense coverage, the unworthy are treated in low key or ignored altogether. We gave telling illustrations, and noted how closely this media dichotomization followed the government's agenda. Even earlier we had featured how the U.S. media devoted great attention to Pol Pot's killings in Cambodia, which served the state agenda of featuring Communist misbehavior, but treated in very low key Indonesia's almost simultaneous invasion and occupation of East Timor, which took place with the approval and logistical support of the U.S. government. And as Indonesian killings in East Timor peaked in 1977 and 1978, mentions of that occupation in the *New York Times* fell to zero—the victims disappeared.¹⁴

This same Orwellian process can be seen in the recent treatment of body counts and civilian killings. When the United States kills civilians, body counts are politically inconvenient as they may impede the use of advanced weaponry and permit the mobilization of opposition to U.S. military ventures. For this reason the Pentagon doesn't count bodies in such cases, and regularly denies charges of responsibility for major civilian casualties, as in Panama in 1989, Iraq in 1991, Yugoslavia in 1999, and Afghanistan in 2001-2. On the other hand, the Pentagon and State Department have been deeply concerned over civilian killings by enemy states, the most notable recent case being Kosovo during the war with Yugoslavia in 1999.¹⁵

The media follow along with the Pentagon/State Department treatment of civilian victims in these cases in a manner similar to their earlier dichotomous treatment of Cambodia and Indonesia in East Timor. The media outdid themselves in their attentiveness to, and indignation over, Kosovo Albanian victims of Serbia before, during,

and after the 78-day bombing war in 1999; but their interest in civilian victims in Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan has been very muted if not absent altogether. Equally interesting has been their treatment of Iraqi civilian victims of the U.S.-British imposed "sanctions of mass destruction" on Iraq during the decade following the 1991 war. When U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in answer to a question on whether 500,000 Iraqi children dying as a result of those sanctions was defensible, stated on national TV in 1996 that those deaths "were worth it," no media notice of this exchange followed. These were unworthy victims whose death flowed from U.S. policy decisions, and the media's black hole treatment followed. On the other hand, when 40 Albanians were killed at Racak, Kosovo in January 1999, offering a *casus belli* that Madeleine Albright was looking for—"Spring has come early this year," she said to Sandy Berger—on hearing of this incident, the media found these victims to be eminently worthy, and indignant attention followed.¹⁶

This comparative method that I have been describing here is a very constructive methodology that has been used effectively by historians such as the great French scholar Marc Bloch as well as by media analysts.¹⁷ For one thing it is simple and comprehensible, but grounded in solid factual evidence that is hard to evade. For another, it can demonstrate media bias in very dramatic fashion, as suggested by the illustrations I have just presented. If this bias is huge, as I believe and have easily demonstrated on numerous occasions, it is surely important to show this and reiterate the point time and again. After all, demonstrating very serious bias makes the case for the importance of radical media criticism. At the same time, as this bias shows media performance that is incompatible with an informed public and democratic politics, it also points to the urgent need for radical change in media organization and structure.

What is needed to link the systematic bias to media structures is a theory that will explain this regular subservience of the commercial media to agendas of the state and other powerful interests. This is the function of the propaganda model, which is essentially a power model that traces media performance to structural and power factors: media ownership and control; the funding of the media by advertisers; sourcing processes and the dependence of journalists on "primary definers" who wield power; flak as a force keeping the media in line, important cases of which trace back to inputs by powerful people; and

the ideology of media owners and personnel, which also flows in good measure from dominant power sources.

The propaganda model cannot explain everything, but it has proven to be a very useful framework for understanding the forces that shape many important media choices, many of which, as I have noted, serve the agendas of the powerful and violate principles that media personnel and apologists often claim to control their behavior.

One of the criticisms of the propaganda model has been that it neglects the importance of professionalism in offsetting any bias arising from structural factors. It has been a major contention of Professor Dan Hallin, that the maturing of journalistic professionalism is "central to understanding how the media operate," and "surely part of the answer" to reforming and rehabilitating the public sphere.¹⁸ But professional standards, and the closely associated rules of objectivity are fuzzy, and their stress on finding credible sources (also conveniently cheap and with no flak attached) has entailed fatal compromises with substantive objectivity. Hallin himself has acknowledged that professionalism has sometimes allowed thoroughgoing government control via sourcing domination.¹⁹

In fact, although Hallin has asserted that the propaganda model couldn't explain media coverage of the Central American wars of the 1980s, and Michael Schudson has pointed to Hallin's studies as superior in explanatory value to comparable material in *Manufacturing Consent*, the propaganda model works well for those Central American struggles, whereas Hallin's effort does poorly. The propaganda model readily explains the election double standard in treating El Salvador and Nicaragua, including the spectacular apologetics for El Salvador's elections held under ongoing state terror. Hallin admits that "the administration was able more often than not to prevail in the battle to determine the dominant frame of television coverage," that "the broad patterns in the framing of the story can be accounted for almost entirely by the evolution of policy and elite debate in Washington," and that "coherent statements of alternative visions of the world order and U.S. policy rarely appeared in the news."²⁰ This is exactly what the propaganda model would anticipate, but it is a far cry from news determination based on professionalism or substantive objectivity.

Hallin also noted that a "nascent alternative perspective" in reporting on El Salvador—a "human rights" framework—existed but

"never took hold." The propaganda model can explain this—professionalism cannot. Nor can professionalism explain why, with 700 journalists present at the Salvadoran election of 1982, many of whom were allegedly "often skeptical" of election integrity according to Hallin, the election still yielded a "public relations victory" for the administration.²¹ In this case, professionalism was easily overridden by power.

Societal changes over the last two decades have strengthened the explanatory value of the propaganda model and weakened the force of professionalism in shaping media behavior and performance. Both corporate and media concentration have increased, and so has the centralization of political power and greater sophistication of political leaders in media management. Public relations and advertising have increased in importance, and the competition for advertising in the media industries has intensified. Conglomeration, greater pressures for bottom line performance and competition for advertising, has led to increasing compromises of editorial independence, cutbacks in news and editorial staff, and diminished willingness to contest the powerful. The public sphere has shriveled and the propaganda model has increased in salience.

The result is an abundance of dramatic cases of the mainstream media serving as propaganda agents of the state and elite, and failing to meet minimum public service responsibilities. The opportunities for enlightening and constructive media analysis are rich. Just open the newspapers or turn on television and watch a state version of the "war on terrorism" offered without the slightest vestige of substantive objectivity: no coherent definition of the word terrorism; no distinction between retail (individual and small group) and wholesale (state) terrorism; no analysis of possible hidden agendas in the pursuit of this war; no historical context. On context, you will not read or hear any analysis of the analogous Reagan "war on terrorism," announced by Reagan's Secretary of State Alexander Haig in January 1981, which covered over a regressive economic agenda, but also, in historical retrospective, clearly involved massive support of state terrorists on a global basis (the South African apartheid government, the Argentine military regime, the El Salvador and Guatemalan governments, the Nicaragua contras, and the Begin-Sharon invasion of Lebanon culminating in the Sabra and Shatila massacre).

This horrendous media performance rests in part on the patriotic ardour which has gripped the populace since 9/11, which has caused the Democrats to cease any oppositional stance on the war, giving the administration a freer hand to keep the pot boiling with daily and weekly claims, reports and scares. This official propaganda barrage is not contested by anybody important, and the media feature it uncritically, serving as de facto propaganda conduits. With the threat of open aggression against Iraq, and with members of the establishment as well as virtually the entire rest of the world questioning this plan, there has been debate. But it is almost entirely about tactics and whether Iraq poses a sufficient threat to justify a "regime change" imposed by force. The idea that this is planned aggression in blatant violation of the U.N. Charter, and therefore an extreme form of state terrorism, is outside the realm of acceptable thought.

The potential applications of the comparative method and propaganda model on media performance today are almost beyond count, and the payoffs should be substantial. Analyzing the media's performance in relation to their claims of fairness, lack of bias, and objectivity is like shooting fish—maybe even dead fish—in a barrel. But these fish need to be shot. Shooting them should be a high priority for believers in a democratic media.

Notes

¹ Henry Weinstein, "Secret U.S. Deportation Hearings Ruled Illegal," *Los Angeles Times* (27 August 2002).

² Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), pp. 392-93.

³ See Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead, *Demonstration Elections: U.S. Staged Elections in Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988 and 2002), chapter 3.

⁵ See Herman and Chomsky. Table showing the differential treatment of topics in accord with the government-media agenda are shown on pp. 132-36

⁶ Lindsey Gruson, "A Fingerhold for Dissent in Salvador," *New York Times*, March 17, 1989.

⁷ The United States also gave Iraq intelligence information that allowed Iraq to "calibrate" their mustard gas attacks on Iran in 1984. For this and other U.S.-British assistance to Saddam, see the Labour Party Counter-Dossier, September 2002, at: (<http://www.traprockpeace.org>).

⁸ This and other quotes from the *Washington Post* in these paragraphs are drawn from Seth Ackerman, "The Washington Post's Gas Attack: Today's Outrage Was Yesterday's No Big Deal," *EXTRA!*, Sept.-Oct. 2002.

⁹ "Iraq Is Waging Chemical War," editorial, March 1, 1985.

¹⁰ "Too Tough On Iraq?," editorial, Sept. 20, 1988.

¹¹ "What a Difference Four Years Makes: Why U.N. Inspectors Left Iraq--then and now," *EXTRA!* Update, October 2002.

¹² See *Manufacturing Consent*, 2nd edition, pp. xxxvii-xli.

¹³ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), chap. 3.

¹⁵ Edward Herman, "Body Counts in Imperial Service," *Z Magazine*, Feb. 2002.

¹⁶ Herman. See also, Edward Herman, "'Tragic Errors' In U.S. Policy," *Z Magazine*, Sept. 2002.

¹⁷ See Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), chapter 3.

¹⁸ Dan Hallin, *We Keep America On Top Of The World* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.

¹⁹ Hallin, pp. 64, 70.

²⁰ Hallin, pp. 64, 74, 77.

²¹ Hallin, p. 72.

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