

## **Manipulation, Informative Control and Iraq War**

**Aurora Labio Bernal**

*Communication Faculty (University of Seville-Spain), Avenida Américo Vespucio s/n,  
Isla de la Cartuja, 41092 Seville. SPAIN  
e-mail-auroralabio@us.es*

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### **Abstract**

Taking the studies of Herbert Schiller as a basis, we shall carry out a reinterpretation of the myths that uphold the Market Economy, within which the media shall act as instruments that have control over public opinion. The multinationals of the sector, with multiple interests, thus forget their role of public function and instead join together with the political/economic elite which aims at the survival of inalterability. In order to do so, the doses of manipulation are to be administered on a daily basis by means of multiple mechanisms and shall reach their highest levels at moments of crisis. This is what was to happen at the different phases of the invasion in Iraq in 1991, 1998 and 2003, just as can be seen in the case of American journalism.

**Key Words:** manipulation, economic elite, journalism, groups, power.

### **Introduction**

In the mid-seventies, Herbert Schiller wrote *The Mind Managers* (1974), a book that was ahead of its time due to its analysis of the mechanisms used by the media for manipulating public opinion. The analysis of the American writer cannot be of more importance at this very moment. Thirty years after its first publication, the processes of concentration and multinationalization have turned communication and information into thriving businesses, due to their profits and their capacity to have an influence on world population.

A globalised society in economic terms is a standardised society in cultural and informative terms. What we're saying is by no means anything new. In fact, in the eighties when there was an attempt to re-establish a New International Economic Order, it was to be unavoidably associated with the additional creation of a New World Order of Information and Communication. In this way, it was revealed that the hegemony of an elite of nations above the rest was not only an economic matter, but at the same time it was also creating inequalities in the access and distribution of content matter.

From then on, these conditions have not improved. Instead, they have become more acute due to the willingness of a system which establishes its own identity by means of the media. It is not the only mechanism that is used. In reality, the very same rules of capitalist dynamics help the media to be, at times, the shelter where they can take refuge. At other times, they facilitate the comprehension of a unique way of seeing the world, the only way possible, which turns alternative thinking into something strange. In both cases, the definition of the messages is perfectly

structured so that few doubts can be raised about the system, so that its survival is encouraged by means of consumption and so that people can relax their minds, as they sit back on their comfortable couches and enjoy the entertainment provided.

In doing so, it is especially interesting to analyse the superficial layer of content, which is determined to show values such as freedom, pluralism and independence. In other studies, we have already pointed out that the media themselves praise the goodness of the system. They refer to the press as the fourth power, they deny that there may be any other possibility of censorship in the current democracies and they sell the mirage of free societies.

In the aforementioned book, Schiller, by analysing this in the case of the United States, drew attention to the existence of up to five myths in the structure of content. Although we coincide with the American author, we miss in his analysis the establishment of relations between these myths, whose ultimate intention can only be understood by using their interdependency as a starting point.

### **A reinterpretation of Schiller's myths**

Schiller begins by referring to the exaltation of individualism, under the precepts of which private property is encouraged as a culmination of human well-being. However, this will require a suitable imperturbable context which will allow this reality to be assumed without doubts appearing. This is how the second myth appears, that of neutrality, to which we referred before when we spoke about the appearance of an ideal system which denies manipulation as a form of social control. Thus, the individual can live in peace, accumulating wealth just like the rest of his fellow men and with the assurance of being protected by a model of a neutral state in all its ramifications. It is precisely in this context that another of the myths begins to make sense, that of the pluralism of the media, guarantors of the structure of a well-formed public opinion. The belief in the fact that a quantity of channels and the abundance of information ensure diversity and alternative thinking is shaped as one of the most determinant axes in manipulation. People trust the media, which have theoretically and traditionally been granted the values upon which current democracies have settled. Discrepancy also grants the definitive value of plurality, even if it's only a case of being the disguise of a truly heretical element. If the latter were to appear, the system would really end up expelling or devouring it.

Two other myths are joined to these, both contrary and complementary at the same time: the one that refers to the absence of the analysis of social conflicts and the one which calls out to human emotions which justify the demand for a specific type of message. In this way, it won't be necessary to emphasize the in depth study of existing inequalities. In exchange, these contents are to be substituted by banal informative channels which, at the end of the day, only respond to the demands and the requests of the audience.

The interrelation of these mechanisms in the structure of the message ensures order and the incapacity to react. It is the victory of the system over the individual, relegated to its role as

producer and consumer of goods, submitted to the interests of owing and owning rather than those of loving and being. Armand Mattelart has written about this matter:

In the name of categorical imperatives of the techno-political planet, archetype of the emancipated networks of historic boundaries and those of different cultures, the neo-liberal utopia has created an unsurmountable horizon for the evolution of the globe, in which the ideal of equality and justice has been prohibited, in which the utopian matrix has been inspired for quite some time. No great topics, no great conflicts, but instead technical solutions, a ‘managerial action free from worries of political hegemony’, according to the vocabulary issued by the great world agencies of intermediaries. No great tales of freedom, but instead short-sighted technoutopian fragments. With the disappearance of the Cold War and the equilibrium of terror, human societies would have reached the ‘final point in man’s ideological evolution’. Consequently, no need for those promoted to sovereign consumers/audiences to resist the established order, but the neo-Darwinian obligation to adapt to the new competitive environment of world free trading. Now, it’s not just survival of the fittest, but also the survival of the fastest (...) Only the ‘universal commercial republic’ is legitimised in its rejuvenated version: the global democratic marketplace. (Mattelart, 2000: 431-432)

There does not seem to be much innocence in the emanation of informative messages by means of media which have lost (if in fact they ever had had it) their independent character, in order to form part of corporations directly connected with economic and political interests. In this way, globalization, in informative terms, makes us talk about the power of the media, this being understood as another ramification of the economic-political power in the world.

According to Ramón Reig, ‘every Power structure requires a discourse, it needs messages for its consolidation’ (Reig, 2004: 125). Clearly, these contents shall encourage the legitimacy of the System, not only by means of publicity which incites consumption, but also by means of homogeneous information to which it is impossible to respond. In this sense, the receiver should not confuse the different ideological lines in media – often marked by the need to cover market quotas – with the unanimous message that praises the goodness of Market Economy.

The commercialisation of the media is such that the contents are poisoned in order to achieve the sale of the informative product. In nearly all television channels all over the world, we can find that showiness is an essential characteristic. Even the so-called serious press has been unable to escape the tabloidization of its contents, which gradually give priority to lighter-hearted subjects and which fundamentally fulfil the function of entertaining.

Furthermore, even some news reports include undercover publicity based on commercial interests of the company to which the media group belongs. It is the case of promoting certain writers, which publish their work in the Group editorial, or certain cinema directors who receive support from their affiliated audio-visual company. It is the definitive death of the Fourth Power and the discovery of a new way of creating journalism, subject to market laws and their ways of manipulating.

### **Groups, power and manipulation**

At present, the media panorama shows us a tangle of communication companies at the service of one single interest: the system of market economy. This is why, although we can discover political tendencies in many media groups, we uphold the thesis that the true dominant ideology in this media falls in with the bases on which capitalism is settled.

If we wish to understand all of this in a practical manner, we only need to pause to study what the journalistic reality itself shows us on a daily basis. We are specifically referring to the amount of news reports which the media themselves echo over and over again and which constitute the best evidence of the complex relations that are established within the informative structure. We thereby discover the impossibility of acknowledging the media as isolated companies which assume their public function as a priority task. Beyond all of this, the interests and relations between the great corporations of this sector and of other industries, are revealed to us as key elements in understanding the informative submission to the neo-liberal ideology.

We can confirm this by means of an example in which we shall apply considerations of a structuralist methodology. In June 2002, we heard the news that Robert Murdoch, communication tycoon behind whom we find the News Corporation group, was buying the Italian digital platform Stream from the Vivendi group. Months before, in another news report, we heard that Fox News, also belonging to News Corporation, had a larger audience than the American channel CNN, belonging to the America On Line-Time Warner conglomerate.

The analysis of this information leads us to establishing a series of bonds from which we can reach other sectors, corporations, media groups and countries. For example, Vivendi, as well as being a communications group, is also a company dedicated to water supply. Furthermore, according to this information, it reaches Spain thanks to Canal Plus, where we curiously find the CNN Plus channel, a Spanish derivation of the American channel which, as we have seen, is in the hands of AOL-Time Warner. And from CNN Plus we get to the Prisa group, a Spanish group which, for example, also has interests in Mexico, which it reaches with Santillana, El País Internacional and Radiópolis.

By reading this data we open the way to the understanding of how it's only a few corporations which dominate the market of world media. This has some direct consequences starting when these companies are the catalysts of predetermined messages and configured with propagandist aims for the upholding of this power structure, from which they emanate and to which they owe their survival.

### **In reference to this matter, Chomsky and Herman have written:**

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. (Chomsky and Herman, 1990: 21)

These are the authors who also tell us about a series of filters applied to the information by the media which work as implicit censors in the messages so that they can maintain a certain state of things. From the management of information by the power structure to the advertising subjection and the company configuration which dominates the media.

The media power in the world can therefore be found in the hands of corporations with interests inside and outside of communication which, furthermore, is not recognised as a public service but as a profit making business. This contemporary social reality is the product of a capitalist advance, accelerated after the Second World War, which has supposed a worldwide informative distribution which corresponds to the political and economic distribution. It is the case of a second wave in the process of globalization, in which a unique way of thinking has been imposed:

Groups which are more powerful than States carry out an attack on the most precious possession of democracies: information. Are they trying to impose their law on the whole world or, on the contrary, do they wish to open a new area of freedom for citizens? Neither Ted Turner, from CNN; nor Rupert Murdoch, from News Corporation Limited; nor Bill Gates, from Microsoft; nor tens of other new masters of the world have ever submitted their projects to universal suffrage. Democracy wasn't made for them. (...) They have no time to lose. Their products and ideas freely cross the borders of a globalised market. (...) Proceeding (once again) from the United States, but happily taken up by Europeans, this new preaching serves the interests of world capitalism. (Ramonet, 2002: 165-166)

In the same way, on informative grounds, there are also some companies which rule the world and that can be found in the developed area of the planet. This is how we can verify that the six largest communications groups in the world are American and European, and that they extend their area of influence beyond their frontiers thus contributing to spreading an informative flow which connects with its western interests.

Established as another part of economic power, these groups depend on the approval and the tolerance of a political elite which protects them and gives them shelter. In appearance, we speak of pluralism, but in practice, control is removed from the market in order to proceed with concentrations and a rhythm which is increasingly wilder in the sector. Good relations between the political, economic and media elements also allow the exchange of favours. The executive allows the growth and expansion within the limits of property, while corporations maintain the singular dimension of the message in order to avoid 'social disorder'. This practice can reach levels of propaganda at moments of crisis as could be seen in the War in Iraq through the American media. It was a case of keeping public opinion favourable, which is why the media of that country took unanimous turns when patriotic journalism was to be carried out. The machinery must keep going, although truth can be somewhat injured along the way.

### **The manipulated message: an example through of the War in Iraq**

As we have just seen, nowadays information suffers the consequences of a commercialised

system which puts economic results before public function. This is not strange since, in the attainment of this interest, the message undergoes a process of manipulation that can prove to be more than obvious, but that can also be diluted through mechanisms that are not recognised by the receiver.

If this occurs with daily information, then that which is produced at moments of crisis is even more contaminated due to the confluence of commercial interest with propagandist purposes. Under these circumstances, we are going to make a special mention of the techniques used during the different phases of the Gulf War, starting with the first American attack at the start of the eighties up until the last real invasion in 2003.

In effect, the first Gulf War, in 1991, revealed the different tactics used to manipulate information on behalf of western media, especially the Americans. In fact, when the bombing occurred over Baghdad, the only television station to broadcast the images was CNN, from which the rest of the channels in the world would get their data. Indeed, we can assert that it was a conflict in which information was censored, manipulated and even invented. In this sense, the complicity between large media groups and the political-military leadership made it possible to broadcast impaired contents:

(...) Indeed, to understand how television became 'Pentavision', it is necessary to consider not just how negative dimensions of the management system prevented news media from reporting certain aspects of the war but how readily reporters succumbed to the positive side of news management, relaying event through the eyes, and in the terminology, of the military. (...) Euphemisms were the order of the day. Emitting a stream of 'bovine scatology' (one of Schwarzkopf's more colourful coinages, though applied by him to journalists' stupid questions rather than to the briefings) the briefer used opaque jargon to obscure reality, so that civilian casualties became 'collateral damage' while 'degrading capabilities' was the preferred substitution for bombing. (Carruthers, 2000: 142-143)

Thus, during the months that the war lasted, it was revealed that journalists obeyed orders from their companies, which didn't hesitate to adopt instructions dictated by the government as their own. It was a case of creating patriotic journalism, in which the distinction between who were the good guys and who were the bad guys ought to be made perfectly clear. Not only information was censored, but also at times lies were told and false news reports were invented with a more than obvious propagandist intention:

In 1990, the organisation Citizens for a Free Kuwait managed to convince a reluctant America that there was a need for the Gulf War to break out. Supported by George Bush senior, this group led the world press to believe that Iraqi soldiers had killed Kuwaiti children, by removing them from their incubators; a cynical operation of intoxication, brilliantly carried out thanks to the savoir faire of a rival member of the Rendon Group (The author refers to the Rendon Group, dedicated to carrying out clandestine propagandist campaigns requested by the Pentagon.), Hill and Knowlton, whose former head of the Washington Office, 'Torie' Clark, is now spokesperson



for the Pentagon. (El Semanal Supplement, 2003: 20)

Seven years later, when the Clinton administration once again bombed the Iraqi city, history repeated itself. It was the CNN, surprisingly isolated there as the only international station, which once again was to broadcast for the rest of the planet. From thousands of homes, viewers watched a shower of bombs, at the same time as they received the message from the American president which justified the act. Rising up as the saviour of his country and the whole world, Clinton lashed out at Saddam Hussein, accusing him of not collaborating with the UN inspectors who were in Iraq to check whether or not he owned weapons of mass destruction. And the whole world believed the message, even though it was made in the midst of a process that questioned whether Clinton would remain in office, due to the Lewinsky matter.

However, certain variations between one event and another could be noticed when it was time for the western media to report, with the exception of the Americans. After the fighting in 1991, many voices were raised against informative manipulation which had been performed with an outright contempt for the truth. Criticism made way for the awareness of the journalistic profession, especially in Europe. For this reason, when the bombings occurred in 1998, we can observe a variation in the manner of reporting of many professionals, who, in spite of American recommendations, tried to show an alternative version.

We insist that these reflections are not going to affect the American media which once again in 2003 fell in with the propagandist directives from the American government. In February 2004, Colin Powell presented the UN with some photographs as irrefutable evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction in his territory. Rather more than questionable, the images became the necessary justification to start the second Gulf War which would eventually lead to the dismantling of the Iraqi regime.

During the invasion, the country's media took unanimous turns to support the Bush administration. The mechanisms used show that manipulation can be carried out in many ways. Among the roughest, we can find the explicit censorship carried out by the American government on the report sent by the Iraqi government to the UN relating to the weapons of mass destruction.

Just as was published in the German newspaper Die Tageszeitung in December 2002, and as was revealed by Project Censored 2004, the American executive literally removed 8,000 of the 11,800 pages from the original report. In these pages there were, according to an article published by Michael I. Niman in The Humanist and in ArtVoice in spring 2003, references to the involvement of different American governments in supplying forbidden weapons to Iraq:

The missing pages implicated 24 U.S.-based corporations ante the successive Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. Administrations in connection with the illegal supplying of Saddam Hussein's government with myriad weapons of mass destruction and the training to use them. (Niman, 2003, cited in Censored 2004, Media Democracy in Action, 2003: 42)

But not only was information concealed. There was an attempt to censor it, thus affecting the informative task itself. In another article, we have already mentioned how, shortly before the

American troops entered Baghdad, the Pentagon had asked journalists to leave the Iraqi capital. Aware of the power on public opinion, the American troops preferred to not have any direct witnesses on their entrance to the city, a definitive symbol of the fall of the Saddam regime. Furthermore Colin Powell warned the journalists of the danger they were in 'not only because of the threat of a potential military action, but because of the risk of Saddam taking hostages' (Sistiaga, 2004: 133). One day before the capture of Baghdad, the threat was fulfilled when an American tank fired at the Palestina Hotel, where the international press was lodged. Two news professionals, including Spanish cameraman José Couso, died during the attack, justified before public opinion as an action in an area of intense fighting. Although the version offered was more than questioned by journalists present in Baghdad, the then president of the Government publicly declared that informers 'knew the high risk that they ran by being there, a risk that unfortunately had been materialised' (*El Mundo*, 10 April 2003). The statement was made by José María Aznar at a meeting with George Bush, whose policy in the war was perfectly assimilated by the Spanish executive, also in informative matters:

Powell wasn't the only one to publicly ask journalists to flee and stop doing their work. The Spanish government devoted itself to calling the heads of media who had reporters in the area so that they could get them out of there. From Moncloa, from the vice-presidency of the Government, from the Ministry of Defence, from the headquarters of the Partido Popular in Génova Street, directors and heads of television, radio and press were urged to remove their people from Baghdad. The calls were made directly by ministers and State secretaries. There was an authentic psychosis of forced evacuation among those of us reporters who were in Baghdad because the Spanish government adopted the American communicative policy. It was a case of waging an illegal war which was not supported by the United Nations, and against which we could find the majority of public opinion, therefore the less witnesses the better. (Sistiaga, 2004: 133-134)

This control strategy also had another ramification by means of the embedded journalists. That is to say, not only were orders sent to the media in a general manner, but furthermore, the Pentagon made sure that there were informers within the military units. The initiative was considered a 'clear success' by the Pentagon, but we should ask ourselves why it was so praised in view of the requirements that were imposed. For example, among the rules that had to be obeyed by that type of journalist, there was one which forbade the broadcasting of information about operations that were underway unless they were authorised by the commander in charge. In the same way, they were only allowed to broadcast public data relevant to the date, time or location of the military missions and action if they were described in general terms. In this respect, informative work surrendered itself to military control, with the journalists becoming 'captives, prisoners' (Ferreira and Sarmiento, 2004: 63-64) of the units that accompanied them.

If this method of control is performed effectively, there is another manner of informative manipulation, this being that of omission. We are referring to the concealment of elements that can provoke a negative attitude of public opinion regarding the War in Iraq. The photos of the coffins draped with American flags and which transported the lifeless bodies of soldiers who had



fallen in Iraq became famous but the media said nothing about those who were wounded during the war. The instructions were to not show the consequences that the conflict was having on the American army, mainly that young men under the age of thirty were being mutilated for life, much to the ignorance of the population in general. According to information published in *El Mundo* in January 2004:

At least 10 American soldiers were wounded every day in Iraq. The proportion is seven to each of the 496 deaths, but the Pentagon is increasingly more imprecise. The last official report speaks of 2,809 wounded, although three weeks ago news leaked out that another 8,581 ‘medical evacuations’ had occurred since the war began, many of which were caused by the mysterious pneumonia that some attribute to the anthrax vaccinations and others to impoverished uranium.

Moreover, all these techniques are to try and achieve patriotic passion, with tarnished examples, like that of the rescue of soldier Lynch, which seemed more like a Hollywood motion picture rather than reality. It was a way of calling on the emotions of the population, which enthusiastically welcomes heroic attitudes that safeguard the myth of the homeland as a collective sentiment (Labio, 2003: 189-202).

So, the combination of these simplifying elements, censorship and the control of information were determinant when it came to launching a manipulated message and at the service of the dominating elite in the United States. One year after the invasion of Iraq, the American executive admitted that weapons of mass destruction had not been found in Iraq and that it was improbable that connections between Al Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime would be found. That wasn’t of much importance. The Americans had adopted the manipulated message: the War in Iraq already formed part of their country’s foreign policy.

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