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Media, Power and the Origins of the Propaganda Model: An Interview with Edward S. Herman

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Abstract

To commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) and the publication of the collected volume, *The Propaganda Model Today*, this article re-presents an interview with Edward S. Herman that was originally published with *Fifth Estate Online* in 2008. The interview explored the origins of the PM, common criticisms of the PM, ways in which the PM was updated during the first two decades after it was initially introduced, and whether the PM can and should be applied to other media (such as television news, talk radio, the internet, popular films, pop music and music videos, and comic books). The interview questions have been edited and abbreviated from the original, and a bibliography has been added which directs readers to works which have explored (and will explore) topics and issues discussed within the interview.

Keywords

Propaganda Model, Edward S. Herman, propaganda, ideological power, elites, Cultural Studies, Sociology.

Jeffery Klaehn: *How would you characterize the relationship between media and power? And what are your thoughts on the most important implications of media power for democracy and public education today?*

Ed Herman: The mainstream media (MSM) are an integral part of the power structure and in consequence consistently serve the ends of the leaders within that power structure. This means that democracy and public education are not primary aims of the MSM; the former, if fully realized, might well be damaging to the ends of the powerful; the latter also, unless properly channeled and limited, could be injurious to the powerful. These incompatibilities are likely to increase if inequality

grows and if a military ethos and culture become steadily more important (as they have). The MSM will respond with attacks on and marginalization of ‘populism’ with its equalitarian tendencies, and will normalize enormous military budgets and wars.

Jeffery Klaehn: *What inspired the PM? What were your overall hopes and aims for the model?*

Ed Herman: We were inspired by the failure of the MSM to serve the public interest and the unwillingness of media analysts to give adequate weight to the structural basis of that media mal-performance. The model actually derives from models of industrial organization, where in past years the paradigm was that structure shapes firm behavior and ultimately economic performance. Fewness of sellers means less intense competition and greater profit margins. The PM similarly relates structural facts like ownership, funding sources, news sources and the relationship of these to the media, the ability to generate threatening flak, and the power to influence ideological premises, to ultimate media news and editorial performance. We hoped that this model would focus greater attention on fundamental forces affecting the media – that it would help explain their choices and frequent double standards and participation in propaganda campaigns.

Jeffery Klaehn: *What are the theoretical and real-world foundations of the PM?*

Ed Herman: The theoretical foundation is in good part the economic model of industrial organization that traces back to the great British economist Alfred Marshall, but assumed its more modern form at Harvard with Edward S. Mason and his student and later Berkeley academic Joe S. Bain. Our thinking was also influenced by pioneering media analysts whose ideas also flowed into our work: Warren Breed, Gaye Tuchman; Ben Bagdikian, Philip Elliott, Eric Barnouw, Peter Golding, Stuart Hall, Leon Sigal, and others. The ‘real world’ foundation was our own observations over many years, written up in many articles and books, on how the media operate in choosing, ignoring, stressing and contextualizing (or decontextualizing) the vast flow of news.

Jeffery Klaehn: *Does the PM share overlaps with critical discourse analysis, and how do you explain resistance and hostility to the PM?*

Ed Herman: The overlaps with critical discourse frames are numerous, but this is because the subject is immense and many tracks can be followed that are often not inconsistent with one another but stress different things. We don’t stress subtle language variations and/or the nuances in effects when the elite is split and a certain amount of dissent becomes permissible. Our emphasis is on the broader routes through which power affects media choices, how this feeds into media campaigns, and how it results in dichotomization and systematic double standards. The propaganda model focuses heavily on the institutional structure that lies behind news-making in ‘a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest.’ This leaves lots of room for other tracks and sub-tracks in areas we deal with.

The resistance and hostility to the PM had several sources. One is that it is a radical critique, whose implication is that modest reforms that don’t alter the structure very much aren’t going to affect media performance very much. This is hard for non-

radicals to swallow. Another source of resistance has been based on our relatively broad-brush strokes with which we model a complex area. This makes it allegedly too mechanistic and at the same time lacking in a weighting of the elements in the model! But we don't claim that it explains everything and we are clear that elite differences and local factors (including features of individual media institutions) can influence media outcomes. We argue that the model works well in many important cases, and we await the offering of one that is superior. But we also acknowledge that there remains lots of room for media studies that do not rest on the propaganda model. This same room opens the way to criticizing the model for its failure to pursue those tracks and fill those spaces.

Jeffery Klaehn: *It's been suggested to me at various points that studies applying the PM represent political criticism. What are your thoughts on misplaced criticisms of the model and on misconceptions about it that continue to circulate?*

Ed Herman: The key as I have noted is that it is a radical model, a class-based and class-bias model, and that in itself will explain much of the hostility. That will make it 'political,' whereas analyses that take the status quo as a given and that confine themselves to modest reforms are 'non-political.' This kind of critique is implicitly political. Applications of the PM do take ruling class interests as unified on some issues and as yielding consistent premises in the MSM (like benevolent intent in external ventures, and the superiority of market over government interventionary solutions to economic problems). But we are very clear that the ruling class may be divided on some issues, with important consequences for the media and the space within which journalists can work.

Jeffery Klaehn: *On the question of relevance, did you create the PM to be fundamentally democratic, available for reading and use by specialists and non-specialists alike?*

Ed Herman: We are democrats and oppose elite rule and great inequality. The PM shows that the MSM are elite institutions that serve an elite and not the general populace. This seems to us a rudimentary fact, but the model spells it out in its main features. We certainly didn't write this for specialists alone – we wrote it for everybody. Obviously elite interests and their supporters will find the thrust of the model upsetting and wrong-headed.

Social reality is very complex, but that is why a relatively simple and straightforward model like the PM is especially useful – cutting through that complexity to essentials. Ordinary persons can grasp complex realities as well as the elite, but we are happy to help them do this in a world where elite interests often try to obfuscate that reality.

Jeffery Klaehn: *In what ways might the PM be modified, improved or updated today?*

Ed Herman: We modified it in 2002 to include free market ideology as an important ideological premise, complementing anticommunism. We could possibly improve it by spelling out in much more detail the ways in which elite divisions and local factors affect the media and allow dissent more space, although there is always the danger

that the view of the forest might be lost in the profusion of detail on the trees. We could update on the growing command of militarism and war and the consequent growth in war propaganda. We may do this in an Epilogue to an edition of *Manufacturing Consent* being published in the UK by Bodley Head to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the publication of the model.

Jeffery Klaehn: *Can the PM be applied to other media, such as television news and the internet? Should it be? What about popular films and comic books? Is it possible to explore media content and/or various political-economic elements of the contexts in which these media are produced, applying general principles associated with the model?*

Ed Herman: The model certainly applies to television news, and in fact it can probably be applied as well to other media forms, modified as necessary by the extent to which they deal in matters of strong elite interest, the importance of advertising, and their ownership. A great many of the more important institutions in the categories that you name are parts of media conglomerates, and operate under similar pressures and rules. There may be special features of these media and local conditions that will modify the applicability of the propaganda model. But there is no logical reason why they shouldn't be subject to the same general principles and be worthy of study along these lines.

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