



**HAL**  
open science

# Radical Interventions: Ed Herman's Intellectual Roots and Activism within the Political Economic Tradition

Victor Pickard, Todd Wolfson

► **To cite this version:**

Victor Pickard, Todd Wolfson. Radical Interventions: Ed Herman's Intellectual Roots and Activism within the Political Economic Tradition. *Media Theory*, 2018, Standard Issue, 2 (2), pp.101 - 109. hal-02047638

**HAL Id: hal-02047638**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02047638>**

Submitted on 25 Feb 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License



**Radical Interventions:  
Ed Herman's Intellectual Roots  
and Activism within the Political  
Economic Tradition**

VICTOR PICKARD

*University of Pennsylvania, USA*

TODD WOLFSON

*Rutgers University, USA*

*Media Theory*  
Vol. 2 | No. 2 | 101-109  
© The Author(s) 2018  
CC-BY-NC-ND  
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

**Abstract**

This essay reflects on Ed Herman's legacy by connecting his intellectual background to the anti-fascist project within the political economic tradition of communication research. Given that one of the authors (Todd Wolfson) was good friends with Ed and worked with him on independent media, we also consider how he applied his radical critique to local activist projects in Philadelphia. This analysis helps underscore the fact that Ed Herman's insights hold much contemporary relevance for the many political problems facing American and global society today.

**Keywords**

Political Economy, Media Criticism, Journalism, Propaganda, Democracy

Last year we lost one of our great radical scholars. Ed Herman, who was writing cogent media criticism right up until the end of his life, died at the age of 92. Reflecting on Herman's legacy offers us a valuable opportunity to consider the important implications that his life's work holds for the many media crises facing us today. It also allows us to locate his work within a larger intellectual tradition, one devoted to tracing out the structural roots of power in an effort to aid activist projects toward contesting them. With this in mind, the following essay has three

aims. To briefly sketch Ed Herman's intellectual origins and connect this lineage to the political economic tradition of communication research, describe how he applied his radical critique to local activist projects in Philadelphia, and consider his insights in light of current problems facing commercial media systems.

## **Ed Herman's Anti-fascist Intellectual Roots**

Ed Herman hails from a research tradition that reflects a radical approach to analyzing power. This tradition has been largely marginalized within the field of communication research, but it is most akin to the sub-field of critical political economy. Herman shared a mentor with two other radical scholars: the economist Doug Dowd (who also passed away last year) and the critical media scholar Dallas Smythe, who is widely recognized as one of the founders of the "political economy of communication" tradition of media studies. Dowd, Smythe, and Herman all studied with the same left-wing economist at Berkeley, Robert Brady. Much of Brady's work – for example, studying the early rise of fascism in Germany – was devoted to understanding how the capitalist logics driving technological developments and business organizations enabled dangerous concentrations of power (Brady, 1937; Dowd, 1994). Dan Schiller (1999) has credited Robert Brady with deeply influencing two pioneers of political economy – Smythe as well as Herb Schiller – and thereby linking the field to an explicitly anti-fascist agenda. Schiller notes that Brady passed on the key insights that business interests seek to control many aspects of social life – through media and by other means – and these hegemonic tendencies serve as a prerequisite for fascism.

This intellectual lineage – one that exposes the structural roots of power with the express purpose of challenging them – remains consistent throughout Ed Herman's work. Herman, who spent nearly his entire professional life teaching at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School (as well as periodically lecturing at the Annenberg School for Communication) focused on how corporate power operated through business relationships. He also devoted much scholarship on criticism of American foreign policy (Chakravartty, 2018). These interests would lead him to scrutinize the role of commercial media in propagating elite agendas.

Ed Herman, like most radical political economists of media, understood that to apprehend journalistic norms, we must first consider the political economic system within which the institutions of the press are embedded. This key insight is far too often missing from the broader field of media and communication studies – as well as much contemporary media criticism – which has historically assumed an accommodationist relationship with the American media system’s commercialism (Pickard, 2015: 201). Whereas many media scholars take the commercial design of the American news media system as a given and a largely benign condition, Herman started out with the proposition that the commercial media system primarily served elite political and economic interests and, therefore, was antithetical to democracy.

### **Ed Herman’s Media Criticism**

In reflecting on Herman’s legacy for the field of communication, it is impossible to over-state the importance of his and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*. This 1988 book serves as a seminal text for structural criticism of commercial news media, specifically how they serve to advance the interests of political and economic elites. The book conceptualizes Herman and Chomsky’s famous “Propaganda Model.” Drawing from a number of case studies, they show how news coverage selectively filters out some bodies of evidence while privileging others according to larger power relationships. Their model suggests that patterns of omission and emphasis stemming from persistent news routines and values can be attributed to five structural “filters” unique to commercial media: corporate ownership, advertising, reliance on official sources, flak from interest groups (predominantly rightwing), and anticommunism (now updated to focus on anti-terrorism and other official enemies). The book is a rare attempt to link commercial media’s political economic structures with predictable biases and distortions in news media content.

Thoughtful and nuanced criticism of the Propaganda Model has been raised by left-of-center critics over the years. Ed Herman (1996) addressed some of this criticism in a classic essay published in the *Monthly Review*. One point that stands out is his critique of professional news norms, which penetrates to the ideological constraints of commercial media:

Professionalism and objectivity rules are fuzzy, flexible, and superficial manifestations of deeper power and control relationships. Professionalism arose in journalism in the years when the newspaper business was becoming less competitive and more dependent on advertising. Professionalism was not an antagonistic movement by the workers against the press owners, but was actively encouraged by many of the latter. It gave a badge of legitimacy to journalism, ostensibly assuring readers that the news would not be influenced by the biases of owners, advertisers, or the journalists themselves. In certain circumstances it has provided a degree of autonomy, but professionalism has also internalized some of the commercial values that media owners hold most dear, like relying on inexpensive official sources as the credible news source (Herman, 1996).

Even casual observers will note that much contemporary media coverage continues to conform to official narratives – even as some reporting and commentary takes on an adversarial stance toward the Trump administration – carefully hewing to hegemonic discourses about America’s and capitalism’s role in the world, just as the Propaganda Model would predict.

Herman built upon these insights over the last several decades. He co-authored a book with Robert McChesney (1997) that continues in this vein, linking ownership structures, profit imperatives, and elite ideological agendas within the broader global media system. This work advances the key insight from critical political economy that a media system is always embedded within a larger political economic system – in most cases, capitalism – and this shapes many of the everyday, taken-for-granted aspects of how that media system operates. Drawing from such insights, Herman continued to write incisive media criticism for popular news outlets, including *Monthly Review* and *Z Magazine*. In one of his final essays, he even addressed the “fake news” hysteria, in which he historicized the judicious use of misinformation by elites over the past century, and how a very compliant *New York Times* reliably amplified this propaganda (Herman, 2017).

Ed Herman's pioneering media criticism demonstrated how commercial systems are incapable of providing substantial, critical journalism and reliable government accountability, especially leading up to and during times of war. Given the corporate libertarian logics driving the American media system (Pickard, 2015), good journalism that focuses on major social problems like climate change and inequality is often bad for business. Therefore, Herman believed that nothing less than a structural overhaul was required, and he believed that we must mobilize around action plans for instituting alternative models—and political strategies for implementing them—that aim to unhook journalism from profit imperatives. As it becomes abundantly clear that a commercial media system cannot withstand profit pressures long enough to confront an elite-driven status quo—especially during times of war and economic crisis—Herman urged us to pursue democratic alternatives to the current system. Herman's commitment to local activism attested to these ethical commitments.

### **Ed Herman's Activism**

A central theme in Ed Herman's structural media criticism is that profit-driven journalism serves as a tool for propagating the ideology of elites. This core insight led him to a host of activist projects meant to shine a light on distortions in news media content. In particular, much of Herman's writing focuses on the bias of mainstream news media coverage of international politics. Later in his work, he applied this same critique to local media, particularly the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to account for their elite bias.

Through the later part of his career, Herman spent a great deal of time illustrating, in detail, the ideological slant of US newspapers on international crises. This work began in collaboration with Noam Chomsky in the book, *Counter Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Facts and Propaganda* (1973). *Counter Revolutionary Violence*, which saw extreme censorship by a publisher that destroyed over 10,000 copies of the book (Frazier, 2018), was focused on American media's reporting of U.S. actions during the Vietnam War. Building on that project, Herman and Chomsky published *After the Cataclysm* (1979), where they looked at news coverage of U.S. actions in Cambodia and other parts of Indochina. In these two books, and specifically *After the Cataclysm*,

Herman and Chomsky began to develop their thesis on American media as a propaganda machine that reinforces U.S. geo-political interests. This work naturally led to *Manufacturing Consent*, where the authors took their initial analysis that had focused on Asia and offered a more systematic analysis of modern-day propaganda in capitalist society.

In the years to follow, Herman continued to develop the propaganda model approach, writing trenchant critiques of the U.S. media system through analyses focused on the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda, and the war in Ukraine. All of this work was hallmarked by both rigorous research and a biting appraisal of our failing (or succeeding) media system. Alongside his scathing analysis of the U.S. media system's role in supporting U.S. hegemony, Ed Herman also turned to focus on local work in Philadelphia. In 2002, he worked with local activists to launch *Inkywatch*. The mission of *Inkywatch* was to monitor “the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for deception and bias.” He published *Inkywatch* from 2002-2008, and during that period the website was a key part of a radical media ecosystem in Philadelphia that was anchored by the *Philadelphia Independent Media Center* (Wolfson, 2014). In this phase, Ed worked closely with one of the authors (Todd Wolfson) on radical media projects throughout the city. And while Ed wrote biting copy, as a person, he was a sincere and generous mentor and co-conspirator to many organizers, activists and budding radical scholars.

As the main contributor to *Inkywatch*, Ed published dozens of articles each year and he used the *Inkywatch* website as a public ombudsman to hold the newspaper to account for its political and economic biases. His work ranged from criticism of *The Inquirer's* reporting on the Iraq War to analysis of the paper's consistent bias in coverage of the Mumia Abu-Jamal case.

Herman wrote an article shortly after the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003 entitled “Inky Notes: The Inky Celebrates ‘Liberation’ in a Propaganda Mode,” that epitomized his work on *Inkywatch*. He wrote:

The Inky (Philadelphia Inquirer) hops aboard each war bandwagon with uncritical zest, and sometimes falls on its face in the process. Its front page headline of April 10, accompanied by pictures of the toppling statue of Saddam Hussein, and a celebrating group of Iraqis, was ‘Toppled Ruler: Hussein's grip finally broken, jubilation sweeps Baghdad.’ As usual, nowhere in the accompanying article or associated editorial columns was there any mention that the dictator now toppled had long been supported by the United States, initially in his Ba’ath Party’s seizure of power and thereafter during most years of his tyrannical rule (Inkywatch, 2003).

Herman’s consistency in his scholarship, political writing, and activism is noteworthy. For instance, throughout all of Ed’s local activism, he linked directly to the broader analysis of the political economy of media institutions. He illustrated this by consistently referencing the propaganda model in his analysis of *The Inquirer*. Accordingly, while the main goal of the *Inkywatch* was to criticize the “rightward tilt” of the newspaper, Ed also reported on the ever-shifting ownership structure of *The Inquirer*, and he worked to tease out how it shaped the newspaper’s reporting. With this approach, he was able to connect his political economic analysis of the Philadelphia media ecosystem to his content analysis of *The Inquirer*. This ability to connect theory to rigorous and grounded analysis is one of Ed Herman’s many strengths as a scholar and as an activist.

In a similar vein, Herman recognized that the only way to challenge the propaganda machine was to assist radical political struggles, while cultivating alternative and independent journalism as an antidote to the corporate media. Ed expressed this instinct by consistently giving money and time to local media projects, including the *Philadelphia Independent Media Center*, *Media Tank*, and the *Media Mobilizing Project*, while also supporting national and global independent media projects where he published much of his work.

## Onward

Ed Herman worked to develop an accurate and all-too-unique assessment of modern capitalist society and, in particular, its commercial media. Collaborating with a host of scholars and activists, Herman became one of the foremost critical analysts of the media system's political economic structures while undertaking rigorous content analysis of how this "propaganda machine" operated on the ground. While Ed's scholarship was at times bleak, he was a staunch believer that through large-scale social change another world was possible. He expressed this belief through his friendships and in the way he fought for a just media system by supporting independent and radical media. Reflecting on Ed Herman's work allows us to better understand current problems – that they are political problems subject to human agency and progressive change if we organize to make it happen. Ed was an exemplar of a radical scholar, a committed activist, and a democracy-loving human being. Let us hope that part of his legacy is to inspire future activist scholars to pick up where he left off and carry on the struggle.

## References

- Brady, R. (1937) *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism*. New York: Viking.
- Chakravartty, P. (2018) 'US Media Power and the Empire of Liberty,' *Media Theory*, 2(2); originally published: 10 September: <http://mediatheoryjournal.org/paula-chakravartty-us-media-power-and-the-empire-of-liberty/>
- Chomsky, N. & Herman, E.S. (1973) *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Facts and Propaganda*. Andover: Warner Modular Publications.
- Chomsky, N. & Herman, E.S. (1979) *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Dowd, D. (1994) 'Against Decadence: The Work of Robert A. Brady (1901-63),' *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 1031-1061.
- Frazier, W. (July, 2018). 'Edward S. Herman's Biography', [http://ahealedplanet.net/herman.htm#\\_edn4](http://ahealedplanet.net/herman.htm#_edn4)
- Herman, E.S. and Chomsky, N. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Herman, E.S. S. & McChesney, R.W. (1997) *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*. Washington, DC: Cassell.

- Herman, E.S. (1996) 'The Propaganda Model Revisited,' *Monthly Review*, July. (Robert McChesney recently re-posted this article with a new preface). <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/01/01/the-propaganda-model-revisited/>
- Herman, E.S. (2003) 'Inky Notes: The Inky Celebrates 'Liberation' in a Propaganda Mode,' *Inkywatch*. Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20030421061933/http://www.inkywatch.org:80/>
- Herman, E.S. (July 1, 2017) 'Fake News on Russia and Other Official Enemies The New York Times, 1917–2017', *Monthly Review*, <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/07/01/fake-news-on-russia-and-other-official-enemies/>
- Pickard, V. (2015) *America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiller, D. (1999) 'The Legacy of Robert A. Brady: Antifascist Origins of the Political Economy of Communications', *Journal of Media Economics*; Vol. 12, Issue 2, 89-101.
- Wolfson, T. (2014) *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

**Victor Pickard** is an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. He is the author or co-editor of several books, including *America's Battle for Media Democracy*, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights*, and *Media Activism in the Digital Age*. With Todd Wolfson, he co-directs the Media, Inequality & Change (MIC) Center.

**Email:** [victor.pickard@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:victor.pickard@asc.upenn.edu)

**Todd Wolfson** is an associate professor at Rutgers University. He is author of *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* and co-editor of *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Todd is also co-founder and board president of Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia and he is co-director of the Media, Inequality & Change Center ([www.miccenter.org](http://www.miccenter.org)) with Victor Pickard.

**Email:** [twolfson@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:twolfson@rci.rutgers.edu)