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## **US Media Power and the Empire of Liberty**

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### **Abstract**

This brief essay reflects on the legacy of the work of Edward S. Herman in shaping critical theories of US media and empire through the long 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the current era of the forever War. I argue that the work of Herman (and Chomsky) poses a lasting challenge to celebratory liberal theories of media freedom, and instead documents the constitutive role of the commercial US media institutions and technologies in fortifying illiberal forces with implications both “at home” and abroad. In closing, I briefly consider the decolonial significance of Edward Herman’s persistent critique of US media power.

### **Keywords**

Propaganda and US Empire, Empire of Liberty, Media Freedom, Anti-Colonialism, Decolonial Theory.

The military juntas of Latin America and Asia are our juntas. Many of them were directly installed by us or are the beneficiaries of our direct intervention, and most of the others came into existence with our tacit support, using military equipment and training by the United States. Our massive intervention and subversion over the past 25 years has been confined almost exclusively to overthrowing reformers, democrats, and radicals – we have rarely “destabilized” right-wing military regimes no matter how corrupt or terroristic (Chomsky & Herman, 1979: 16).

My colleague Miriyam Aouragh (2017) and I recently published an article where we wondered why it was that the vast majority of English language scholarship on the Arab Uprisings’ “innovative social media use by youth in Egypt and Tunisia had so little to say about the US’ and other Western colonial powers’ legacy of occupation, on-going violence and strategic interests in the region at large.” Suddenly, a region that has been long ignored in mainstream media studies literature when it comes to

theories of democracy or social movements, became, momentarily, the focus of numerous books and articles speculating on the promise of Facebook and Twitter youth-fueled revolutions (Bennett and Segerbergh, 2013; Castells, 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). All of these technology-forward accounts of social transformation side-stepped the decade-long US-led war on terror and its impact across the region, not to mention the much longer Cold War roots of media control and surveillance backed directly by decades of US support for long-time authoritarian allies President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. It appeared to us – both of us as scholars of media and politics in the Middle East and North Africa and in South Asia respectively – as if the “Arab Spring” was a “vindication within Media Studies and Communications of the universal appeal of Western liberal democracy delivered through the gift of the Internet and other “technologies of freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

This common-sense correlation between individual freedom and liberal democratic order is rooted in a much longer contradictory history of US exceptionalism, from its settler colonial origins defined from founding father and slaveholder, Thomas Jefferson’s era, as an “empire of liberty”. Distinguishing its imperial ambitions from European colonial powers, Jefferson justified Westward expansion of the republic by military force. However, as political theorist Anthony Bougues argues in drawing from historian William Appleman Williams (1980), “the sustainability of its political power resided in the realm of the mind and in bending consciousness to conform to what was seen as the natural spirit of being human...the natural unfolding of human destiny as embodied in the ways of life that were founded on conceptions of American liberty” (14). Given the mediatization, or the ways in which media institutions, technologies, practices, and affects shape both the context and currency of politics and war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> this brief essay considers the legacy of the work of Edward S. Herman in this distinct practice of U.S. empire.

Theories of media and democracy, whether liberal or critical, are largely grounded in the historical experiences of the birth of the free press and the emergence of the public sphere as it evolved in Western Europe and the United States (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013; Engel and Becerra, 2018). Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the US model

of market-driven media came to be seen as the universal aspirational model for much of the world whereby “...the independence of American media from government control, the fearless way in which American journalists are able to criticize authority” became a source of inspiration around the world (Curran, 2011: 16). As James Curran goes on to write, “American media – viewed from a distance – seems like a shining city on a hill.”<sup>3</sup> It is this vantage point of safe distance, where the “free liberal media” operates in relation to its “good citizens” – assumed almost always as the wealthy, white, heterosexual male (Schudson, 1999) that Herman and Chomsky’s scholarship on the neo-colonial political economy of US media power, fundamentally challenges.

I was drawn to the opening quotation from Chomsky and Herman’s 1979 book, an early critique of the US Human Rights regime and what the authors call the rise of “Third World fascism,” in the backdrop of the media maelstrom over Trump’s “treasonous” performance in his press conference with President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki in July of 2018. The issue of “fake news” and secret foreign interference affecting democratic elections within the US is surely grave and worthy of public scrutiny; how might we rethink the constitutive role of the “free liberal media” in holding democratic institutions accountable if we stretch our frame of analysis beyond national borders? This is precisely what Chomsky and Herman were asking us to do in *The Washington Connection* (1979), where they provide detailed accounts of the most influential liberal US news media systematically downplaying political *and* military “interference” in both elections and in the perpetuation of mass violence by the US’ authoritarian allies in Brazil, Burundi, Chile, Paraguay, Indonesia and Thailand. Current research based on more recently declassified information on Cold War interventions by both superpowers holds Chomsky and Herman’s findings to be true. For example, a widely cited quantitative study documents that the US intervened in sovereign foreign elections between 1946 and 1989 some 62 times in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, with the vast majority as covert operations where concerns for democratic legitimacy were almost always trumped by concerns for national interest (Levin, 2016).

In this sense, Chomsky and Herman provide a substantive challenge to the standard celebratory liberal narrative of the post-war “free US media,” memorialized in both scholarship and popular culture – for a recent reference think Stephen Spielberg’s melodrama *The Post* – as instrumental in ending the Vietnam war and taking down President Nixon along the way (Gitlin, 2003). Instead, in 1979 – the year of the Iranian revolution and the year before the political hegemony of Ronald Reagan and Maggie Thatcher, they ask us to reconsider the democratic value of media institutions that insist on such limited and parochial standards of democratic freedom for the few at the costly price of mediated political machinations fostering “Third world fascism.”

*Manufacturing Consent* (2002 [1988]), with Edward Herman as the primary author, honed in on the institutional culpability of the US “free media” in selling the fantasy of US exceptionalism in the 1980s and 1990s. It is important to remember that the book, while covering the history of US involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as well as Central America, was first published during the Reagan era, which saw both the expansion and enforcement of global neoliberal economic reforms and renewed excesses of covert military engagement from Central America to Afghanistan-Pakistan and beyond. By the early-1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of commercial satellite television, new optimistic theories of media and globalization and the spread of civil society<sup>4</sup> became central components of a renewed “popular belief in the unique mission of the United States to secure the destiny of liberal democracy across the world (Grandin, 2011: x). The “CNN-effect” and American popular culture appeared to be bringing the world together against state control whether in Eastern Europe or China, and hybrid media flows promised new cultural and political possibilities beyond American cultural homogenization.

What becomes clearer in retrospect is that theories of global media and democracy, formulated in the heady early days after the end of the Cold War amidst new and rapid advances in digital media technologies, turned away from what might remain the long-term structures of US media power, specifically in relation to what would become the global South. Chapters 2 and 3 of *Manufacturing Consent* focused on US

media coverage of a series of corrupted elections and covert wars during the Reagan era in Central America. What they found was that US media coverage “...often surpassed expectations of media subservience by government propaganda demands” (2002: xlix). In describing US Cold War policies in Latin America during the Reagan era, historian Greg Grandin argues that “Cold War terror – either executed, patronized, or excused by the United States – fortified illiberal forces, militarized societies, and broke the link between freedom and equality, thus greatly weakening the likelihood of such a fulfillment...” (2011: xv). In other words, instead of assuming that US media technologies instill individual freedom (against state power), the work of Herman and Chomsky revealed the ways in which “U.S. empire weakened Latin American democracy by de-linking social solidarity from the idea of freedom, which has been recast as personal liberty, setting the stage for free market ideology” (2011: xv).

What does this mean for how we understand US commercial media and democracy conceptually? How might the findings of Herman and Chomsky in Central America in the 1980s influence our understanding of the role of the commercial US media and media technologies in shaping subsequent elections at home and abroad as well as in shaping the parameters of the never-ending wars against crime, migration and terror in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We could say that *Manufacturing Consent* makes a persuasive case about the constitutive role of commercial US media institutions and technologies in fortifying *illiberal* forces and breaking the link between freedom and equality, with implications both “at home” and abroad. In the last 30 years, *Manufacturing Consent* has stood out as a stubborn thorn in the side of the endless iterations of optimism about global commercial media and the magic of the Internet to ensure, if not deliver, the promise of liberal democracy.

### **Free Market Media as Propaganda: A Decolonial Critique**

In closing, I would like to highlight what we might consider the decolonial significance of Edward S. Herman’s persistent critical analysis of US media power in relation to the world at large. While he worked in an entirely different intellectual tradition, I would say we see clear parallels between Herman’s critique of US imperial exceptionalism and its neo-colonial media infrastructure, and what today we might

call decolonial theory and politics (Byrd and Rothberg, 2011; Bhambra, 2014; Harney and Moten, 2013). Anti-colonial thinkers have long pointed out that the West's humanism and technological prowess was built on the edifices of slavery, genocide and colonial rule in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The barbarism of the West was defined through its relationship to the creation of the "colonized savage," as Aimé Césaire wrote so powerfully in *Discourse on Colonialism*, first published in 1950:

First we must study how colonization works to civilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and "interrogated," all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savage (Césaire, 2000: 35-36).

Without citing thinkers like Aimé and Suzanne Césaire or Frantz Fanon (2007), among many other influential anti-colonial intellectuals, we hear echoes of these works in Chomsky and Herman's preface and throughout much of their writing on media and democracy: "The Free Press has fulfilled its primary obligations to the state by averting western eyes from the carnage of the war and effacing US responsibility...All in all, the performance of the Free Press in helping to reconstruct a badly mauled imperial ideology has been eminently satisfactory. The only casualties have been truth, decency and the prospects for a more humane world" (Chomsky and Herman, 1979: x).

I see this parallel perhaps most clearly in the well-known and oft-quoted discussion of “worthy and unworthy victims” in *Manufacturing Consent* (2002), where the authors contrast the lavish media attention to “people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*.” Herman and Chomsky write that “While this differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of the fact and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone. This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system” (37).

During the initial few months of the extraordinary spectacles of the Arab uprisings, the US media and Western scholars of “social media revolutions” considered Egyptian and Tunisian activists “worthy victims” of oppression by their *own* nation states. U.S. complicity in the backing and funding of militaries of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes and the heated geopolitical context of a region afflicted by a decade-long war was left out of these considerations (Iskander, 2013; Herrera, 2014). As the repressive aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and across the region make abundantly clear, “any assertion of the contagious or transformative powers of media and information technologies require a foregrounding of geo-political histories and the machinations of capitalist crises” (Arough and Chakravartty, 2017: 560). Turning to today’s “unworthy” victims, the “ungrievable” victims of asymmetrical warfare, whether in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen or Palestine, come to mind (Butler, 2016; Daulatzai and Rana, 2018). We might also consider the innumerable victims of police violence “at home,” only recently made visible through the *Black Lives Matter* liberation movement (Taylor, 2016). We obviously cannot but think of the “unworthy victims” of US interventions in Central America and the Middle East and North Africa when we consider the quiet normalization of the Muslim Travel Ban or the cruel regime of migrant separation, incarceration and deportation (Paik, 2017). Here, we can see that it is the structuring logic of media actors and networks that justify the expropriation or killing of almost always racialized and gendered “unworthy victims”.

Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model helps us understand that the excesses of the Trump regime are not an inexplicable aberration, but rather forces us to consider



the continuities across the long-20<sup>th</sup> century that has led to this current moment of political crisis. The “unworthy victim” is tenable of course only if we first establish that they are sub-human and thereby prone inherently to violence or pro-actively a threat to the “empire of liberty”. The systematic propagation of racialized and gendered “unworthy victims” of European and American empire should therefore take us back to the settler colonial histories of genocide (Wolfe, 2006), the unresolved legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation and the domestic implications of the extra-territorial expansion beginning in 1898. The work of Edward S. Herman, whose prolific scholarship on the violence of neocolonial US media power from the Cold War to the on-going War on Terror, provides us with much needed tools to break through the recurrent amnesia about the U.S.’ “empire of liberty” as a modern mediatized way of life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Manuel Castells, author of one of the most influential books on the 2011 social movements (*Networks of Power and Outrage*) was awarded the Ithiel de Sola Pool Award by the American Political Science Association in 2013. De Sola Pool, author of *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), was an influential Cold War advocate of the powers of electronic communication in subverting state control.

<sup>2</sup> For more on "mediatization" see Stromback and Esser, 2014 and Murdock, 2017. Numerous scholars have written about what we can call the mediatization of war including: Butler, 2016; Kuntzman and Stein, 2015; Mattelart, 1994; McCoy, 2009; Mirzoeff, 2006; Parks & Kaplan, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Curran raises this familiar Reagan-era trope reviving US colonial mythology to provide a critique of the paradigmatic role of US media systems at the center of theories of media and democracy. Specifically, in this section Curran critiques the influential text by Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) "Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics."

<sup>4</sup> We can point to a vast literature in Media Studies and Communications, as well as Anthropology, Sociology and Political Science that focused on the democratic, "deliberative" promise of

commercial global media technologies and institutions beginning in the early-1990s. This work is too large and varied to catalogue in this short piece, but could include among many others: Calhoun, 1989; Fishkin, 1991; Keane, 2003; Straubhauer, 1991; Tomlinson, 1999; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2004.

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