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Manufacturing Consent for the 2018 Elections in Venezuela and Colombia

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Abstract

Herman and Chomsky laid out their propaganda model of how foreign countries are presented in the news directly relates to their closeness with Washington. Criticisms of the model declare it overly deterministic and lacking in evidence for the everyday functions of journalism. This article assesses Western media coverage of the Colombian and Venezuelan elections of 2018, finding that the propaganda model continues to hold. Furthermore, by conducting a series of 27 interviews with journalists covering the two countries, it finds evidence to support Herman and Chomsky's theories about the pre-selection of journalists and how ownership and management, sources and flak influence the output of media.

Keywords

Colombia, manufacturing consent, media, propaganda model, Venezuela

Introduction

2018 marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's seminal *Manufacturing Consent* (2002 [1988]). In it, the authors laid out their propaganda model – a theory of the media's function. They argued that the mass media's true purpose in society was not to inform and educate the public, but rather to propagandize and brainwash them into support for the policies, outlook and positions of the rulers of society: to manufacture consent for the ruling elite.

The book has been enormously influential. Robert McChesney claimed that, 'The genius of *Manufacturing Consent* was that it opened an entirely new way of

understanding the US news media... There is no doubt that it is the most widely read and influential work on how to understand the US news media' (Herman, 2018), while Tom Mills (2018 [2017]) notes it became 'a classic text in the media studies canon, and remains probably the most influential single radical critique of the corporate news media'.

Eschewing conspiracy theory, Herman and Chomsky set out a structural critique of the media, arguing that there is rarely any need for overt censorship. Rather, journalists are prized for their obedience and acceptance of neoliberal ideology rather than their independence. As they explain:

Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power (2002: preface).

This leads to a situation where journalists are 'predominantly white middle class people who tend to share the values of the corporate leadership' (Herman, 1982: 149), meaning a hegemonic groupthink begins to arise in the newsroom, as everybody comes from the same background and shares the same outlook.

The propaganda model argues one crucial role of the media is to legitimize elections in friendly countries and to delegitimize those in enemy states, without regard to the empirical facts on the ground. To highlight this theory, Herman and Chomsky used the paired examples of elections in Guatemala in 1982 and Honduras in 1984-5 (US client states) with those in Nicaragua in 1984 (won by the enemy *sandinistas*). They describe the first two elections as being held under 'conditions of severe, ongoing

state terror against the civilian population' (2002: 88). In contrast, those in Nicaragua were 'a model of probity and fairness by Latin American standards' (2002: 131).

Nevertheless, the media ignored the enormous waves of violence, presenting the first two elections positively while displaying an overwhelming 'tone of negativism and apathy' (2002: 118) on the Nicaraguan elections, insisting that democracy was crumbling, ignoring reports from Western election observation teams who praised the proceedings. As such, they accused the US media of serving as 'loyal agents of terrorism' (2002: 142) by downplaying or covering up the waves of massacres.

Critics of the propaganda model have labelled it overly deterministic (see Ashraf, Soherwordi and Javed, 2016) and that the authors should have interviewed journalists as part of their work (Romano, 1989). It has also been criticized for being too simplistic and unable to provide evidence that shows that it is specifically the five filters of ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communism that affect decisions to publish work (see Corner, 2003; Lang and Lang, 2004).

In response, Klaehn (2003) noted that, by these criteria, virtually every social science model could be classed as overly deterministic, arguing that it is not the model's design nor function to test these micro-processes of journalism; rather it is a 'big picture' model. Meanwhile, Herman (1998) claimed that journalists were extremely unlikely to 'confess' anything if interviewed, making the endeavour useless.

However, it may be that the defenders of the model are missing a trick, and that by interviewing the journalists who create the news it is possible to add a new layer of understanding as to why certain stories are run and others are dropped or heavily edited. By simply asking journalists about the process we may be able provide the evidence of the filters at work at a micro level, thus greatly enhancing the model's credibility.

Paired Examples: Venezuela and Colombia

In Chomskyan fashion, this study will use the paired examples of Latin American elections, those of Venezuela and Colombia, updating Herman and Chomsky's

examples and testing if the model continues to hold. It also includes data from a set of interviews with 27 experts and journalists covering the Andean region for major media to ascertain if the explanatory factors (journalistic pre-selection, the five filters) impact the reporting of the area.

The 2018 elections in Colombia and Venezuela make an extremely good test case. They are both similarly sized countries with similar populations, culture and heritage. Indeed, for a time they were the same country, and are still considered sister countries to this day, sharing a near identical flag. The elections happened within a week of each other in May 2018. However, crucially, in recent years the two countries have moved down radically different political paths. In 1998, Venezuela elected a leader, Hugo Chavez, who would go on to re-nationalize the oil industry, revive the OPEC cartel, drastically increasing oil prices, criticize the US invasion of Afghanistan at the UN and embrace the ideology of 21st century socialism. He famously labelled President George W. Bush ‘the devil’ and became the cornerstone of a new Latin American independence movement of leftist governments keen to reduce American influence in their countries. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described him as a ‘new Hitler’ and the US has been involved in multiple coup attempts against Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro (MacLeod, 2018).

In contrast, Colombia continues to be a key American client state, with the US pouring billions of dollars into the Colombian military (and paramilitaries) through their ‘Plan Colombia’ scheme. The country is by far the largest recipient of US military aid in the region and has sent more officers to the School of the Americas (now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Co-operation), where they have been taught for half a century to see communism everywhere and stamp it out brutally (Stokes, 2005: 5-7). Colombia consistently votes alongside the US at the UN and is the key US military stronghold in the region, providing a number of military bases. It has had a succession of right-wing, neoliberal governments.

In Venezuela, the leftist Nicolas Maduro won (with 68 percent of the vote), while in Colombia, the right-wing Ivan Duque won (with 54 percent). Thus we should expect the media to legitimize the Colombian and delegitimize the Venezuelan elections.

The Venezuelan opposition (and the US government) had been demanding an immediate presidential election for over a year. When Maduro acquiesced, they demanded it be pushed back. When he accepted this, they decided to boycott their own election, with both the opposition and the US government predetermining it to be fraudulent. They demanded that UN election observers not come to oversee the events as they would likely ‘legitimize’ them (Reuters, 2018). In contrast, the supposedly dictatorial Venezuelan government pleaded with the UN to send as many observers as possible.

Elections in Venezuela are already probably the most heavily monitored in the world. Successive reports from hostile sources such as the European Union and the Carter Center have strongly praised the election system (MacLeod, 2018: 60-1). Indeed, President Jimmy Carter (2012) stated that the Venezuelan elections were ‘the best in the world’. The 2018 elections in Venezuela were of note because they took place under a fractured US-supported opposition, with some boycotting the proceedings. The US also demanded opposition presidential candidate Henri Falcon stand down, in an attempt to delegitimize the vote before it started. However, the vote took place in complete normalcy and under the auspices of senior election officials from around the world, who testified to the election’s validity. The Latin American Council of Electoral Experts (CEELA), consisting of senior election co-ordinators, most from countries openly hostile to Venezuela, praised the ‘high level of security and efficiency’, noting that the vote reflected ‘the will of its citizens, freely expressed in the ballot box’ (CEELA, 2018). The African mission’s preliminary report characterized the election as a ‘fair, free, and transparent expression of the human right to vote and participate in the electoral process’, endorsing the proceedings’ ‘comprehensive guarantees, audits, the high-tech nature of the electoral process’ (Venezuelanalysis, 2018). Indeed, the strongest criticism the international election teams’ reports had was that some polling stations were not on the ground floor, meaning some voters had trouble accessing them.

In comparison, the Colombian election, which pitted the conservative Ivan Duque against the leftist Gustavo Petro, took place under a heightened state of terror, with Petro narrowly surviving an assassination attempt, while many of his supporters were

not as lucky. The incumbent conservative party under President Alvaro Uribe had overseen a massacre of over 10,000 civilians (Parkin, 2018). Colombia is also the most dangerous place to be a human rights defender or trade unionist, as many more unionists are killed inside Colombia than in the rest of the world combined (Human Rights Watch, 2008). This is partially because the military and paramilitaries have been trained by the US to see agitating for better wages as a communist conspiracy to destroy the country and to respond with a clenched fist. The paramilitaries – right-wing death squads linked to the government – issued generalized death threats to those who tried to vote for Petro. There was widespread vote-buying, with American observers, such as Daniel Kovalik, mistaken for voters and offered money to vote. There were over 1,000 official electoral fraud complaints (Kovalik, 2018).

The mainstream media virtually unanimously presented the Venezuelan elections as a farce, the ‘coronation of a dictator’ (Sequera and Pons, 2018), according to *The Independent*. *The New York Times* described the ‘widespread disillusionment’ among the people voting in a contest ‘critics said was heavily rigged’ (Neuman and Casey, 2018). CNN claimed there was an ‘international outcry’ over the proceedings, with the international community demanding the suspension of the election while *The Huffington Post* christened it ‘a farce cementing autocracy in the crisis-stricken OPEC nation’ (Cohen and Aponte, 2018). *The Wall Street Journal* described the contest lauded by election monitors as one:

...deemed illegitimate by the opposition and foreign governments, paving the way for heavier international sanctions amid widespread discontent over [Maduro’s] management of an economy in free fall. Even before the ballots were counted, opposition candidate Henri Falcon cried foul, saying the election was a sham and calling for a new vote this year (Vyas and Forero, 2018).

Thus, the media presented the elections as a very poorly attended travesty, despite the fact that the 46 per cent turnout, when one side had told its voters not to participate, was seen as a victory for Maduro and a repudiation of the opposition on all sides inside Venezuela. *The Washington Post* neatly summed up the overall message

of the coverage, describing the events as ‘the fortification of a dictatorship’ (Faiola, 2018).

In contrast, the media endorsed the elections in Colombia a week later as a hopeful chapter in the country’s history, describing the 53 per cent turnout in a tightly contested vote as high and the events as peaceful while rarely mentioning the aforementioned issues. When they did, they were downplayed. CNN (McLaughlin, 2018) noted that ‘though there have been isolated incidents of violence related to the election, they have been minimal’, while Al-Jazeera (Rampietti, 2018) euphemistically noted there was a ‘taboo’ against voting for leftists in the country. Petro’s assassination attempt was barely mentioned in the press. Indeed, the only dangers associated with the election, according to the media, were due to the left. There were ‘fears about Petro’s economic policies’ (McLaughlin, 2018) and that (according to Associated Press) he would swing the country ‘dangerously to the left’ (Armario and Goodman, 2018). Furthermore, many outlets, including the liberal NPR took pains to present Alvaro Uribe as ‘immensely popular’ (Otis and McCallister, 2018). The widespread vote-buying, intimidating, rigging and assassination threats went unnoted, leaving the image of a rather bland, uneventful democratic process.

It can therefore be said that the case studies of the recent elections in Venezuela and Colombia represent a textbook example of the propaganda model in action. Yet by conducting interviews with the journalists responsible for the coverage of the two countries it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the micro-processes of journalism that critics say cannot be explained. I conducted a series of 27 interviews with experts and journalists covering the Andean region and found that if we look for evidence of the filters at work, we can find it.

Of course, this methodology is not without its problems. Journalists have little incentive to bare all, have their own agendas, and their accounts must be treated with skepticism. There are, of course, serious economic and other consequences to whistleblowing or revealing the inner workings of media companies. Furthermore, journalists pre-selected for conformity and acceptance of corporate norms are unlikely to be aware of the boundaries of the expressible and the factors limiting their

reporting. Therefore, there are certainly limits to the utility of interviewing them, especially those still working inside media organizations. However, these limits should be tested and this study found it to be an extremely useful methodology.

It became clear that journalists come from a small, elite segment of the population and are pre-selected for their conformity and acceptance and internalization of neoliberal rules. Matt Kennard, who covered Latin America for the *Financial Times* (*FT*) and was highly critical of his colleagues' coverage, stated:

I read *Manufacturing Consent* before I started my master's and I thought that it sounds like a tight argument but it must be more complicated. Then I went into the elite institutions like Columbia Journalism School after my undergraduate and went straight onto the *FT*. And what you realize is that you just *can't think* certain things and have a career. People might have started with my ideas when they were younger but they would go to these institutions and learn that everyone else thinks a certain way. And if you start dissenting or if you start having an opinion that goes against everything you are being taught, then you are just not going to progress. It is that simple. That's the beauty of the system. It is not like the Soviet system. It is not like you will be put in jail. You just won't rise. And that's why no one ever thinks these things. It is just implicit in what you do.

Many of those sent to Latin America seemed completely unqualified to serve as correspondents, save for their conformity. Many admitted they had been hired without the ability to communicate in even basic Spanish, a pre-requisite for dealing with Colombia and Venezuela where English proficiency is below ten per cent – below that of Sri Lanka or Indonesia (Education First, 2018). Freelancer Girish Gupta was an example of this. He said:

I came very ignorant actually. The first year or so I was just trying to learn and get my head round things, both learning journalism and about the industry, which can be two separate things, and also learning about Venezuela, politics,

and economics...When I got here my Spanish was non-existent. I just bumbled along.

A *Wall Street Journal* correspondent who asked not to be named confided that they had been unable to speak the language until six months after they started their job in Venezuela. As English proficiency is correlated with class, this leads to a situation where the only people Western journalists can speak to are members of the elite, who have a very particular view of the events in Latin America. Reuters' Brian Ellsworth noted that:

Definitely...there is a certain echo-chamber that you can get sucked into and a certain outside vision of the way people want to see a country.

This leads to a 'groupthink', according to former *Los Angeles Times* Venezuela correspondent Bart Jones, who described the 'groupthink' he saw among journalists:

There was definitely an atmosphere of "Chavez is a bad guy," you know? And we need to fully present and almost take the side of the "resistance," the "dissidents," or whatever you want to call them. They would actually use those terms... And some of them were outright government haters. One of them said it to me once, "we have got to get rid of this guy".

The inability to communicate with the population leads to the sourcing filter becoming especially prominent in the case of Venezuela, where there is an extremely strong class/government support correlation (Cannon, 2008) and where the government has effectively written off the foreign media as hostile propagandists and largely refuses to speak to them. As Gupta said:

In Venezuela it is near impossible to talk to government officials. But there are sources in other sectors, people in opposition.

Bart Jones corroborated this, noting:

You have got to get the news out right away. And that could be a factor in terms of “whom can I get a hold of quickly to give me a comment?” Well it is not going to be Juan or Maria over there in the *barrio* [slums] because they don’t have cell phones. So you can often get a guy like [anti-government pollster] Luis Vicente Leon on the phone very quickly.

Sourcing in Colombia has traditionally been especially difficult owing to the civil war that has raged for over 50 years, leading to a very dangerous situation for foreign journalists, who overwhelmingly stay inside government-controlled areas and do not seek out alternative sources in the FARC guerillas, for example, leading to stories that reflect the government line.

Anatoly Kurmanaev of Bloomberg noted that there were ‘very few people’ who know what is going on and therefore ‘we end up going to the same people pretty often’.

The coverage of the two countries is also clearly influenced by ownership and the owners’ representatives in upper management. Jim Wyss, who covers the Andean region from Bogota, Colombia for the *Miami Herald* was initially defensive about the idea, adamantly stating:

I have never heard anybody in the international press saying they were being restricted in any way.

Yet later in the interview he casually said:

Every now and then I will get something from my boss’ boss. They will be like “hey, what do you think about this?” and what that means is “go out and investigate it.” ...When your high-up bosses make mild suggestions, you take them very seriously.

Telling is his unawareness of how this could be understood as a factor affecting his work, having completely accepted the first filter as normal, common sense, rather

than a constraint influencing journalistic output. If there is a clearer example of Herman and Chomsky's ideas on internalizing the preconceptions and constraints of ownership, I do not know it.

Others confirmed that ownership and upper management strongly affected what they wrote. Bart Jones said:

What you might see from [top brass in] New York a little bit more would sometimes be some of the direction too, when it came to the political stuff anyway. They were very careful to make sure that a certain point of view was strongly in there...I think you definitely had to temper what you were writing. There was a clear sense that this guy [Chavez] was a threat to democracy and we really need to be talking to these opponents and get that perspective out there. There was an emphasis put on that.

Kennard admitted that this led to widespread 'self-censorship', even if 'most people don't realize they are doing it', saying:

I just never even pitched stories that I knew would never get in. What you read in my book would just never, ever, in any form, even in news form, get into the *FT*. And I knew that and I wasn't stupid enough to even pitch it. I knew it wouldn't even be considered. After I got knocked back from pitching various articles I just stopped.

He also provided specific examples of top-down editorial control and censorship that shaped the dominant narratives in foreign reporting, revealing:

At the *FT*, I actually carried on writing as I would. So I put in things like 'US-backed' when describing US-backed dictators, when the convention is to just put "Russian-backed" or "Iranian-backed" if they are a bad guy. But I kept doing it because I wanted to test out that *Manufacturing Consent* idea. And it was explicit. What happens if you put "US-backed" into a newspaper? Will they take it out? Yes! And the funny thing is that no one would ever know because

the journalists would just never [even] think it. It is a form of mind control because everyone thinks they are free. And the best people to write censored articles are people who don't even realize they are performing self-censorship.

When asked, it was clear that flak from a variety of groups also shaped reporting. Dan Beeton, a writer and economist at the progressive Center for Economic Policy Research noted that his work was constantly attacked:

That is the framework. If you are a reporter and you write something that is not considered negative enough against the Venezuelan government then you will get flak. There is push back, maybe from the US government, but there are any number of right-wing think tanks, Venezuelan exiles have their own organizations and lobbies and their champions in the US Congress...We have been challenged repeatedly and questioned any time we say something about it – whether we get funding from the Venezuelan government. There is this assumption that if anyone is saying anything that goes against the conventional wisdom that they must be in the pockets of the Venezuelan government.

Wyss also noted that the strongly conservative Miami ex-pat Latino community also stirs up outrage and anger to police his writing (emphasis added):

I hear from grumpy readers when they feel I am not being hard enough on Venezuela. I never get any pressure from anybody except from some radical readers who see everything through the prism of Cuba so *if you are not hammering Maduro hard enough you tend to get emails.*

Reporting from dangerous areas, journalists' lives can be at risk. In 2017, left-wing reporters Mike Prysner and Abby Martin were the subject of a viral, fake news campaign that depicted them as Venezuelan secret police informers. A nationwide right-wing search to find and burn them alive was undertaken. Fortunately, they escaped to the US. Other government-sympathetic journalists were shot and burned (RT, 2018). None of these have been mentioned by Amnesty, the Committee to Protect Journalists or other human rights groups. Meanwhile, in Colombia, right-

wing death squads regularly threaten or assassinate journalists they deem to be too critical. Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist (Witchel, 2018), and those who dare to report critically about the government or the paramilitaries face threats graver than in almost any other country.

Conclusion

It is clear that the propaganda model's theory of legitimizing and delegitimizing foreign elections still holds. The case of Venezuela and Colombia proves this. Elections in Venezuela, an enemy of the US government, were presented as a sham, as, just like in Nicaragua, the media ignored glowing reports from international observation missions to decry the process as a meaningless farce in a distinctly similar fashion to that which Herman and Chomsky found. In contrast, US ally Colombia was presented as a vibrant democracy, with the media glossing over or simply not reporting the numerous and widespread problems with the vote, downplaying the violence and the terror in a similar fashion to the reporting of Guatemala and Honduras.

Going beyond analyzing the reporting from afar, however, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the propaganda model in action, up close, by interviewing those involved in creating the news. The interviews with 27 experts and journalists provide evidence to support Herman and Chomsky's assertion that journalists are pre-selected for their conformity, their sharing of corporate values and their internalization of the rules that control what is published and what remains unsaid. This leads to a hegemony of thought in the newsroom. Furthermore, it can provide us evidence of how the five filters affect journalistic output. This study has highlighted the role that ownership, sourcing and flak play in manufacturing a particular view of Venezuela and Colombia in the West, one that would perhaps not be recognized by their respective populations. Herman and Chomsky did not set out to create a model that would explain the micro-processes of journalism, but this article has shown it is possible to test their theory more fully.

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