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► To cite this version:

Jeffery Klaehn, Daniel Broudy, Christian Fuchs, Yigal Godler, Florian Zollmann, et al.. Media Theory, Public Relevance and the Propaganda Model Today. Media Theory, 2018, Standard Issue, 2 (2), pp.164 - 191. hal-02047725

HAL Id: hal-02047725

<https://hal.science/hal-02047725>

Submitted on 25 Feb 2019

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Media Theory, Public Relevance and the Propaganda Model Today

Media Theory
Vol. 2 | No. 2 | 164-191
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<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

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Abstract

Since its initial formulation in 1988, the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) has become one of the most widely tested models of media performance in the social sciences. This is largely due to the combined efforts of a loose group of international scholars as well as an increasing number of students who have produced studies in the US, UK, Canadian, Australian, Japanese, Chinese, German, and Dutch contexts, amongst others. Yet, the PM has also been marginalised in media and communication scholarship, largely due to the fact that the PM's radical scholarly outlook challenges the liberal and conservative underpinnings of mainstream schools of thought in capitalist democracies. This paper brings together, for the first time, leading scholars to discuss important questions pertaining to the PM's origins, public relevance, connections to other approaches within Communication Studies and Cultural Studies, applicability in the social media age, as well as impact and influence. The paper aligns with the 30th anniversary of the PM and the publication of the collected volume, [The Propaganda Model Today](#), and highlights the PM's continued relevance at a time of unprecedented corporate consolidation of the media, extreme levels of inequality and class conflict as well as emergence of new forms of authoritarianism.

Keywords

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

Introduction

What follows is a discussion of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) of media performance, meant to explore questions from [*The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*](#), which was published open-access on October 25, 2018 by the University of Westminster Press. Over the past three decades, since 1988, when Herman and Chomsky's now classic [*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*](#) (MC) was first published, scholars have continued to apply, reflect upon and debate the PM, and this engagement continues. As the following discussions demonstrate, divergent and sometimes contradictory viewpoints concerning the PM and its broader context within the fields of media theory, social theory, and cultural studies, as well as its explanatory and analytical achievements, have inspired much debate and fruitful scholarship. Hopefully, the spectrum of views presented below is rich enough to provoke interested readers into engagement with – and formulation of their own independent positions on – the various subjects discussed herein. More importantly, debates such as these constitute an antidote against the possibility that radical scholarship will end up fostering new dogmas.

Discussion

Jeffery Klaehn: Can you please discuss Ed's influences and how and why the two of you created the PM?

Noam Chomsky: A little background. Ed and I began to work together in the early '70s, after a number of contacts before in anti-war activities. In 1973, we published our first book, [*Counter-revolutionary Violence*](#). It was published by a small but quite successful publisher, owned by the Warner Communications conglomerate. An executive of the parent company saw the book, and demanded that it be destroyed. In the ensuing controversy, he closed the entire publisher, destroying not only our book (a few copies escaped) but all its stock. The matter was brought to the attention of prominent civil libertarians, who saw no problem because it was all in the private sector; no state censorship, no interference with free speech. A few prominent figures disagreed, notably Ben Bagdikian.

We went on to write a much longer and extensive two-volume work on similar themes, *Political Economy of Human Rights* (in 1979), then later turning to *Manufacturing Consent* (in 1988), along with other joint work.

The basic framework of *MC* was Ed's, which is why I insisted, over his objection, that his name come first, contrary to our usual policy of alphabetic listing. Ed was a Professor of Finance at Wharton School, the author of a major 1981 study *Corporate Control, Corporate Power*. Our book *MC* begins with an investigation – mainly Ed's – of the business structure of the major media and the broader institutional setting in which they function. In brief, the media are major corporations selling a product (audiences) to other corporations (advertisers), with close links to the broader corporate world and to government. The core thesis of *MC* is that these central features of the media tend to influence the character and assumptions of reporting and interpretation. We suggested five filters that derive from the institutional analysis (one, the fifth, generalized in a second edition), and proposed that they have a significant effect on determining how events in the world are presented and interpreted. The bulk of the book then tests the thesis, selecting cases that the media regard as of primary significance.

In other publications, joint and separate, going back to the '60s and continuing to the present, we have examined numerous other cases over a broad range, as have, of course, many others. Ed's work in these domains over half a century constitutes a remarkable contribution to understanding of what has been happening in the world, and how it is refracted through prisms that are often distorted by ideology and systems of power.

My personal judgment, for what it's worth, is that the basic thesis of *MC* is quite well-supported, certainly by the standards of the social sciences. My own feeling, which I think Ed largely shared, is that the general conclusions apply in somewhat similar ways to the prevailing academic and broader intellectual culture – the hegemonic culture in the Gramscian sense – topics I've discussed elsewhere. But that is for others to judge.

In the current period of “fake news” and (quite understandable) general contempt for institutions, our book is commonly misinterpreted as suggesting that one can’t trust the media because of their bias and distortions. That was not our conclusion. Though (like everything) they should be regarded with a critical and open mind, the major media remain an indispensable source of news and regular analysis. In fact, a large part of *MC* was devoted to defending the professionalism and integrity of the media against an attack in a massive two-volume Freedom House publication, which accused the media of being so consumed by anti-government passion that they radically distorted what happened during the Tet Offensive of January 1968, undermining popular support for the Vietnam war and contributing to the failure of the US to achieve its goals – virtuous by definition. We showed that the critique was wrong in virtually every important respect, to a level approaching fraud, and that the reporting from the field was honest and courageous – though within a framework of assumptions that reflect the effect of the filters.

Hardly a day passes without illustrations of these pervasive features of reporting and commentary. To pick virtually at random as I write, from what remains the world’s most important general news source, the *New York Times*, we read that the Trump administration is shifting “[its national security priorities to confront threats from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran](#)” – that is, to confront what the administration claims to be such threats, claims that do not become reality merely because the propaganda system so declares, and in fact largely dissolve on analysis. And [we are reminded](#) of an Open Letter of September 2002 signed by two dozen courageous international relations scholars that so radically confronted power that “none of its signatories have been asked to serve in government or advise a presidential campaign,” an Open Letter that warned that “war with Iraq is not in the U.S. national interest” – or to break free of patriotic propaganda, the invasion of Iraq would be – and soon was – a textbook example of aggression without credible pretext, “the supreme international crime” of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which sentenced Nazi war criminals to be hanged for lesser offenses.

Such examples are so common as to be unnoticeable. In their general impact, they were more significant than the cases of serious distortion, sometimes exposed, just

because they are so standard, insinuating a framework of perception and belief that becomes part of the background noise, hardly more than common sense, to borrow from Gramsci again.

Jeffery Klaehn: How does the PM connect with other critical approaches within communication studies and media theory?

Christian Fuchs: Broadly speaking, the PM stands in the tradition of ideology critique. The PM, as a critical approach to ideology, is most closely connected to the Frankfurt School's analysis. The joint starting point is the critique of instrumental reason, which goes back to Marx's notion of fetishism and Lukács' concept of reification. Capitalism is a society that is based on instrumental reason: capital tries to instrumentalise human labour, domination tries to instrumentalise the public, and ideology tries to instrumentalise human consciousness for partial interests. Critical communication and media approaches such as the PM differ from bourgeois approaches in that the latter take the instrumental character of communication and power structures for granted and neutrally describe who communicates what to whom in which medium with what effect, whereas critical approaches show what role communication plays in power structures and into what contradictions of society it is embedded.

Joan Pedro-Carañana: Christian's response is connected to Eduardo Galeano's quote that opens [*The Propaganda Model Today*](#): instrumental reason objectifies the media and journalism as mere means (of communication) to achieve the ends of capitalism, i.e., its reproduction through capital accumulation and concentration of power (see Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn, 2018). We discuss in the book how Auguste Comte, the father of positivism, and the founders of communication studies in the US argued that the role of the media and social science is to promote the adjustment of consciousness to systemic structures. Instrumental rationality, therefore, does not question the ends. Positivism advocates for the eviction of values in media analysis. But this is impossible; what happens in reality is that instrumental reason is grounded in the values of capitalism. On the other hand, emancipatory reason questions existing ends, intends to promote new ends of human dignity and reflects on how the media can become appropriate means for the population to

develop their own awareness and critical analysis. It does not attempt to persuade people to comply with objectives that have been established by external powers, but instead aims to show and explain the world so that citizens can establish their own objectives. Emancipatory reason focuses on how communication can provide tools for people to think how they can free themselves from oppressive structures and build a more just society on the grounds of shared knowledge and collective action.

Florian Zollmann: The PM also connects well to approaches from classical economics and sociology as it is based on industrial organisation and functional analyses. Classical economics theory suggests that public goods like news cannot be sufficiently provided via markets. This is a well-known phenomenon with respect to other public goods like health care or education whose provision abysmally fails under a market regime. Whilst media economists from various political outlooks have highlighted this problem, the PM is the only media-approach that systematically accounts for such market failures. Consequently, Herman's work on media economics and his assessment of journalistic gatekeeping provide an important foundation for the PM. Herman was critical of the so-called liberal gatekeeper studies' focus on micro-issues when investigating journalistic selection and production processes in newsrooms. When building the PM, Herman consequently argued for the need to prioritize macro-level news media analyses (see Zollmann, 2017). However, many gatekeeper studies also lend support to a PM approach.

As Herman argued elsewhere, the PM is in "the tradition of the Breed approach," particularly his gatekeeper study, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis" (1999: 57; see also Breed, 1955: 328). Breed's study identified a newsroom policy enforced by proprietors and "that reporters must learn and apply in order to prosper and even survive in their jobs" (Herman 1999: 57). Herman (ibid) reflected on Breed's study as follows: "The implication is that the news is skewed by a combination of economic factors and political judgments that are imposed from above and that override professional values." Breed's important study, in turn, is based on the functional analysis set out by the sociologist Robert K. Merton. Merton (1968: 104) identified the following elements, among others, to which functional analysis relates: institutional pattern, social structures and devices for social control.

Functional analysis aims at attributing functions and dysfunctions (consequences) to the societal elements described above (see *ibid*: 104-105). Of course, we can see significant intersections: the PM similarly emphasises dysfunctions – the production of propaganda as a result of market forces, ownership and funding structures as well as the wider political-economic environment of the media. I think it is useful to consider these issues because the PM bridges critical theory, classical media economics, conflict theory and functional analysis (see also Klaehn, 2003a).

Tom Mills: The PM is compatible with a broad range of media and communications scholarship, as others have noted, but that said, it has always sat slightly uneasily alongside other approaches. *MC* wasn't that well integrated into existing work, and the authors are openly disinterested in certain questions that have preoccupied media and communications scholars, such as professional ideology. I suspect its initially poor reception among many critical scholars was partly because of this; especially given that it is an ambitious text by two outsiders to media and communications studies. It is also not a Marxist text in the narrower sense, although there's obviously a significant crossover with media scholarship in the Marxist tradition, and with critical social science more broadly, as Jeffery Klaehn and Andrew Mullen (2010) have argued. A pretty consistent bone of contention here has been the extent to which the PM allows for conflict and contestation, but in my view this stems more from the tone of *MC* than the explicit claims made by the authors, who have been pretty open to criticisms on this point.

Jeffery Klaehn: I argued that the PM ought to be formally incorporated into the structural-conflict approach within mainstream sociology in a co-authored essay with Andrew Mullen that argued, "In terms of its basic underlying assumptions about the dialectic between ideological and communicative power and the structural organization of advanced capitalist societies, the PM unequivocally shares the general worldview associated with the structural-conflict or political economy perspective, known as conflict theory within mainstream sociology" (Klaehn and Mullen, 2010). This essay, "[The PM and Sociology: understanding the media and society](#)," aimed to unpack reasons why the PM represents a critical sociological approach, to explore the model's potential within the sociological field, and to consider the trajectory of its

reputational reception. The PM, in my view, explores the relationship between ideological and institutional power and discursive phenomena. [I have written about criticisms of the PM](#), including those likening the PM to the gatekeeper model (see Klaehn, 2003a: 361). Further, on the functionalism critique, [Edward S. Herman \(2018 \[1996\]\) pointed out that](#): “The criticism of the PM for functionalism is also dubious and the critics sometimes seem to call for more functionalism. The model does describe a system in which the media serve the elite, but by complex processes incorporated into the model as means whereby the powerful protect their interests naturally and without overt conspiracy.” I agree with Florian and Tom on how the PM connects with other critical approaches (above).

Yigal Godler: There is a loose connection in that all critical approaches seek to illuminate and uncover power relations that are doctrinally concealed. However, in my view, the coherence and success of these approaches is not equal. Whereas the PM is very specific in pinpointing the agents who exercise power over the media, much of critical theory often obscures them, by e.g. sometimes referring without further specification to ruling classes or elites. It is often very difficult, for instance, to detect the agents of power in various applications of cultural hegemony in media studies. Doubtless, the PM makes references to elites and ruling classes, but only after their identity has been rather neatly delineated. I do, however, find close parallels between the PM and the Investment Theory of Party Competition, Thomas Ferguson’s institutional analysis of the outcomes of US elections and subsequent policies. Although the latter is not an explanation of media content, the explanatory framework pinpoints the agents of power, whose features provide a robust explanation for the outcomes of US elections and the policies adopted by various administrations. Despite the difference in explananda, there is a close relationship between the two approaches in that both hypothesize about and bear out the consequences of business control over democratically vital institutions, such as the media and the fora of political decision-making.

Jeffery Klaehn: What, in your view, does the PM offer that other approaches or critiques miss?

Christian Fuchs: Bourgeois and traditional approaches to the study of

communication miss the analysis of communication in the context of power, class, exploitation, domination, contradictions, social struggles, and the quest for participatory democracy and democratic socialism. The PM together with other critical communication approaches challenges these limits.

Daniel Broudy: For me, the most striking thing about the PM is its audacity to step back and take stock of the whole theatrical display and critique the larger system within which mass media perform. Here, in 1988, we saw an economist and a linguist, virtual outsiders, disassemble the whole superstructure, examine its parts, and describe how media imperatives within are set by stronger forces at work in society, namely ownership, funding, flak, access to official sources and the self-reinforcing feedback loops fueling the perpetual necessity of higher profits. Whereas Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, for example, had offered in their Agenda Setting Theory extremely compelling proof of how corporate media mold the public discourse by transferring the salience of news objects into the public agenda, Herman and Chomsky went further by unfolding the interlocking interests that drive the entire system. Their Model also integrates a description of ideological influences over media performance, and this aspect of their scholarship seems to be absent from other approaches (see Pedro, [2011a](#), [2011b](#); Mullen and Klaehn, [2010](#)). We all might have our own ideas about why the major media cover certain objects of interest and not other topics, but the PM helps us see how the prevailing ideological forces have corporate news consumers in their grip. Morris Berman famously observed that people have ideas, but ideologies have people, and the PM pricks our conscience, goading us to consider how ideology's hand holds our perception and awareness in its palm.

Yigal Godler: In a nutshell, it is unparalleled in its clarity and its empirically demonstrable explanatory power.

Florian Zollmann: Whilst the PM is sketched with a broad-brush stroke, its analytical categories are well supported by other research. The PM yields salient results due to its simplicity and grounding in empirical facts. Furthermore, the method of paired examples is one of the most powerful aspects of the PM. This

approach of comparing news media reporting patterns of similar events enables to identify systematic media distortions on the basis of an objective standard that is independent of a researcher's individual biases.

Oliver Boyd-Barrett: *MC* (and the PM) continues to be a powerful and seminal text, greatly undervalued in the academy (particularly in US media, journalism and communications studies) for reasons that are clear to contributors here. There is certainly merit in discussing the extent to which it can be validated within the epistemological frameworks common to social science and many of us have contributed to such debates. In terms of “new knowledge” I consider the PM itself (i.e. Chapter One of the original text) a somewhat derivative and truncated contribution to our understanding of propaganda, of much less interest and power than the other chapters of that same book of which it constituted the introduction. Much of the content of the PM was familiar to political economy scholars of media at that time. Its revelatory power, I think, was somewhat less global, complex or systemic as Schiller's model of cultural and media imperialism in 1969. The PM's pedagogical value, on the other hand – because of the “5 filters” concept – has been and still is immense, even though it is much too much sold on “systemic” rather than “agency” explanations, and even when the rest of the book actually provides a lot of evidence for the role of journalists as agents of propaganda in the sense that they are more than mere systemic cogs but reflective human beings making choices that do not have to be made even at the level of survival.

Additionally, the model in its original formulation is insufficiently nuanced. I have argued that some of the filters defy observability or quantification, but we now have a surprising volume of evidence for the kinds of transactions I have previously ascribed to the “black box” (e.g. I think of numerous revelations of journalists complicit with intelligence agencies, the Pentagon's network of ex-military television pundits, that kind of thing). For scholarly originality, I look to the natural comparison methodologies of the chapters on Central America which among other things seem to implicitly counter criticisms that the model is media-centric. However, and this brings me to my main point, I would counsel against making of *MC* or the PM too much of a canonical text elevated above so many other worthy contributions

to our understanding of propaganda and media complicity with power. It is a clever and important text, by all means, but I think if our mission is to understand propaganda, then there is such a broad wealth of other literature that clamors for our attention, and so many grave developments in all domains of our current existence – not least those of the digital media age – that we simply cannot afford to pedal the same bicycle and expect it to get us to where we need to go.

In the past year or so, for example, my attention has been directed to some of the most significant propaganda wars of our times: they concern the nature and reality of climate change, the meaningfulness of “Russia-Gate,” narratives about MH17 and who shot it down, the circumstances of the 2014 coup d’état in Kiev, the return of Crimea to Russia, claims and counter-claims as to whether the Syrian Arab Army, or “militants,” or “activists” used chemical weapons, the furor over the alleged Russian poisoning of the Skripals in the UK, assessing the real nuclear “balance” between the US/NATO and Russia/China, the narratives of 9/11, and so on, ad infinitum. In tackling all these and other issues, I simply accept that the PM in its broad outlines is a very helpful contribution that we can and should largely, for much of the time, take for granted, simply because there are so many other important questions that demand our attention (and for which the PM is not actually all that adaptable or helpful) – details of the Dutch JIT investigation into MH17, its methodology and its relation to data supplied among other sources from Atlantic Council allied Bellingcat.com; the extent to which we can trust international adjudicatory bodies such as the International Commission for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; the robustness of evidence of use of chemical weapons by either Syrian Army or jihadists in Dhouma; the “real” history of Daesh; the history of the development of novichocks in the Soviet Union and adoption of that development by other countries; evidence and counter-evidence as to whether the Podesta emails at the DNC were leaked or hacked; how to relate supposed evidence of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections to evidence of Anglo-American meddling in elections worldwide via online operations of organizations such as Cambridge Analytica etc. etc. – if we are serious in our endeavor to advance our understanding of the nature of propaganda today. This is no longer, and probably never has been, just a “media thing,” because it involves such a complex network of players in the political,

corporate, intelligence, technology, and financial realms into which mainstream media are so closely integrated at so many different levels.

Jeffery Klaehn: I agree completely in that we, as scholars, should examine ways in which media and other sectors interconnect, but I think the PM suggests this with its emphasis on structural and institutional frameworks (see Klaehn, [2002a](#)). My edited and co-edited books have explored topics and issues relating to communicative power and discourse, including the near-genocide in East Timor (Klaehn [2002b](#), 2004, 2005); dissent (see Klaehn, 2006a, [2006b](#)); gender inequality (Klaehn, 2008); war; capitalism, and social inequality (Klaehn, [2010](#)). I also agree that scholars should take a multi-paradigmatic approach and have argued that the PM and discourse analysis share much in common (Klaehn, [2009](#)). I look at the work other participants in this discussion have produced and are producing and can't help feeling completely inspired in thinking of what we can accomplish, individually and collectively, in the future, along with scholars from around the world who are concerned to engage with issues relating to democracy, power and the common good. I feel the PM, as a conceptual model, reads as contemporary, now, thirty years after it was first introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, and is especially relevant today (see Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn, 2018).

Tom Mills: In comparison with a lot of scholarship on the media, what it does very well is to situate news media as part of the corporate-state power structure of American society. Superficially, *MC* can read like a very media-centric text, but in analytical terms it's not; only two of the five filters are features of media organisations. A lot of other critical approaches similarly seek to integrate an analysis of the news media into a broader critique of capitalist society of course, but the PM stands out for its intellectual and political clarity. *MC* is a sophisticated, but highly accessible text, and like Herman and Chomsky's other writings, it is radical but thoroughly empirical. This precision sets *MC* apart from a lot of texts with a similar sort of critical orientation.

Jeffery Klaehn: What are your thoughts on the PM and its approach within the framework of cultural studies today, particularly in relation to claims that cultural studies has become largely depoliticized?

Christian Fuchs: In critical communication studies, models competing with the analyses by Herman and Chomsky and the Frankfurt School include cultural studies concepts of communication, such as the ones by Stuart Hall or John Fiske. Representatives of this approach often criticise Herman and Chomsky for neglecting resistance, counter-power, and the active role of the audience. Herman and Chomsky are not over-optimistic, but have always stressed the role and importance of alternative media or what Raymond Williams, whose approach of cultural materialism constitutes a kind of bridge between different critical communication theories, calls alternative communications.

The three main problems cultural studies approaches can face are a) the structuralist and poststructuralist influence that can neglect human beings, b) the relativist assumption that all forms of reception, responses, and audience behaviour are equally likely, c) the deterministic assumption that audiences and users *always have to* resist and rebel. Herman and Chomsky do not cover all aspects needed for a critical theory of communication because they have never intended to create such a theory, but analytical tools. They diverge in this respect from the Marxist tradition, but share with some cultural studies approaches the opposition to grand theoretical narratives. A dialectical, critical theory of communication can in contrast build on elements from different critical approaches, including Marxist political economy, ideology critique, the PM, critical cultural studies, various critical social theories, psychoanalysis, socialist feminism etc., in order to create a combined framework for the analysis and critique of power and communication in society viewed as totality.

Yigal Godler: I think the PM is essentially outside the framework of “cultural studies”, at least in the mainstream sense of cultural studies. I fully agree that “cultural studies” in the mainstream sense has been largely evacuated of significant political content. Much of cultural studies chooses to ignore or circumvent structural explanations, while the PM foregrounds them. Nonetheless, the PM is of course concerned with explaining one important chunk of intellectual culture, and in that literal sense it is an explanation of certain aspects of culture. But I take it that the question referred to “cultural studies” in their institutionalized sense, or as it is

understood in the mainstream of media studies and the academic social sciences more broadly.

Florian Zollmann: I think cultural studies as well as the media and communication sciences more broadly lack a critical engagement with the institutional structures of the media. The question of how corporate power and market forces affect the media and political systems in liberal democracies is often not addressed by scholarship. An exception is Ferguson's Investment Theory of Party Competition mentioned by Yigal (above). Such blind spots are clearly accounted for by the PM. This outlook makes the PM a vital tool for research at a point in time when corporate power and inequality have reached unprecedented levels in the Western hemisphere. On the other hand, I see some important overlaps between the PM, cultural studies and communications research.

For example, Stuart Hall's primary definer thesis and W. Lance Bennett's indexing norm effectively constitute the PM's sourcing filter. As mentioned above, media economists have highlighted how market allocation is incompatible with public service news provision. So I think a close reading of the literature thus reveals that the PM is supported by mainstream scholarship (I have discussed this in more detail in Zollmann, 2017). However, Herman and Chomsky focused on the intersections of US-imperialism and corporate media power – looking through a propaganda lens. Using such a critical framework has arguably led to the unwarranted marginalisation of the PM because the media field is too de-politicised and hesitant to engage critically with state-corporate power in liberal democracies.

Jeffery Klaehn: Should critical scholarly work be oriented toward public relevance? And how do you position the PM in this context?

Joan Pedro-Carañana: Absolutely. The whole point of critical theory is to be connected to practices of social justice. PM scholarship has been able to provide rigorous studies of media structures and empirical analysis of media contents while remaining accessible to a non-academic audience. The PM has aided activists around the world to understand media systems and engage in practices for media reform and the democratisation of the media landscape. It has also helped to create non-

corporate media that provide invaluable information to understand contemporary forms of oppression and develop alternatives for the common good. Moreover, the PM can assist ordinary citizens to further develop what Chomsky calls intellectual mechanisms of self-defence. It can aid audiences in reducing credulity and developing skepticism.

Christian Fuchs: I agree with Joan. The PM and critical communication studies in general are not just analytical frameworks, but need to be practised as forms of critical, public intellectualism that aim at the creation of a democratic public sphere. They aim at the critique of asymmetric power structures in the world of media and communication and the instrumentalization of the public sphere. Herman and Chomsky's concern is the strengthening of the public and common good. Democratic communication and democratic communications are an essential aspect of society's commons.

Yigal Godler: I happen to think that all scholarship in the social sciences ought to be oriented towards public relevance, and especially critical scholarly work. The PM is an excellent example of scholarship which does exactly what scholarship is supposed to do, which is to reveal doctrinally hidden truths, be these institutional, cultural or otherwise. For me, all of social science, insofar as it is not trying to prop up those in power, ought to try to puncture false beliefs that stem from doctrines that sustain existing authoritarian and hierarchical institutions and relations. Needless to say, most social scientists couldn't care less about the continued existence of such institutions and relations, which in my book disqualifies them from the status of doing authentic social science. Perhaps some of them are, for instance, good gatherers of data or good grantsmen, but these are very superficial trappings of what being a social scientist means.

Florian Zollmann: I also agree. Research has an important public service function. The PM is basically an analytical tool that allows to critically interrogate media structures and performances. This is certainly an important task for public-service oriented research. Moreover, PM scholars try to avoid abstract and unnecessary scientific jargon and this further enhances public accessibility and relevance.

Tom Mills: I agree with all the comments above. Scholars in general should address important and pressing social questions, and if they do that then their findings should have real world consequences. In many cases this necessarily means assuming a critical orientation, since many of the problems we face stem from the power structures that have been the focus of Herman and Chomsky's work. Michael Burawoy, in my discipline, writes about both "public" and "critical" sociology (2005). The latter is a radical critique directed towards the discipline itself, whilst the former is about engaging with movements beyond academia that are capable of bringing about social change. I think this is a good model for scholars of all disciplines to think about critique and public engagement, and the authors of *MC* have been extremely effective in both offering an uncompromising challenge to the complacency of liberal intellectuals, and orienting themselves towards social movements.

Jeffery Klaehn: Everyone's saying they're in agreement on this question, and I am too. I think of C. Wright Mills and the promise of sociology: the sociological imagination (see Klaehn and Mullen, [2010](#): 19). The PM enables further understanding of how economic, social and political power sync with communicative power.

Jeffery Klaehn: Is the PM more relevant now, in 2018, than it was in 1988? In the 1990s? In the 2000s? Why or why not?

Christian Fuchs: In capitalist and class societies, there have always been approaches to instrumentalise humans, which includes the attempt to instrumentalise their consciousness. Not just the critique of ideology, but the critique of all forms of alienation and instrumental reason has always been, is and will always be crucial as long as class society exists. [The Propaganda Model Today](#) shows that the PM remains important today for understanding and analysing communication critically.

Daniel Broudy: Your questions call my attention to the subtitle of *MC*. In it, Herman and Chomsky imply that media do not operate in a vacuum free from outside influences; their performance is largely the effect of political and economic sensibilities acting upon them. Their aim is not achieving accuracy as much as

developing a representation of the world that squares with these sensibilities. Part of their persuasive power depends upon the power of the glossy façade to camouflage these forces at work. This much the elites admitted back in 1928 when we find Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, who observed that, “Democracy is administered by the intelligent minority who know how to regiment and guide the masses” (Bernays, 2005 [1928]).

Consider society today and the uninterrupted processes of regimentation at work in light of Fred Block’s incisive reminder: “the economy is not autonomous, as it must be in economic theory, but subordinated to politics, religion, and social relations” ([1944] 2001: xxiv). In actual practice, Karl Polanyi argued, the market economy is always, embedded and enmeshed in institutions ([1944] 2001: 60), and we can observe these phenomena before us today playing out in the efforts of the technocrats consolidating their power through deregulation and, thus, the marginalization of dissident voices. In your questions, if your reference to ‘relevant’ connotes ‘useful’, then, certainly, the PM served well in 1988 and has, with the passing years, served an increasingly relevant role. Like Polanyi’s model of the market, Herman and Chomsky’s model of media performance serves as a stark reminder that the manufacturing processes of information and the manufacture of consent are enmeshed in social, political and economic relations.

Yigal Godler: I would say it’s at least as relevant, and in some countries probably more so than before, insofar as they, and their media systems, have undergone a more extreme subjection to the rule of international capital. The PM would become irrelevant if the liberal-pluralist dream or something like it becomes a reality. So, for instance, if tomorrow mainstream media cease to be business-run or dependent on some other authoritarian institution, the PM will have served its historical purpose. As long as that’s not the case, the PM continues to be a powerful, if an almost self-evident, explanation of why an important segment of society’s institutional landscape operates the way it does.

Florian Zollmann: Yes, and the institutional environment of the news media has not significantly changed during the last 30 years. If anything, corporate-capitalist and

market control over the news media system have intensified. National and international levels of inequality have increased as well. These factors concurrently raise the importance of a class-based model. To that effect, the research presented in [*The Propaganda Model Today*](#) further demonstrates the relevance of the PM today.

Tom Mills: It is certainly still relevant. There has been an historic shift in media and communications technology underway in the decades since *MC* was written, but the structure of the news media in terms of content production remain basically the same, even if news items are shared across different platforms. The internet has certainly brought new opportunities for alternative media, but even if the entry costs are now much lower, none of these initiatives can compare to the resources and reach of the corporate news media. The big question is in what ways will the challenge digital technology poses to the corporate news media's business model, and the power of Silicon Valley, which is at the cutting edge of capital accumulation, reshape things? The corporate news media is still dominant, but it is in crisis. Advertisers have no particular fealty and now have much more sophisticated means of reaching audiences. This creates serious problems, and there has been discussion amongst, and conflicts between, the political and corporate elite around how this should be managed. There seems to be a consensus forming around a system of cross-subsidies from, and greater regulation of, the platform giants. I think we can expect to see a new sort of institutional form start to emerge, and one that without a significant political intervention will serve broadly the same interests that the traditional news media has.

Jeffery Klaehn: On the subject of social media, can the PM reveal any new insights about social relations of power?

Daniel Broudy: Social media are really interesting nowadays. If I were cutting new paths of research on social networking services (SNS) and the PM, I might proceed from the claim that social media, at least the major players, are actually anti-social. Social psychology, media studies, journalism, political science, and cognitive linguistics would probably have much to say about what's been happening lately. The first filter of the PM refers to ownership of the dominant media outlets. These are corporations themselves oriented toward profit and observant of the demands of

investors. Since their rise from obscurity, SNS have grown, however, to dwarf the old gatekeepers, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

The objects of discussion in the public discourse are increasingly being shaped not by observant human editors but by [algorithms](#) written by observant programmers. Those who reject or openly challenge this system of performance now risk excommunication and/or economic marginalization. Examples have already been made of fearless journalists and agitators. First, they came for [Alex Jones](#) to deplatform him, but now upstart SNS companies focused on preserving free speech in a cyber-commons are at risk of being subsumed. After the reported slayings in a Pittsburgh synagogue, the social network Gab ([noted as a cesspool of hate speech](#)) illustrates how an entire company can be threatened if it departs from the path that Facebook and Google now tread. Common knowledge holds that the internet has long been, among other things, a magnet for revolting behavior and imagery, but this new trend signals a definitive step toward authoritarian forms of censorship. Facebook's participation on the [Atlantic Council](#) and Google's work with the [military-industrial complex](#) should not surprise anyone who has looked, even casually, at the history of these sorts of time-honored interrelations. Obviously, social media's performance depends upon revenue, but there isn't much profit in truth-telling.

Conspicuously missing from major mainstream media was Facebook's deplatforming of *TeleSUR*, a Venezuelan-based multi-Latin American state funded media organization meant to counter CNN. Authoritarian control over the public discourse and the collective consciousness will emerge in a [corporate clown](#) with an affable smile stamping, as Orwell once noted, on the [faces of the masses forever](#). As the PM's filters prioritize ownership, size and profit orientation of dominant media, as well as advertising, sources, flak and ideology, you see them at play in the performances of social media – an area [Christian Fuchs](#) (2018) is exploring.

Christian Fuchs: My chapter in *The Propaganda Model Today* has the title "[Propaganda 2.0: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model in the Age of the Internet, Big Data and Social Media.](#)" It shows what forms ideology and power take on today in the context of social media. Concerning ownership, the likes of Google and Facebook

use algorithms that have a secret, non-public logic that determines online visibility. Google and Facebook operate globally and virtually, which allows them to shift around their finances into tax havens so that they avoid paying taxes, which undermines the public good. They are the world's largest advertising agencies. In respect to the advertising filter, advertising on social media is targeted, algorithmic, based on real time surveillance and big data, and puts users' activities and attention to work. In respect to the sources of communication, celebrities, corporations and populists dominate attention and visibility on social media. There are filter bubbles and authoritarian populists that polarise political online communication. Political bots generate fake attention, fake likes, fake re-tweets, which distorts communication in the public sphere. It becomes difficult to discern what communication originates in a human being or a machine. In respect to "flak", dominant interest groups use social media as "soft power" tools for trying to influence the public sphere. But we also find fascists and authoritarians online, who often hide behind anonymity in order to use the violence of language to threaten, intimidate and harass political opponents. In respect to ideology, we find both ideologies of and on the Internet. Fake news is as old as tabloid media. But in the world of social media, they are partly generated and disseminated at high speed globally by both human fake news factories and by fake news bots.

We are experiencing the transition from neoliberal capitalism towards increasingly a new level of neoliberalism that is based on authoritarianism: We see the emergence of [authoritarian capitalism](#). Social media is embedded not just into class and capitalism, but today into an especially dangerous form of capitalism that uses nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme, authoritarian leadership, law and order politics, and militarism. The most important political task is to question and drive back authoritarianism, which includes that we create communication spaces that take out the speed of communication, i.e. decelerate communication, make political information and communication less superficial, and allow meaningful debate. [Club 2.0 as public service Internet platform](#) is a concept for this task.

Yigal Godler: Insofar as one wishes to explain the contents appearing on social media by recourse to the PM, I think this is a hopeless endeavor. Simply because the

production of content on social media is not subject to the same constraints that exist in a business-owned newsroom. As is well known, the PM was designed to account for the behavior of the American elite media, not to account for every possible media-related phenomenon. Needless to say, Facebook is a business, and every business inflicts some kind of sabotage on society (in Veblen's sense). The latter characteristic is shared by General Motors, Facebook, and the *New York Times* as well as many other businesses, even though the specific features of the sabotage that each business inflicts are qualitatively different. However, for the sake of analytical precision and intellectual integrity, I don't think that we need to pretend that the PM explains more than it does. Of course, none of this means that social media do not interact with the processes of news content production, when, for instance, producers of news content take into account prospective Likes and Shares or insofar as news stories are accessed by users through social media. But the dynamics of these phenomena seem to call for a separate explanatory account. That is, on condition that there is something that requires urgent explanation here. It should be remembered that the PM has not only successfully explained media behavior, but also debunked the misconception that the elite media are neutral or objective. Does anyone really believe that about either the contents or the algorithms of social media?

Florian Zollmann: It is possible to demonstrate how the PM's filters manifest in the social media sphere. For example, my chapter in the volume, titled ["Corporate-Market Power and Ideological Domination: The Propaganda Model after 30 Years – Relevance and Further Application,"](#) sketches how the first and second filters of the PM apply to social media. In accord with what Daniel and Christian say, I suggest that social media applications have been enveloped in political-economic structures. The major social media organisations constitute near-monopoly corporations with substantial funding from the advertising industry. Expectedly, this has impacted on social media technology and performance: cookies and other tracking technologies were instituted to surveil and control users, website search engine rankings have become a function of economic power, and selected offerings have been censored by way of political convenience.

Additionally, social media accounts and online comment functions allow for unprecedented flak campaigns by powerful actors and agencies. It should also be noted that social media and the Internet more broadly have not been able to contribute significantly to news provision. Real journalism needs extensive resources, substantial amounts of money and institutional backing. Yet, the digital media environment has not been able to provide viable new funding models or revenue streams. In fact, at this point in time, the journalism sector has lost revenue as the advertising industry has shifted investment from legacy news to Internet companies. This means, unfortunately, that in terms of news access the public has been further weakened vis-à-vis its positioning in social relations of power. Additionally, novel Internet channels have increased the ability of traditional power elites, intelligence services and the new right to manipulate publics via direct forms of communication that bypass the traditional news media.

Jeffery Klaehn: Your thoughts on the impact and influence of the PM to date? On the value of the PM for communication studies and media theory, moving forward?

Christian Fuchs: The PM continues to provide some important foundations for a critical theory of communication. But, it is not a theory in itself; there are dimensions of media power that it does not focus on, such as the exploitation of digital and cultural labour, privacy violations, or communications and digital surveillance. I see it as an important task to create a critical theory of communication that builds on the rich history and tradition of critical communication studies.

Daniel Broudy: The PM, like other models, is a representation of observed phenomena. The model has been incredibly influential in studies undertaken by numerous scholars across the decades and across cultural boundaries in our efforts to grasp the complexities of media performance (see Pedro, [2011a](#), [2011b](#); Klaehn, [2009](#)). I can recall a 2010 [article](#) in which you and Andrew Mullen presented the PM as a critical sociological approach to understanding media and society. Power in all of its forms is central to that discussion. Power to influence public discourse and perception of key issues, to ignore other objects, to shape knowledge and mollify dissent. I think this kind of inquiry is becoming increasingly more important as the

public becomes increasingly more aware of ideology and its role in bounding debate within only approved or official frames of reference. Think of how power is used to redefine what hate speech is, for example, and how common citizens questioning the newfangled definitions of what is and isn't male or female are castigated and promptly tarred as haters or fascists. Think of how power is used to redefine anyone who poses critical questions about patently obvious flaws in logic concerning the destruction seen on September 11, 2001, the manufacturing of consent for a War on Terror, and the other perverse forms of rationalizing we see in corporate media among talking heads. Power seeks a silenced, or self-censoring, populace whose thoughts are colonized by the homogenizing message that mindless mass consumption is really the only way to exist.

Yigal Godler: In my view, the PM is to Media Studies an unrealized paradigm shift. It has demonstrated a much more compelling, intellectually honest and analytically lucid way of doing media research, which has been dismissed by the discipline for this precise reason. If Media Studies had been an aspiring science rather than an orthodoxy, it would have been revolutionized by the PM. Instead, it reacted to the PM like the Academic Church normally reacts to autonomous thought.

Florian Zollmann: To this day, Herman and Chomsky as well as other PM scholars have produced a large set of important studies. We have particularly good insights now in the ways that Western elite news media organisations have misreported wars and foreign policy crises. This work spans dozens of conflicts with Western participation in Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, the Balkans, Libya, Syria, Venezuela and many other countries. Scholars have also applied the PM to looking at societal issues such as austerity, class and inequality. There has also been a great deal of theoretical developments and updates of the PM. Critiques of the PM, whilst some of them genuine, have been thoroughly addressed also thanks to the recent work by Jeffery Klaehn, Joan Pedro and Daniel Broudy. So it would be fair to say that the PM stands on solid grounds today and awaits fruitful scholarly application and refinement.

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