

Does the Media Manufacture Public Consent?

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ASTRID HOLZINGER, MAY 27 2013

Does the Media Manufacture Public Consent? A Comparison of CNN, Al Jazeera and Indymedia in the Case of the Iraq War

Introduction

The widely held view in most liberal and democratic societies is that the media serves as an objective news provider and independent watchdog over the political elite. Furthermore, the media is perceived to be free from propaganda and manipulation, attributes commonly associated with state controlled media in totalitarian regimes only (Mullen, 2009:5). Herman and Chomsky challenge this view in their Propaganda Model and argue that privately owned media in liberal and democratic societies, like the United States, is similarly dominated by the interests of the political and corporate elite, and is used as a tool to manufacture public consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:2). As a result of the growing awareness in civil society of this elite-dominated agenda-setting in the media, independent media outlets were established with the aim of forming a counterweight (Phillips, 2003:12). This essay addresses the questions of whether state-owned and commercial media outlets equally produce public consent and if independent media outlets are as free from political and economic constraint as they claim to be. In order to answer this a comparison will be drawn between the reporting of CNN, Al- Jazeera, and Indymedia in the case of the Iraq War through an analysis of their reports on civilian casualties and the victims of war.

The first part of the essay outlines the concept of propaganda and provides the reader with a brief introduction to the key elements of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model. Considering the fundamental changes that the media system underwent in the last decades it is argued that the Propaganda Model is even more valid today than it was back in the 1980s when it was published. The second part of the essay discusses the role of the media in the Iraq War and outlines that both state-owned media outlets in the Arab world as well as commercial media outlets in the United States and Great Britain were accused of manufacturing public consent. The third part of the essay will be a case study, comparing the news coverage of the commercial news-outlet CNN, the state-owned news-outlet Al-Jazeera and the independent news-outlet Indymedia, with particular focus on the reporting of civilian casualties and the victims of war, using different portrayals of worthy and unworthy victims as an indicator of such manufacturing. In the fourth part of the essay a case analysis is drawn, assessing whether the different media outlets produced public consent or not. The essay then ends with a concluding section.

The Manufacturing of Public Consent

The concept of propaganda is strongly connected to the notions of mass media and public opinion (Robins, et al, 1987:7). The Oxford Dictionaries define propaganda as *'information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view'* (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). Since the twentieth-century and the invention of new communication technologies, mass media has become the most commonly used and effective tool to spread propaganda (Robins et al 1987:2). This abuse of the media for propaganda purposes is mainly associated with autocratic or totalitarian regimes, where direct control and censorship are exerted over it (Robins, et al 1987: 6; Herman and Chomsky, 1994:2).

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as Herman Lasswell, William Albig and Walter

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Lippmann became that the media in liberal and democratic societies is similarly used as a propaganda tool. According to their approach, propaganda in democratic societies manifests itself in the management of information and public opinion. Rather than being abnormal, these are understood to be normative aspects of modern democracies, which create order in a complex and heterogenic society (Robins, et al 1987:6ff). The normative aspect results from the paradox that in modern and heterogenic democracies, governments cannot base their decisions on the diversity and pluralism of public opinion, while simultaneously depending on it. The solution is that since *“the government cannot follow opinion, opinion must follow the government. The point is to make the masses demand what the government already decided to do”* (quoted in Robins, et al 1987:9). Instead of enforcing direct control and censorship over the media, the production of public consent in liberal states is achieved with the help of public opinion surveys, public relations and advertisement (Robins, et al 1987:13).

Chomsky and Herman argue similarly in their Propaganda Model but reject the normative aspect of propaganda (Lang and Lang, 2004:98; Herring and Robinson, 2003:565). According to the Propaganda Model, privately owned media in liberal democracies serves the interests of the political and corporate elite and is used as a tool to manufacture public consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:2). This hypothesis rests upon the assumption that, as a result of the domination of money and power over the media system, five filters can be located through which all information needs to pass (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:2). These filters guarantee that the final media output will reflect the interests and opinions of the elite and only allow critical or controversial voices to pass if acceptable to the elite. (Herring and Robinson, 2003: 555). Consequently, if the elite shares a certain view on a topic, their consensus will also be reflected in the media output (Mullen, 2009:4). Within the Propaganda Model these filters are labelled as corporate, advertising, sourcing, flak and ideological (Herring and Robinson, 2003:555).

First, the corporate filter refers to the ownership and the quest for profit in the media. The deregulation of the media market in combination with the high costs of financing a media company limits the media ownership and leads to an increase in media concentration. Additionally, the quest for profit opens the door for banks and investors to buy large shares of media enterprises. As a consequence, Herman and Chomsky (1994:4f) argue that corporations and banks' strong ties to the media ensures that information contradicting their interests is less likely to be included in the news output. Indeed, media concentration in most European countries and the United States increased over the last decades and large media conglomerates dominate the industry (Albarran and Mierzejewska, 2004:4). According to the non-profit organisation Free Press, the American media industry is dominated by only six big corporations, namely, General Electrics, Walt Disney, News Corporation, Time Warner, Viacom and CBS (Free Press, 2012).

Second, the advertising filter of the Propaganda Model refers to the dependence of the media on advertisement as an important source of revenue, giving advertisers the power to influence the programme. Advertisers prefer an entertaining programme that does not interfere with their viewers' mood to buy; therefore, controversial issues and opinions are often excluded from the programme (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:16f). Current observations of the media industry show that, with the Internet as a new and popular advertising platform, the number of media outlets competing for advertising deals has increased and competition intensified (Mullen, 2009:14).

Third, the Propaganda Model states that the sourcing of information relies heavily on material provided by the elite. This results from the fact that the news has to be produced in a short period of time, which concentrates on the material provided by corporations, trade associations and political bodies, because it is perceived as reliable and because it is provided on a daily basis and on a very large scale (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:19ff). As the Washington Post wrote, the Committee on Public Information in World War I discovered 'that one of the best means of controlling news was flooding news channels with 'facts' (quoted in Herman and Chomsky, 1994:23). Again, what the Propaganda Model perceived as an important factor in shaping the news production in the late 80s is equally valid today. Public Relations is a growing profession and is increasingly used by governments and corporations as a tool to place their message in the media (Lang and Lang, 2010:94).

Fourth, Herman and Chomsky (1994:26) identified the filter flak in their Propaganda Model that *refers to negative responses to a media statement or programme*. Controversial issues or viewpoints that could produce 'flak' are likely to be excluded from the news as they bear a costly risk for the media outlet. Institutions, corporations and governments have the power of producing far-reaching and influential 'flak', which increases their hold on the media

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output (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 26f).

Finally, the last filter of the Propaganda Model is the ideology of anticommunism. During the period of the Cold War, the portrayal of communism as America's number one enemy, posing a threat to Western values, served as an important tool to suppress political opposition. It also provided journalists with the option to frame political events and news within the dichotomy of 'us' and 'the United States' or 'others' and the 'enemy' (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:29f). Although the last filter seems to be out-dated in the twenty-first century it can be equally applied to other ideologies, such as the war against terror, which is currently affecting media coverage in the United States (Herring and Robinson, 2003:556).

In sum, the political and economical constraints faced by the media in liberal societies can lead to the manufacturing of public consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:31). The result of this conclusion means that the Propaganda Model is often misinterpreted as perceiving the media as non-adversarial and biased (Herring and Robinson, 2003:554). Herman and Chomsky reject this interpretation and point out that the filters identified in the Propaganda Model form the underlying structure of the media system. This means that the constraints that result from it are very often hidden and journalists perceive themselves as critical and objective in selecting the news (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:2f). What the Propaganda Model does assume is 'a liberal and adversarial bias in the media, which serves the crucial function of setting the boundary of critical thought' (Herring and Robinson, 2003:554).

As a consequence of the growing awareness of the political and economic constraints faced by the media in liberal societies, independent media outlets were established in order to form a counterweight to the reporting of the mass media. Independent from advertisers or investors and free from political or corporate constraints, independent media outlets follow the central goal of creating a platform for critical thought and public debate. They also provide room for minority opinions, as members of civil society including activists or independent journalists produce the news (Phillips, 2003: 12).

Considering the different types of media, the different framework of rules and constraints they operate in, the question arises if state-owned media and commercial media outlets equally manufacture public consent and if independent media outlets are as free from propaganda and constraints as they claim to be. To answer this question the media reporting on the Iraq war will be examined.

The Role of the Media in the Iraq War

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. Accusations about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, its ties to the terroristic network Al Qaeda, as well as human rights abuses committed by Saddam Hussein's regime were used to justify a humanitarian intervention. After a quick initial victory over the regime, a long conflict followed that resulted in more than one hundred thousand deaths (Murray, et al: 2008:8).

In the context of the Iraq War, the role of the media was heavily discussed and its objectivity repeatedly questioned (Goddard, et al: 2008:11). On the one hand, Saddam Hussein took control over the news outlets in Iraq and transformed them into a massive propaganda machine. That said, not only Iraqi media but also state-owned media outlets in the Arab world were accused of biased news coverage that took an adversarial line towards the United States (Johnson and Fahmy, 2010:49). Moreover, similar doubts about the objectivity of the British and American mass media arose. Several studies on the reporting in the US and Great Britain showed that, in times of war, the media acts as a faithful servant to the state, not just in autocratic but also in democratic regimes (Goddard, et al: 2008:11; Robinson, et al: 2010:49).

The Propaganda Model suggests that one way to assess if the media is used as a propaganda tool in times of war is by analysing the news reports on the victims of war. A media outlet that produces public consent commonly distinguishes between worthy victims and unworthy victims in its reports. Worthy victims are victims abused by the enemy and gain a lot of attention in the news reports. Their portrayal entails a lot of detail and the reports emphasise emotional aspects that aim to trigger public outrage. Unworthy victims are abused by their own state or its allies, and thus coverage is rather neglected and lacks detail in order to avoid emotional reactions. The different treatment of

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these groups of victims in the news is a clear sign of manufacturing public consent in the media and will be used as the tool of analysis (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 37ff)

Based on the numbers documented by the Iraq Body Count, there were vast numbers of victims of violence, civilian casualties and losses of soldiers in the Iraq War. In the beginning of 2012, nine years after the invasion, the Iraq Body Count counted between 104,796 and 114,470 civilian deaths (Iraq Body Count, 2012a). 14,709 of them were direct victims of the United States and its coalition forces, amounting to around 13% of the documented civilian casualties. As these numbers were calculated solely on the basis of civilian deaths reported by newspapers, the actual number must even be higher (Iraq Body Count, 2012b). At the same time, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count Project documented 4,802 soldiers of the United States Coalition forces who lost their lives in Iraq (Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, 2012). What needs to be assessed now is how these numbers are reflected in the news coverage of the different media outlets.

The Reporting of CNN, Al-Jazeera and Indymedia – A Comparison

The commercial news channel CNN, which belongs to Time Warner, is the largest news conglomerate in the world and one of the six dominant media conglomerates in the United States (Free Press, 2012). CNN's news coverage on the Iraq War emphasised stories about the battle and the US strategy in the war, but paid little attention to fatalities and civilian casualties. Furthermore, the news outlet avoided broadcasting pictures of bloody or dead civilians and soldiers in its reports. In general, the American news-outlet painted a picture of the war that was free from blood and stood in contradiction to the real scenes of the war (Aday, Livingston and Hebert, 2005:11f). Only during CNN's programme, 'This Week at War', were fatalities covered and considered an important issue. The deaths of U.S. soldiers received a lot of attention and were mentioned in more than three quarters of the programme, mostly followed by longer interviews with the surviving dependants (DiMaggio, 2009:104). This detailed and emotional portrayal of American soldiers who lost their life during the war suggests that CNN perceived them as worthy victims (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 39). Only the deaths of Iraqi civilians, who were killed by insurgent groups, exceeded the news coverage of the deaths of American soldiers and were mentioned in 91% of the program. Compared to this, the coverage of civilian casualties at the hands of the U.S coalition forces was rather low and only mentioned in 25% of the reports. This follows that Iraqi civilians killed by America's enemies were perceived as worthy victims in the news coverage of CNN, while civilian casualties attributed to the US coalition forces were considered as unworthy victims (DiMaggio, 2009:105ff).

Unlike CNN, Al-Jazeera the state-owned media outlet of Qatar, established as an Arabic counterweight to Western mass media, showed a picture of the war full of human suffering (Figenschou, 2010:98). Pictures of bloody and dead civilians were aired regularly on Al-Jazeera, painting a more violent picture of the war than most other news outlets in the United States (Wessler and Adolphsen, 2008:457). Aday, Livingston and Hebert show that, similarly to CNN, the reporting on Al-Jazeera was mainly dominated by stories of the battle and diplomacy, and only 4.5% of the reports mentioned civilian casualties. The overall programme was perceived as neutral in the survey, but large parts of the reporting on civilian casualties were presented in a critical tone. This led the authors to the conclusion that Al-Jazeera's reporting on civilian casualties was not objective. Nevertheless, although critical in its general approach, Al-Jazeera did not differentiate between the different groups of civilian casualties, whether attributed to insurgent groups or to US coalition forces, and did not prioritise them over losses of soldiers in its reports (Aday, et al, 2005:12). Consequently, no distinction between worthy and unworthy victims was made.

Compared to CNN and Al-Jazeera, the independent media outlet Indymedia took a completely different role during the Iraq war and tried to establish a counterweight to the reporting of the mass media in the United States (Platon and Deuze, 2003:338). Indymedia served as a platform for anti-war activism and collected critical voices from anti-war protesters, which were largely excluded by the mass media (Indymedia, 2012; DiMaggio, 2009:43). The large numbers of civilian casualties during the war and the brutal losses of human life were highly emphasised by the anti-war movement and served as their main point of critique. Critical news about the large number of civilian casualties during the Iraq war was regularly published and dominated the reports of the news outlet (Indymedia, 2012).

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The case study shows that not all media outlets manufacture public consent. A distinction between different forms of media and media outlets is crucial. In the case of the commercial media outlet CNN, the case study shows that the reporting on the Iraq War was very bloodless and avoided pictures of human suffering in Iraq, in order to prevent public discontent (Aday, et al, 2005:11f). Furthermore, CNN's different portrayal of worthy and unworthy victims in the reports can be seen as manufacturing of public consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:35). Especially striking is the high emphasis on civilian victims of insurgent groups (DiMaggio, 2009:107). This focus fulfils two important functions in the propaganda of war. First, such a focus is commonly used to overshadow reports on civilian casualties caused by their own forces. Secondly, it is used to reinforce fear among the civil society in order to remind the public of the necessity to wage the war (DiMaggio, 2009:105). CNN's framing of terrorism as America's primary enemy and the emphasis on the dangers posed by terrorists as a tool to legitimize the war refers to the ideological filter of the Propaganda Model and is another indicator for the production of public consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994:29f).

In the case of Al-Jazeera, the case study shows that visual pictures of blood and brutal scenes often accompanied the reporting of the war. The use of pictures of violence, which could trigger emotional reactions, could be interpreted as intent to promote anti-US sentiments (Wessler and Adolphsen, 2008:457). Additionally, Aday et al. (2005:12) state that the news coverage of civilian casualties was presented in a rather critical tone and therefore failed to be objective. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether these are signs of the production of public consent as, according to the same survey, the general reporting on the war remained neutral and no distinction was made between the portrayal of civilian casualties caused by Iraqi insurgents and them caused by US coalition forces (Aday, et al, 2005:12). Both groups were represented equally in the news and no distinction was made between worthy and unworthy victims. Considering that more than 100,000 civilians died in Iraq, a rather critical reporting can also account as an objective approach (Iraq Body Count, 2012a).

The case study also shows that independent media outlets can form a valuable counterweight to the reporting of the mass media. Instead of manufacturing public consent, Indymedia was used as a protest tool by activists and citizens who opposed the war. Critical voices and anti-war activists found a platform to gather and publish information, which was largely outsourced by the mass media (Indymedia, 2012). Independent from commercial, corporate or political ties, Indymedia followed an open source policy, which allowed everyone to post the articles on their websites and thereby guaranteed a plurality of opinions and public debate (Platon and Deuze, 2003:337ff).

In sum, it can be argued that, in the case of the commercial news outlet CNN, various aspects pointed towards the manufacturing of public consent and the Propaganda Model proved to be applicable. In the case of Al-Jazeera, on the contrary, no explicit aspects of propaganda were found. The independent media outlet, Indymedia, was used as a protest tool by anti-war critics. Based on this comparison it has to be concluded that a distinction between different media outlets and the context they operate in is necessary. General assumptions about propaganda in the media would simplify the issue at hand.

Conclusion:

As discussed in the first and second part of the essay, the use of the media as a propaganda tool is, although commonly associated with autocratic regimes, no abnormality in democratic societies as well. Herman and Chomsky (1994) argue in their Propaganda Model that the mass media in democratic societies faces economic and political constraints that lead to the manufacturing of public consent. In the context of the Iraq war, both state-owned media outlets in the Arab world as well as commercial news outlets in the United States and Great Britain were accused of biased reporting and of acting as faithful servants to the state. In order to assess whether all forms of media outlets produce public consent, a case study on the reporting of the commercial media outlet CNN, the state-owned media outlet Al-Jazeera and the independent media platform Indymedia was drawn in the third part of the essay. The analysis of the media coverage on civilian casualties during the Iraq war showed that the American news-outlet CNN distinguished between worthy and unworthy victims in their reports and painted a rather bloodless picture of the war that stood in clear contrast to the real scenes of the war. These factors indicate the manufacturing of public consent and the impression that commercial media outlets act as an objective news-provider and independent watchdog over the political and corporate elite has to be dismissed. In addition the case study showed that the state-owned news-

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outlet Al-Jazeera did take a critical stance on the issue of civilian casualties during the war, but did not distinguish between worthy and unworthy victims in their reports. Thus, no clear signs of propaganda were found. Similarly, Indymedia was not used as a tool to manufacture public consent but on the contrary, served as a protest tool for anti-war activists within civil society to criticize the large number of civilian casualties and fatalities resulting from the war. By doing so, Indymedia included voices that were largely ignored by mass media and established a valid counterweight to reporting of the mass media.

As a result of these findings two conclusions can be drawn. First of all, not all media outlets produce public consent and a distinction between different types of media needs to be drawn. Second, despite this, the underlying structure of a media system seems to determine how media outlets operate. This is visible especially in the case of Indymedia, which is free from corporate or political constraints and provided a platform for criticism and public debate. Furthermore, the common assumption that state-owned news outlets are likely to be used for propaganda while commercial news outlets are objective news providers has to be dismissed as proved in the case of CNN. In sum, it can be argued that different forms of media and different news-outlets do face different forms of constraints that have an influence on their programme. Consequently a generalised assumption that all media outlets manufacture public consent needs to be avoided as it would simplify the complex interplay of the media, the public and the elite.

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