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# The Propaganda Model and Sociology: Understanding the Media and Society

Jeffery Klaehn

*Wilfrid Laurier University*, [jklaehn@wlu.ca](mailto:jklaehn@wlu.ca)

Andrew Mullen

*Northumbria University*

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## The Propaganda Model and Sociology: Understanding the Media and Society

Jeffery Klaehn  
PhD candidate  
University of Strathclyde

Andrew Mullen  
Senior Lecturer  
Northumbria University

This article unpacks reasons why the Propaganda Model represents a critical sociological approach to understanding media and society, explores the model's potential within the sociological field, and considers the trajectory of its reputational reception to date. The article also introduces the three central hypotheses and five operative principles of the Propaganda Model and suggests that the model complements other (competing) approaches that explore the relationship between ideological and institutional power and discursive phenomena.

Propaganda Model | Sociological Imagination | mass media | power | sociology

The Propaganda Model (hereafter PM) of media behaviour advanced by Herman and Chomsky (1988) is analytically and conceptually concerned to theorize the intersection between communicative power and political economy in contemporary capitalist society, specifically the United States (US). Academic engagement with the PM is typically limited to overviews of its five filters and brief comments devoted to its predictions regarding the role and function of media in contemporary society. Meanwhile, relatively little attention has been accorded to the multiplicity of ways in which the PM intersects with central theoretical concerns within the intellectual field of sociology. This article suggests that the PM is directly relevant to the discipline of sociology, and it begins by highlighting the centrality of the concept of power in relation to both sociology and the PM. The article then introduces the three central hypotheses and five operative principles of the PM before reviewing the nature of the academic engagement with the PM to date.

Sociology is comprised of various and often competing perspectives that share a common aim in striving to discover knowledge/'truths' about social phenomena and the social world. This article offers a sociologically informed history of the PM, maps out the creation and diffusion of its reputation as a relatively marginalized conceptual model, and considers how its reputation has been socially constructed. The relative ease with which the PM's first-order predictions may be applied and tested empirically clearly demonstrate that the PM is centrally concerned to discover knowledge/truths about patterns of media behaviour. As noted, generally speaking, all sociological perspectives are inspired by the search for 'truths' and are comprised of sets of elaborate arguments. The perceived strengths and limitations of various perspectives can in part be gleaned by the extent to which corresponding evidence suggests that the various hypotheses advanced are accurate and/or intuitively plausible and serve some utility in explaining and understanding recurring, empirically specifiable patterns.

The conception of social organization upon which the foundations of the PM are constructed correlate directly with the structural-conflict perspective within sociology. The PM is a structural model that confronts how the interrelations of state, market and ideology constrain democracy. It predicts that patterns of media behavior are connected to broader institutional and market imperatives. It advances numerous hypotheses, which can be tested empirically, utilizing the methodological techniques associated with the model. Toward this end, evidence supportive of the predictions advanced by the PM can be seen to lend significant legitimacy to its preferred theoretic and conceptual explanations regarding power and interrelations of state, corporate capitalism and the corporate media. If concerned simply with the scientific utility of the framework in question, the argument advanced by the model holds together as a general framework and has much utility. While the PM is highly interdisciplinary, we suggest here that it connects directly with the 'sociological imagination.' Exploring the PM's potential within the sociological 'field,' we unpack reasons why the model represents a critical sociological approach to understanding media and society and consider the trajectory of its reputational reception to date.

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 (see Mullen and Klaehn, 2010). The term refers to a theoretical perspective within sociology that derives from the work of Karl Marx; class conflict, social inequality and ideological domination are main areas of concern within conflict theory (see Marx, 1956). The term also refers to the work of neo-Marxist thinkers, most notably Antonio Gramsci (1971), the Frankfurt School (see Marcuse, 1968; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972), Althusser (1969, 1971) and Poulantzas (1975). Radical mass media criticism has long drawn upon the critical insights provided by conflict theory (see Marx and Engels, 1970 [1845]); Theobald (2006), for example, observed that: 'Of central importance within a genealogy of radical mass media criticism is [Gramsci's] view that current bourgeois control of society, while certainly manifest in material modes of production, is culturally embedded and naturalized in the minds of the people via its hegemony over discourse.' Europe has long been a central hub of radical mass media criticism – notable figures included Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and the Glasgow University Media Group – although internationally resonant contributions have been made by a wide range of scholars from around the world (see Carey, 1995; Parenti, 1986; Bourdieu, 1991, 1996; McMurtry, 1998; McChesney, 1999, 2008; Miller and Dinan, 2008; Giroux, 2001, 2010; Edwards and Cromwell, 2005, 2009; Cromwell, 2006; Chomsky, 1989, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Herman, 1992, 1999; Herman and

O'Sullivan, 1990; Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b, 2002; Bagdikian, 1992; Pilger, 1998; Jhally, 2006; and Winter, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2007; Alford, 2010). (See Theobald (2006) and Berry (2010) for a detailed discussion of the key figures associated with radical mass media criticism). In short, conflict theory is concerned with discourse phenomena within a multiplicity of geographical and temporal contexts and, like the PM, is primarily concerned with the question of how ideological power and material power intersect and reinforce one another.

Both conflict theory and the PM take as given that: power is manifest in the first instance within the economic realm; the existence of social classes is a primary feature of the structural organization of advanced capitalist societies; economic power enables social, political and ideological power; elites are the major initiators of action within the capitalist democracies in the sense that they routinely dominate decision-making processes and are typically motivated to exercise power in a multiplicity of ways according to self-interest; the structural organization of advanced capitalist societies and the dominant economic or material relationships that characterize and define the social order directly impact the production and transmission of ideas; consciousness and the realm of ideas will correspond with dominant material relationships in ways that are both paradigmatic and hegemonic; and social control is a necessary dimension of class rule that is central to sustaining an unjust social order that in turn sustains itself by perpetuating the social inequalities upon which it is built.

Both conflict theory and the PM emphasize the interrelations between the state, corporate capitalism and the corporate media. Chomsky (1985:230) argued that the state comprises the 'actual nexus of decision-making power ... including investment and political decisions, setting the framework within which the public policy can be discussed and is determined.' The government is composed of the more visible agents of power, 'whatever groups happen to control the political system, one component of the state system, at a particular moment' (Chomsky, 1985:230). Within particular time and place contexts, government is inherently transitory and is the public face of power. It may be inferred from this that power is manifest, made material, within dominant social institutions, which in turn exercise and deploy power. Ways in which power is deployed – materially, socially, politically and ideologically – vary according to specific time and place contexts. Highlighting the primacy of the state-corporate-media nexus in relation to decision-making processes, both conflict theory and the PM theorize the existence of class cohesion at the elite-level (see Klaehn, 2005a:16). That is, both recognize overlapping, mutual interests among elites.

The PM acknowledges dissent and makes no predications regarding the effectiveness of hegemonic control (see Klaehn, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a:17-18, 2005b: 231, 2008; Mullen, 2009). Barker (2009) writes that:

The conscious intent of ruling elites to manufacture public consent, while not monolithic in its effectiveness – for the most part because of vigorous grassroots activism – still exerts a massive influence on the way people think about domestic matters and especially foreign affairs. Indeed, with the massive amount of money, time, and technology poured into the dark art of engineering consent, it should not be the least bit surprising that corporate propaganda plays a central part in shaping our lives (and in destroying the lives of distant 'others'). While elites cannot always simply manufacture public consent (as the public often holds vastly different opinions to those propagated by the media), the mass media has been remarkably successful at manufacturing the general public's contentedness and/or resignation to the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism – both of which do wonders to bolster the status quo. (At the same time the media have almost completely censored any critical discussion of their own anti-democratic influence on democracy, and have neglected to examine how the funding of liberal foundations works to undermine the Left – neither of which is very surprising.) (Barker, 2009)

In specific relation to the role and function of mainstream mass media within advanced capitalist societies, both the PM and conflict theory accept as given that: power meets meaning within media discourses; social communication, popular culture, cultural politics and public pedagogy reflect dominant material relationships (i.e. existing social inequalities); political-economic elements influence overall patterns of media performance, encouraging a systematic and pervasive right-wing bias within media discourses that is consistent with the interests of power; and careful analysis of media discourses and the social, political and economic contexts in which these are produced can enable insight into the dialectic between ideology and power.

### **The Propaganda Model: Three Hypotheses and Five Operative Principles**

It is important to establish at the outset that the PM is concerned with media *behaviour* rather than media *effects*. Nevertheless, more than twenty years after its publication, confusion abounds on this crucial distinction and it is, perhaps, understandable. Consider, for example, this excerpt from the Preface of *Manufacturing Consent*:

If ... the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about, and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda

campaigns, the standard [liberal-pluralist] view of how the media system works is at serious odds with reality. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. xi)

Or this, from the opening paragraph:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, inform and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. (Ibid. p.1)

Indeed, the very title of the book, *Manufacturing Consent*, and frequent references throughout to the 'propaganda system', suggests that the PM was concerned with effects. Although Herman and Chomsky have attended to the societal function of ideology and propaganda as an effective means of population control elsewhere in their work (see Chomsky, 1989; Herman, 1999), the PM is solely concerned with questions of media behaviour.

Situated firmly within the Marxist-radical tradition of media studies, more specifically the political economy approach, the PM effectively challenges the liberal-pluralist view of the role of the media in a capitalist, liberal-democratic regime such as the US – namely that it constitutes the 'fourth estate' and functions as an effective check on the exercise of power. Instead, Herman and Chomsky argue that the media all too often serves the interests of the economic and political elite. This does not require direct intervention on the part of the corporate-state nexus to determine media output, nor conspiracy on the part of the journalists and other workers within the media system to marginalize dissenting voices and reproduce the status quo. Although cases of direct intervention (by editors, shareholders, agents of the state, etc.) and conspiracy (recycling stories known to be false, smears, etc.) frequently occur, as revealed by Boyd-Barrett (2004) and Edwards and Cromwell (2009), to give just two examples, the PM provides a structural, political economy framework to account for observed media bias in favour of corporate and political elites' power. Put simply, Herman and Chomsky (1988: xii) insist that the PM presents a 'free market analysis' of the media, 'with the results largely the outcome of the working of market forces.'

The PM proposes three hypotheses and is based upon five operative principles. The starting point of the PM is the existence, or not, of elite consensus. The first hypothesis put forward by Herman and Chomsky is that, where there is consensus amongst the corporate and political elite on a particular issue, the media tend to reflect this in their coverage of that issue, to the exclusion of rival viewpoints. Herman asserts that 'where the elite are really concerned and unified, and/or where ordinary citizens are not aware

of their own stake in an issue or are immobilized by effective propaganda, the media will serve elite interests uncompromisingly' (Herman, 1996). Conversely, Herman and Chomsky concede that the 'propaganda system' does not work as efficiently where there is dissensus: 'the mass media are not a solid monolith on all issues. Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgements on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p.xii). Herman acknowledges that 'there are often differences within the elite which open up space for some debate and even occasional (but very rare) attacks on ... the tactical means of achieving elite ends' (Herman, 1996). Critically, however, the media do not stray from the bounds of 'thinkable thought': Herman and Chomsky reason that 'views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors will be excluded from the mass media even when elite controversy over tactics rages fiercely' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p.xii). It should be noted that, although much broader in its analytical scope, the PM makes a similar claim to that of the indexing hypothesis of media-state relations put forward by Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990).

The second hypothesis advanced by Herman and Chomsky is that where the media function under corporate rather than state control, media behaviour is shaped by what is, in effect, a 'guided market system' underpinned by five filters – the operative principles of the PM. Herman and Chomsky suggest that:

Money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public. The essential ingredients of our propaganda model, or set of news 'filters', fall under the following headings: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by governments, business and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) 'anti-communism' as a national religion and control mechanism. These elements interact with and reinforce one another. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premise of discourse and interpretation, and the definitions of what is newsworthy in the first place. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p.2)

The data presented by Herman and Chomsky in support of the PM consisted of a series of case studies based upon content analysis of newspaper coverage. These include studies of the coverage of the murdered Polish priest, Jerzy Popieluszko, and other religious victims in Latin America; elections in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua; the 'KGB-Bulgarian plot' to kill the Pope; and the wars in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The 2002 edition of *Manufacturing Consent* expanded the studies to include mainstream media usage of the term 'genocide' to describe events in East Timor, Iraq, Kosovo and Turkey; plus the coverage of elections in Cambodia, Kenya, Mexico, Russia, Turkey, Uruguay and Yugoslavia. Herman and Chomsky also claimed that, in addition to foreign policy matters, the PM could be applied to domestic policy issues such as the North American Free Trade Agreement; anti-globalization protests; the longstanding elite assault on the labour movement; and the chemical industry and its regulation. In all of these cases, Herman and Chomsky found, media coverage reflected, rather than challenged, elite interests.

Since its publication, many critical scholars have presented evidence which supports the PM (see Herman, 1982, 1985, 1992; Parenti, 1986; Herman and O'Sullivan, 1989, 1991; Aronson, 1990; Lee and Solomon, 1990; Chomsky, 1991; Winter, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2007; Gunn, 1994; McMurtry, 1998; Hammond and Herman, 2000; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Herring and Robinson, 2003b; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Babe, 2005; Winter and Klaehn, 2005; Phillips, 2007; Alford, 2010; Broudy, 2009). Furthermore, although they did not utilize the PM, a number of other scholars in Europe and North America concurred that the media tended to manufacture consent for elite preferences, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy issues (see Miliband, 1969; Domhoff, 1979; Curtis, 1984; Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Hallin, 1986; Hollingsworth, 1986; Bennett, 1990; Entman, 1991; Philo and McLaughlin, 1993; Carruthers, 1995; Zaller and Chui, 1996; Lashmar and Oliver, 1998; Mermin, 1999; Greenslade, 2003; Knightley, 2003; Miller, 2004; Altheide, 2006; Anderson, 2006; Sussman, 2010).

The third hypothesis proffered by Herman and Chomsky relates to the way in which the PM would be received:

[It] makes predictions at various levels. There are first-order predictions about how the media function. The model also makes second-order predictions about how media performance will be discussed and evaluated. ... The general prediction, at each level, is that what enters the mainstream will support the needs of established power. (Chomsky, 1989, p.153)

More specifically,

One prediction of the model is that it will be effectively excluded from discussion. ...However well-confirmed the model may be ... it is inadmissible, and ... should remain outside the spectrum of debate over the media. ...Plainly it is either valid or invalid. If invalid, it may be dismissed; if valid it *will* be dismissed (emphasis in original) (Ibid. p.11)

'The first-order prediction of the Propaganda Model', that media behaviour conforms to and reflects the interests of the economic and political elite (where the elite is united), is 'systematically confirmed', Chomsky (Ibid. p.145) declared – manifest in the overwhelmingly supportive evidence discussed above.

In terms of the second-order prediction, that the PM would be ignored by the media and within academia, the evidence is again compelling. There have been only a few mentions of *Manufacturing Consent* and/or the PM in the European and North American media. In Britain, for example, MediaLens (2004) reported that, since 1988, the PM had been mentioned only once in *The Guardian* – Britain's most liberal broadsheet – while a Lexis-Nexis database search found just ten mentions in other British newspapers during this period.

Their work has also been marginalized within academia. Paradoxically, although Chomsky was described in a *New York Times* book review as 'arguably the most important intellectual alive' (Robinson, 1979) and although he is one of the most cited scholars (see Massachusetts Institute of Technology News Office, 1992; *Times Higher Education*, 2009), Chomsky is generally ignored within the social sciences. More accurately, while his linguistic work receives critical acclaim, the disciplines of economics, history, media and communication studies, politics and sociology do not, generally speaking, engage with his prodigious output in these areas. The same is true of Herman, the main architect of the PM. As Chomsky himself complained

...we've studied a great number of cases, from every methodological point of view that we've been able to think of – and they all support the Propaganda Model. And by now there are thousands of pages of similar material confirming the thesis in books and articles by other people too – in fact, I would hazard a guess that the Propaganda Model is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences. There has been no serious counter-discussion of it at all, actually, that I'm aware of. (Chomsky in Mitchell and Schoeffel, 2002:18)

This bold claim has been substantiated; Mullen (2010a), for example, surveyed 3,053 articles from ten media and communication journals published in Europe and North America (including the *Canadian Journal of Commu-*

nication) over the 1988 to 2007 period to ascertain if and how the PM was included in this scholarship. Of this sample, only 79 articles (representing 2.6 per cent of the total) attended to the PM. Importantly, rather than engaging with the PM, most of these articles merely included a reference to *Manufacturing Consent* in their bibliographies. Likewise, out of 48 media and communication texts – typically used on British under-graduate and postgraduate media and communication courses – surveyed during the 1990 to 2007 period, only 11 (representing 22.9 per cent) actually engaged with the PM (usually a few lines or paragraphs) and, of these, only four texts contained an extensive discussion. The vast majority either ignored the PM (43.8 per cent) or merely included *Manufacturing Consent* in their bibliographies (33.3 per cent) (Ibid.).

A further manifestation of their exclusion from mainstream scholarship is the fact that, since the publication of *Manufacturing Consent* and despite the significance of the PM, there have been only three conferences dedicated to discussing and critiquing their work in this field. These included the 'Distorting Democracy' conference in London (Britain) in February 2004; the '20 Years of Propaganda' conference at the University of Windsor (Canada) in May 2007; and the 'Twenty Years of Propaganda' conference at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (Britain) in December 2009. With the exception of the Canadian conference, these events were not that well attended.

### Engagement with the Propaganda Model

Despite this general neglect, several commentators and scholars have attended to the PM and its relative merits (see Mullen, 2010b). This discourse reveals some disturbing truths about the nature of the dominant intellectual culture. The discourse can be divided into two distinct phases: the first wave of criticism – in the late 1980s, following the book's publication, and in the 1990s – was marked by hostility, indifference and/or an outright dismissal of the PM and its findings, while the second wave of criticism, from the early 2000s, witnessed a greater engagement with the PM which resulted in a number of important debates. Furthermore, these interventions can be categorized: some of these critiques were motivated by ideological opposition to the PM (often accompanied by vilification of Chomsky himself), some objected to the methodology of the PM, while others criticized the scope of the PM (its over-generalizations or, conversely, its failure to theorize media behaviour and media effects at the macro and micro-level).

During the first wave of criticism of the PM many commentators and scholars, on both the political liberal-left end of the spectrum and on the political right, generally dismissed the PM. In their book reviews of *Manufacturing Consent* and cursory discussions of the PM, these writers charged that the PM overstated the power of the

'propaganda system' and downplayed popular opposition to elite preferences (LeFeber, 1988); presented a 'conspiratorial' view of the media (Lemann, 1989; Entman, 1990a, 1990b; Nelson, 1990); constituted a blunt instrument for analysis (Schudson, 1989); was 'political' (Salmon, 1989); was deterministic, functionalist and simplistic (Schlesinger, 1989, 1992; Golding and Murdock, 1991; Eldridge, 1993); and neglected the impact of journalistic professionalism (Goodwin, 1994; Hallin, 1994).

During the second wave of criticism, there was much greater engagement with the PM and a number of more substantial arguments were advanced. Focusing upon the methodology and findings of the PM, these criticisms resulted in a number of debates. The first exchange took place between John Corner and Jeffery Klaehn in the *European Journal of Communication* in 2002 and 2003. Having rejected many of the early criticisms levelled at the PM – its 'conspiratorial' view of the media, determinism and functionalism, similarity to the gate-keeper model, neglect of journalistic professionalism, failure to theorize media effects, and assumption of unified ruling class interests, Klaehn (2002a) restated the case for the PM, focusing upon the five filters and its methodological approach.

In response, Corner (2003) doubted whether the PM, devised to explain the performance of the media in the US, 'could be applied in countries with very different media systems and political structures' (Ibid. p.367). Corner questioned what new theoretical insight the PM could bring to European media research and complained that the PM's five filters were 'assumed to function without much, if any, need for further specification or qualification' and resulted in a 'totalizing and finalizing view' of media performance (Ibid. p.369). Corner also critiqued the notion of a 'filter' and asked whether the filtering process itself produced the resulting media messages or merely served to modify what has already been produced. Corner charged that proponents of the PM ignored the long-standing European media research tradition, rooted in critical-Marxist analyses, on media-state-market relations. In short, these proponents do not situate the PM within this tradition, nor acknowledge the antecedents upon which the PM is founded. Corner questioned whether the PM supported or rejected liberal principles (such as journalistic professionalism); whether media workers involved in the propaganda system were conscious of its operation and effects; and whether, by deploying notions such as 'brainwashing under freedom' and 'thought control', the PM was indeed concerned with media effects rather than just media behaviour.

In a 2003 article published in *Journalism Studies*, Klaehn (2003a) explored criticisms that had been made of the PM by both academics and commentators. He exploded the myth that the model is conspiratorial, that it is deterministic, that it fails to account for micro-processes of media behaviour (which the structuralist PM never set out

to do), and that it fails to theorise audience effects (which was never the intention of the PM).

In a further response, Klaehn (2003b) re-emphasized the attractiveness of the PM from a social science perspective, specifically the ease with which its predictions could be empirically tested. Unlike Corner, who characterized the PM as 'closed', Klaehn argued that the operation of the five filters was contingent and variable; the PM was thus relatively flexible and 'open'. Klaehn criticized Corner for not having recognized the limitations of the PM, acknowledged by its creators, and stated that the PM did not seek to explain all aspects of media performance. Instead of rejecting the PM from a conceptual-theoretical perspective, Klaehn encouraged scholars to test the hypotheses that Herman and Chomsky put forward.

In a special issue of the *Review of International Studies* in 2003 (Volume 29), a number of scholars debated the significance of Chomsky's work within the field of international relations. Herring and Robinson (2003a, p.551) stated that

Once we started to read Chomsky's work, we concluded that there was a great deal to be learned from it. However, when we began to draw on it, we came up against widespread hostility towards his work combined with both ignorance and misrepresentation of what he writes.

In a further article, Herring and Robinson (2003b) observed that the work of Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990) – who advanced an indexing hypothesis regarding media-state relations – shared the same analytical framework as Herman and Chomsky. Nevertheless, an examination of eight major studies on the media and US foreign policy found that 'they only cite Hallin and/or Bennett, but not Herman and Chomsky, despite offering arguments and conclusions that overlap heavily with those of Herman and Chomsky' (Herring and Robinson, 2003b:558). In seeking to explain this marginalization, Herring and Robinson dismissed the personalized explanation – Chomsky's apparent 'polemical' style – and offered instead an institutional explanation: the operation of the flak filter, which discouraged anti-elite analyses and perspectives, given that universities are part of the corporate-state nexus.

Boyd-Barrett (2004:436), who accepted the basic premises of the PM, complained that the PM did not 'identify methodologies for determining the relative weight of independent filters in different contexts'; lamented the 'lack of precision in the characterization of some of the filters' in the PM; bemoaned the fact that the PM privileged structural factors and 'eschews or marginalizes intentionality'; and called for the revision of the PM along these lines. More specifically, in terms of sourcing and flak, Boyd-Barrett recommended greater attention to journalistic departures from, rather than routine conformity with, the

preferences of official sources, and further study of journalistic fears of flak from editors, the right-wing media and government officials. Boyd-Barrett also suggested a sixth filter: the 'buying out' of individual journalists or their media by intelligence agencies, other government bodies and/or special interest groups. Disputing Chomsky's stance on 'conspiracy theory', Boyd-Barrett pointed to the 1970s US Senate investigations and the 'irrefutable evidence of wide-scale, covert CIA penetration of media – by definition, an illustration of 'conspiracy' at work' (Ibid. p.436).

The second exchange on the PM took place between Kurt and Gladys Lang and Herman and Chomsky in the *Political Communication* journal in 2004. Lang and Lang (2004a) challenged the theoretical adequacy of the PM and questioned whether it approximated how the media functioned. The Langs advanced a number of criticisms. They suggested that Herman and Chomsky were seeking to make a political point in presenting their empirical data. They also argued that Herman and Chomsky neglected to provide information about their sampling and coding procedures and they doubted the 'the viability of a model about 'the media' in general based on anecdotal evidence' (Lang and Lang, 2004a:95). They challenged Herman and Chomsky's use of the term 'genocide' in their 2002 edition of *Manufacturing Consent*. They complained that Herman and Chomsky did not inquire how events became news and charged that they assumed that information existed but had been screened out of the media production system. They acknowledged that the media production process was routinized, pointing to the symbiotic relationship between producers (sources) and conveyors (editors and journalists), but argued that such relations frequently became adversarial when interests diverged. Furthermore, media owners often took risks and put out material that politicians wished they had not. In short, there was much interaction, both collaborative and confrontational, between conveyors and sources. The Langs argued that the media have an important informational role and journalists have professional norms; these help to prevent the media becoming a mere mouthpiece for elite interests. They declared that the media do provide space for alternative points of view, particularly where there are divisions within the elite and where there are significant (oppositional) political movements. Concurrently, the Langs suggested that to talk of a 'propaganda system' evaded the fact that Chomsky can and does get his 'deviant point of view' (Ibid. p.97) into the public domain through the very media he criticizes.

When it comes to coverage of events outside the US, the Langs suggested there are cultural, institutional and linguistic constraints that increased 'the dependence of journalists on embassy personnel and on other experts, many of whom have connections, past or present, to the government.' However, they argued that these constraints, which are consistent with the PM, are 'less limiting when it comes to covering events at home' (Ibid.). They argued

that the media are themselves active players in elite conflicts and some of these struggles involve criticisms of media performance. They pointed out that the media do scrutinize corporate scandals and the failures and misdeeds of the US and its allies. Also, the Langs argued that Chomsky misquoted the work of Walter Lippman and others concerning the role of propaganda in society.

In their reply to the Langs, Herman and Chomsky (2004a) raised a number of concerns. First, they complained about the Langs unjustifiably conflating the PM with Chomsky's political views. Second, they declared that the sampling and coding procedures were clear and that the empirical data could be checked; it was not anecdotal. Third, they defended their use of the term 'genocide' and accused the Langs of political bias in raising this point – consistent with media's own bias about 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims. Fourth, they argued that they had tested the PM using a range of cases that were important in themselves and that received prominent media coverage. They did not seek out promising cases. Fifth, in response to the Langs' claim that they did not focus on the media production process, they argued that

Since we focus on how the *available evidence* was selected and interpreted, we were very definitely concerned with how newsworthy facts are located, who the media rely on as sources, how critically they treat them, what forces determine what is newsworthy in the first place – and how stories are inflated, repeated or dropped, and how politically convenient fabrications may survive and even become institutionalized. Our model deals with these matters explicitly in describing sourcing processes, flak, ideology and other matters. But we put our main emphasis on the empirical results of media selection processes, which are crucial facts about the media. (Ibid. p.105)

In short, theirs is a macro- rather than micro-level analysis of the media production process. Sixth, they charged that the Langs offered no explanation to account for the radically different treatment of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims by the media. Seventh, Chomsky defended his interpretation and use of the work of Lippmann and others.

In response to Herman and Chomsky, Lang and Lang (2004b) argued that the media production process was a negotiated product, a social construction, and not one that is controlled by the government or any one party. They again questioned the empirical data presented by Herman and Chomsky and they again challenged the use of the term 'genocide'. Herman and Chomsky (2004b), in turn, responded to these points and rectified the mistakes made by the Langs.

The third exchange on the PM took place between Robert Barsky and Gabriel Noah Brahm in the *Critical Studies in Media Communication* journal in 2006. Where

Barsky (2006) celebrated Chomsky's radicalism and traced its impact upon Chomsky's work, Noah Brahm (2006) dismissed him and argued that Chomsky typified a 'dangerous' intellectual trend – authoritarian, narcissistic and obsessive – governed by 'an uptight psychology' (Ibid. p.454). In terms of the PM, Noah Brahm complained that Herman and Chomsky had ignored the insights generated by cultural studies (for example Barthes on semiotics, Marcuse on ideology and Foucault on discourse) over the last twenty years. However, as with the output during the earlier phase of criticism, Noah Brahm did not engage with the substance of the PM.

Sparks (2007), who, like Boyd-Barrett, was also broadly in agreement with the PM, challenged Herman and Chomsky's claims about elite consensus/dissensus, questioning the strategic-tactical dichotomy they posited, and insisted that, not only are the capitalist class frequently divided on account of their particularistic interests, but the economic and political systems of other countries are quite different from that of the US (on which the original PM was based). In Europe, for example, Sparks highlighted the existence of significant left-wing parties, the centrality of public service broadcasters, the reality of sizeable working class electorates, and the impact of competitive press markets responding to partisan and socially stratified politics. As a consequence of these, Sparks argued that 'we would expect to find ... a much wider and far-ranging set of arguments in the media than simply in-house disputes between different wings of the capitalist class' (Ibid. p.74). Sparks emphasized the need to differentiate between the performance and role of the elite media compared to the mass media; argued that source dependence did not guarantee journalistic compliance – as elite sources may be disarticulated and divided thus opening up the space for alternative, non-corporate and non-state sources; and stipulated that journalists, on account of their class position as wage labourers, sometimes resist and contest the dictates of governments, managers and owners.

With the exception of the constructive criticisms made by Boyd-Barrett and Sparks – and the spirited defence of the PM by Klaehn, Herring and Robinson, Barsky, and Herman and Chomsky themselves – it is fair to say that much of this engagement was poor and superficial; most of these commentators and scholars did not engage with the PM on its own terms, ascribing to it claims that Herman and Chomsky never made, and they studiously avoided the evidence marshalled by Herman and Chomsky, offering no alternative explanations to account for the observed performance of the media. Such blatant avoidance flies in the face of good social science, wherein scholars critique the premises and findings of each others' research.

Misconceptions about the PM continue to enjoy wide currency: in textbooks, university departments, classrooms and on the worldwide web. Regarding the early anger and



hostility directed toward the PM, Herman (cited in Klaehn, 2008) states that:

The resistance and hostility to the propaganda model had several sources. One is that it is a radical critique, whose implication is that modest reforms that don't alter the structure very much aren't going to affect media performance very much. This is hard for non-radicals to swallow. Another source of resistance has been based on our relatively broad brush strokes with which we model a complex area. This makes it allegedly too mechanistic and at the same time lacking in a weighting of the elements in the model! But we don't claim that it explains everything and we are clear that elite differences and local factors (including features of individual media institutions) can influence media outcomes. We argue that the model works well in many important cases, and we await the offering of one that is superior. But we also acknowledge that there remains lots of room for media studies that do not rest on the propaganda model. This same room opens the way to criticizing the model for its failure to pursue those tracks and fill those spaces (Herman, cited in Klaehn, 2008).

Critique that deliberately avoids the whole issue of evidence and factual support for the PM continues to persist (see Corner, 2003; Klaehn, 2003a, 2003b, 2005b, 2008), and it is extremely rare to find introductory textbooks within the disciplines of cultural studies, media and communication studies and sociology that even mention the PM (see, for elaboration, Mullen, 2010a).

Consider, for instance, how the PM is represented in the recently published introductory text, *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives*, by Marcel Danesi, the editor-in-chief of *Semiotica*, for instance:

One of the more interesting contemporary offshoots of culture industry theory is *propaganda theory*, associated primarily with the writings of the American linguist Noam Chomsky (b. 1928). The theory posits that those who control the funding and ownership of the media, and especially the government in power, determine how the media select and present news coverage. The media thus become nothing more than a propaganda arm of the government and put forward mainly its point of view (Danesi, 2008:44).

Note that no reference is made and no reference is given here to *Manufacturing Consent* – thereby leaving the potentially (and probably) otherwise unknowing student (presumably the 'target audience' for an introductory text such as this one) with no signposts by which to seek

evidence supportive of the PM's arguments, which are also seriously misrepresented within the overview presented in the text. It bears noting again that Edward S. Herman was actually the principal architect of the PM, and he is not mentioned at all within the overview. Concurrently, as explained above (also see Klaehn, 2002a, 2003a, 2003b), the PM argues that patterns of media performance should be understood as an outcome of *market forces*; it suggests that political-economic elements influence overall patterns of media performance. The PM is concerned to explore media content in relation to what's present within media texts and also what's absent, and the fact that the model is flexible and easily tested makes it remarkably well-suited for empirical research. Danesi's claim that the PM casts media as 'a propaganda arm of the government' fundamentally mischaracterizes the model. Danesi's stress on the 'government in power' is exactly the opposite of what Chomsky argues (outlined above) regarding the demarcation between the government and the state (see Edgley, 2009, for elaboration). Beyond this, as has been repeatedly noted in literature on the PM, the Herman-Chomsky model is not deterministic. It does not argue that media function solely to circulate propaganda, and it is in fact a 'model' (as implied by the name given it by its originators) as opposed to a 'theory.' Danesi continues,

Examples used by propaganda theorists to support their view include mainstream American television coverage of recent wars, from the Vietnam War to the War on Terror (in Afghanistan and Iraq), by which it is shown that the government in power has the ability to influence how the media present its coverage.

Like Marxist scholars, propaganda theorists see pop culture as an industry serving those in power. Although people commonly believe that the press has an obligation to be adversarial to those in power, propaganda theorists argue that the media are actually supportive of authority, for the simple reason that the press is dependent on the powerful for subsistence ... Like the Frankfurt scholars, propaganda theorists do not seem to believe that common people can tell the difference between truth and manipulation. The solution these theorists offer is to ensure that access to public media is an open and democratic process. Such access is, in fact, becoming a reality because of the Internet, where basically anyone can post an opinion and garner an international audience for it, almost instantaneously. This very fact shows the untenability of propaganda theory. If consent was really manufactured in the populace as the theorists claim, why is there so much dissent against the war in Iraq online expressed by ordinary people? To my mind, individuals' web-based political

critiques are evidence of the capacity of the masses to resist indoctrination (Danesi, 2008: 45).

And thus ends Danesi's overview of the PM. Exactly who these 'propaganda theorists' are – it bears noting – is not entirely clear, as no references are included within his discussion. As recent research indicates, the PM has international resonance and scholars from Canada, the United States and Europe have demonstrated its applicability – testing the PM in terms of a wide range of domestic and international topics and issues (for a comprehensive listing of such studies, see SourceWatch, 2010; see also Klaehn, 2009; Mullen 2010a, 2010b; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010).

It is certainly true that the PM argues, in the first instance, that media discourses are shaped by market forces. This is *'for the simple reason'* that the ownership, size and profit orientation of the dominant media impact significantly upon the contexts in which discourses are conceived and produced (see Bagdikian, 1992; Lee and Solomon, 1990; Golding and Murdock, 1991; Murdock and Golding, 1977; McChesney, 1999, 2008; Klaehn, 2010). The PM does not assume that media are monolithic, nor does it ignore dissent. Chomsky has described the media system as inherently unstable (see Chomsky, 1997a; Klaehn, 2003b, 2005b:231) and the PM makes no claims regarding how effective media may or may not be. Evidence suggests, however, that the media are extremely effective in influencing public discourse (see Winter, 1992, 2007; Klaehn, 2003b, 2010; Miller, 2004; Everton, 2005; Eglin, 2005; Jensen, 2005; Winter and Klaehn, 2005; Scatambulo-D'Annibale, 2005; Ginsberg, 1986; Lee and Solomon, 1990) and are also influential politically (see Winter, 2002, 2007; Sussman, 2007, 2010; Chomsky, 1989, 1991; Herman, 1985, 1999; Herman and O'Sullivan, 1991; McMurtry, 1989; Klaehn, 2002b, 2006b, 2006d; Edwards and Cromwell, 2005, 2009; Cromwell, 2006). Moreover, Herman (2000) has replied to suggestions that the Internet weakens and/or disproves the PM, stating that:

Some argue that the Internet and the new communication technologies are breaking the corporate stranglehold on journalism and opening an unprecedented era of interactive democratic media. There is no evidence to support this view as regards journalism and mass communication. In fact, one could argue that the new technologies are exacerbating the problem. They permit media firms to shrink staff even as they achieve greater outputs, and they make possible global distribution systems that reduce the number of media entities. Although the new technologies have great potential for democratic communication, there is little reason to expect the Internet to serve democratic ends if it is left to the market.

Herman and Chomsky have more recently commented that the rise of the internet-age (blogging, podcasting, etc.) has not limited or lessened the applicability of the PM (see Mullen, 2009).

As highlighted above, the PM is often simply ignored in scholarly debates surrounding media performance. A recent special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, devoted to 'Rethinking Public Relations', illustrates such marginalization. Miller (2009) observed that the journal opens with an editorial which approvingly cites PR apologist Ray Hiebert's famous claim that 'without public relations, democracy could not succeed in mass society' (cited in Greenberg and Knight, 2009:183). The editorial concludes with the declaration that 'PR is a contested and contradictory domain that lacks a unified professional identity or theoretical framework' (Greenberg and Knight, 2009:186). The PM is not mentioned. The vast literature devoted to radical mass media criticism is simply ignored, and media impact in relation to the whole issue of manufacturing compliance and conflict theory's suggestion that the corporate-state-media nexus is directly relevant and crucial to study of discursive phenomena is entirely avoided. Such exclusion reflects and reinforces an intellectual culture which is steeped in ideological and personal bias. The journal begins with an article devoted to examining corporate crisis response strategy that is almost wholly uncritical (Greenberg and Elliot, 2009) in terms of its engagement with the intersection between communicative power and political economy.

## Conclusion

Alex Carey (1995:18) observed that the 20th century has 'been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.' The long-standing aim of corporate propaganda, the control of the 'public mind' was also identified by Marx and Engels (1970 [1845], p.64): 'Each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society.' Accordingly,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time the ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it [emphasis in original] (Ibid.).

The objective is ruling class hegemony, where the ideology of the capitalist class not only justifies its power but gains the active consent of the oppressed in their oppression. The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, defined hegemony as:

...an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant; in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations (cited in Williams, 1960: 586).

The corporate and political elites developed a number of means to achieve such hegemony. These included advertising and the promotion of consumerism (Packard, 1957; Baran and Sweezy, 1969; Ewen, 1976), corporate control of the media, shaping the education system and the deployment of concerted propaganda campaigns (Miliband, 1973; Schmidt, 2001; Giroux, 2001, 2010; Jhally, 2006; Jensen, 2005, 2006; Bagdikian, 1992; Herman, 1985, 1999; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Dinan and Miller, 2007; Winter, 2007; Miller and Dinan, 2007, 2008; Alford, 2010; Klaehn, 2010). The PM analytically engages with the question of how corporate and political power influence patterns of media performance, and as such is directly relevant to the question of how ideological power and discursive phenomena may be explored sociologically, particularly within the theoretical tradition associated with conflict theory. Concurrently, the model complements other (competing) approaches and creates new opportunities for both empirical research and renewed theoretical debate concerning media and society.

The discipline of sociology is non-dogmatic and multi-paradigmatic and C. Wright Mills (1959:5) proclaimed that the great promise of sociology is that it inspires what he called the sociological imagination: 'a quality of mind that will help [people] to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.' Mills believed intellectuals should embrace critical scholarship that engages with power and – beyond this – he believed that intellectuals should also strive for public relevance. This article has suggested that the Herman-Chomsky PM, as a democratic and critical model that engages directly with how economic, social, and political power intersect with communicative power, represents a pathway for achieving these aims.

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