

Media in the U.S. Political Economy ***by Ed Herman***

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Three Alternative Perspectives

It is widely agreed among media analysts that the mass media play an important role in the political economy of the United States, managing the flow of entertainment, news, and political opinion. But there is sharp disagreement on the nature and character of media influence and on the degree to which they are an independent force or merely reflect and transmit the views of other important power interests in the country. For example, there is a neoconservative school that points its finger at the centralization of the media in a top tier of "East Coast Establishment" newspapers and television networks, and also at the elevated status of star journalists and TV interviewers—their high salaries, their alleged power, liberal background, and bias. In this view, the very high status of the media stars and their ability to command large audiences gives the liberal culture considerable freedom of action in the mass media. Its representatives are therefore said to be able to push views hostile to business and the government's foreign policy and at odds with the majority attitudes of the working class and middle America (Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1986).

Representatives of the liberal/"gatekeeper" and propaganda analyses (discussed below) deny both that the stars can do as they like and that the mass media have any kind of bias against the status quo. They stress three types of evidence against the neoconservative view: the checks built into the way media operate, how unlikely it is that institutions so firmly embedded in the corporate government world could display systematic antiestablishment bias, and the evidence of actual media output. Both consider the neoconservatives to be speaking for just one wing of opinion inside the national power structure, attacking representatives of the liberal wing of elite opinion as though its members were dangerous enemies of the American way of life.

The most prominent analyses in the United States of how the media came to be as they are come from liberal newsroom and "gatekeeper" studies, as exemplified by the works of Leon Sigal (1973), Edward J. Epstein (1973), Gaye Tuchman (1978), Herbert Gans (1979), and Todd Gitlin (1983). Although there are differences

among them, they all focus on journalists and media organizations rather than on the system at large or government and major advertisers. These latter are brought into the picture only as sources, pressure groups, regulators, or commercial clients. "Gatekeeper" researchers interview media personnel and watch them working to see how they decide on output, with little emphasis on examining and comparing actual outputs and their results. They stress how practical organizational needs shape news media choices directly or indirectly. Let us explore this view a little further.

News organizations seek sources of authoritative and credible news on a regular basis. These requirements are interconnected: If a highly placed person makes some statement, this is newsworthy in itself. The more authoritative and credible the source, the easier it is to accept statements without checking, and the less expensive is news making. Hence the paradox that even if untrue, such statements may be broadcast without commentary, as "objective" news. The most highly placed news source is, of course, the government. An oft-cited statistic, based on Leon Sigal's (1973) examination of Washington Post, is that 46% of the stories originated with U.S. federal government officials or agencies and 78% with government officials in general, domestic or foreign. Second only to the government as a news source is business, which also showers the media with a vast array of press releases from individual firms, trade associations, and public relations offshoots.

It is also the case that internal media rules and professional codes help powerful board members or media owners not to have to intervene all the time in editorial decisions. For the most part, journalists reproduce the standard choices of the powerful by a process of self-censorship (see Rodriguez, Chapter 8). Those on the lower rungs of the news ladder need to be alert to the news values at the top in order to produce acceptable copy.

Newsroom gatekeeper studies have added a great deal to the understanding of media processes. Nevertheless, they focus too heavily on organizational criteria of choice, often illustrated by struggles within the media as told by media personnel. They suffer from a lack of theory and measurement of actual media output. As a result, they tend to exaggerate the potential media professionals have for dissent and "space," and to neglect how the usual news choices reinforce the status quo.

A third way of looking at the workings of the mass media stresses their role as part of the national power structure. This approach,

which will be examined below, shares a number of features with gatekeeper analyses, but pulls the threads together into an integrated whole and gives more attention to the real interplay between the media and their sources, and to the purposes and effects of news choices and propaganda campaigns. I will call it the "propaganda model."

The Political-Economic Filters of Mass Media Messages

The basic proposition of this chapter is as follows. In a system of concentrated wealth and power, the inequality in command of resources inevitably affects access to, and the performance of, a private media system. Money and power will penetrate the media by direct control or indirect influence, and will filter out the news thought unfit for most of us to consider. We may trace out this filtering process through the following:

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 dependence of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources
4. "flak" as a means of disciplining the media
5. "anticommunism" as a national secular religion and ideological control mechanism

These elements interact with and reinforce one another. They fix the boundaries of media discourse and the definition of what is newsworthy, and they explain the origins and operations of propaganda campaigns.

SIZE AND OWNERSHIP OF THE MASS MEDIA: THE FIRST FILTER

By 1850, improvements in technology and the drive to communicate with a mass audience that could be "sold" to advertisers had developed newspaper technology to a level that made entry into the business very difficult without substantial financial resources. Thus the first filter—the very large investment needed to own a major

newspaper or other mass medium—was already in force over a century ago and has become increasingly effective since. In 1987 there were some 1,500 daily newspapers, 11,000 magazines, 10,000 radio and 1,500 TV stations, 2,400 book publishers, and 7 movie studios in the United States—some 25,000 media entities in all. But most of the news dispensers among this set were small and depended on the national media and wire services for all but very local news. Many more were part of multimedia chains.

In 1983, Ben Bagdikian reported in his book *The Media Monopoly* that by the beginning of the 1980s most U.S. mass media—newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books, and movies—were controlled by 50 corporations (pp. 4-5). Four years later, in his 1987 revision of the book, Bagdikian observed that 29 corporations now accounted for the same majority fraction as the 50 largest had controlled shortly before (p. xvi). These giants are also diversified into other fields, including insurance, banking, advertising, frozen foods, tobacco, weapons production, and nuclear energy. The dominant media companies are large, profit-seeking corporations, owned and controlled by very wealthy boards and individuals. Many are run completely as moneymaking concerns, and for the others as well there are powerful pressures from stockholders, directors, and bankers to focus on the bottom line. These pressures intensified over the 1980s as media stocks became stock market favorites and actual or prospective owners of media properties were able to generate great wealth from increased audience size and advertising revenues (e.g., Rupert Murdoch, Time Warner, and many others). This encouraged the entry of speculators and takeovers, and increased the pressure and temptation to focus more intensively on profitability.

These trends accelerated when the rules were loosened limiting media monopolies, cross-ownership of media in the same area of the country, the number of TV and radio stations the networks could own, and media control by nonmedia companies (e.g., ABC, CBS, NBC). The Federal Communications Commission also abandoned many of its restrictions—which were not very strict anyway—on broadcast commercials, TV violence, and the "Fairness Doctrine" (which supported equal broadcasting time for opposing views), opening the door to purely moneymaking dictates over the use of the airwaves.

Those who control the media giants come into close relation with the corporate community through joint membership on boards of directors and business relations with commercial and investment bankers. These are their sources of credit, who help with banking services and

advise both on opportunities to buy media firms and on takeover threats from other firms. Banks and similar "institutional" investors are also large owners of media stock. These holdings, individually and collectively, do not convey control on a daily basis, but if managers fail to pursue actions that favor shareholder returns, institutional investors will be inclined to sell the stock (depressing its price) or to listen sympathetically to outsiders contemplating takeovers.

These investors constitute a force that helps to integrate media companies into market strategies and away from responsibility to the democratic process. The large media companies have also diversified beyond the media field, and nonmedia companies have established a strong presence in the mass media. The most important cases of the latter are GE (General Electric), which owns the NBC network, and Westinghouse, which owns major TV broadcasting stations, a cable network, and a radio station network. GE and Westinghouse are both huge, diversified, multinational companies heavily involved in the controversial areas of weapons production and nuclear power.

Another structural relationship of importance is the media companies' dependence on and ties with government. Apart from the issues raised in Chapters 6 and 7 of this volume, the major media also depend on the government for more general policy support. All business firms are interested in taxes, interest rates, labor policies, and the level of enforcement of the antitrust (anti-business monopoly) laws.

Thus during the 1980s the systematic reduction of business taxes, weakening of labor unions, and relaxation of antitrust law enforcement benefited media corporations as well as other members of the business community. GE and Westinghouse depend on the government to subsidize their expensive research and development of nuclear power and defense. Reader's Digest, Time, Newsweek, and movie and TV syndication sellers also depend on diplomatic support for their rights to penetrate foreign cultures with U.S. commercial and cultural messages. The media giants, advertising agencies, and great multinational corporations have a close interest in a favorable climate of investment in the Third World, and their relationships with the government in these policies are intimate.

THE ADVERTISING LICENSE TO DO BUSINESS: THE SECOND FILTER

Newspapers obtain about 75% of their revenues from advertisers, general-circulation magazines about 50%, and broadcasters almost 100%. Before advertising became prominent, the price of a newspaper had to cover the costs of doing business. With the growth of advertising, papers that attracted ads could sell copies well below production costs. Papers without advertising faced a serious dilemma: to raise their prices or to have less surplus to invest in making the paper more salable (features, attractive format, promotion). An advertising-based media system will tend to drive out of existence or into marginality the media companies that depend on selling price alone. With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which the consumers decide which media will suit them best. The advertisers' choices heavily influence media prosperity—and survival (Barnouw, 1978).

Since the introduction of press advertising, working-class and radical papers have constantly been at a serious disadvantage, as their readers have tended to be of modest means, a factor that has always reduced advertiser interest in media they patronized. Working-class and radical media also suffer from more overt political discrimination by advertisers, as many firms refuse to patronize media they perceive as damaging to their interests. Advertisers also select among specific broadcasts on the basis of criteria that are culturally and politically conservative. Advertisers on national television are for the most part very large corporations, such as Philip Morris, Procter & Gamble, General Motors, Sears, and RJR Nabisco. These advertisers will rarely sponsor programs that seriously criticize sensitive corporate activities, such as ecological degradation, the workings of the military-industrial complex, or corporate support of and benefits from Third World tyrannies.

As advertising spots increase in price, broadcasters lose even more money on programs if advertisers shun them. For instance, ABC Television's once-in-a-blue-moon feature on the impact of nuclear war on the United States, *The Day After* (1983), had almost all advertisers canceling their options on spots during or around the program. So as the broadcasters come under (a) more pressure to behave as profit makers and (b) less pressure from the FCC to operate a public service, there is a strong tendency for them to eliminate programming that has significant public affairs content.

SOURCING MASS MEDIA NEWS: THE THIRD FILTER

The mass media are drawn into an intimate relationship with the

power structure, national and local, because of cost factors and mutual interests. Cost savings dictate that the media concentrate their reporters where significant news often occurs, where important rumors and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held. The White House, Pentagon, and State Department in Washington, D.C., and, on a local basis, city hall and the police department, are the subject of regular news "beats" for reporters. Business corporations and trade groups are also regular suppliers of stories deemed newsworthy. These organizations turn out a large volume of material that meets the demands of news organizations for reliable, scheduled input. Government and corporate sources also have the credibility associated with their status. Partly to maintain the image of objectivity, but also to protect themselves from criticisms of bias and the increasingly serious threat of libel suits, the media need news that can be portrayed as accurate. Information from sources that may be presumed credible also reduces investigative expense, whereas material from sources that are not seemingly credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful and costly checking.

Thus when President Reagan asserted in March 1986 that the Nicaraguan government was heavily involved in drug smuggling, this was immediately published without checking. (It was a false statement.) On the other hand, a steady stream of claims by imprisoned drug traders and even by U.S. intelligence and Drug Enforcement Administration personnel that the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Contras were smuggling drugs into the United States, with official connivance (L. Cockburn, 1988), was treated much more cautiously, was held to require stringent checking, and received little media coverage (even though, in this case, the claims were true).

The information operations of the powerful government and corporate bureaucracies that constitute primary news sources are vast and skillful. They have special and unequal access to the media. Because they supply news, have continuous contact with the reporter on the beat, and can freeze reporters out of news stories if they are uncooperative, the powerful can use personal relationships, threats, and rewards to influence and coerce media personnel. Perhaps more important, powerful sources regularly take advantage of reporters' routines and need for copy to "manage" the media, to manipulate them into following the agenda of one vector or another in the power structure. Part of this management process consists of showering the media with stories that serve to reinforce a particular framework by which to interpret events. The relation between power and sourcing

extends beyond providing continuing "news" to molding the supply of "experts." Official sources could be threatened by highly respectable alternative sources that offer dissident views with obvious knowledge. ing: During the 1970s and early 1980s, a string of institutions were created and old ones were reactivated in order to propagandize the corporate viewpoint. Among the most important of these institutions were the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. Many hundreds of intellectuals were brought to these institutions, and their work was funded and disseminated to the media in a sophisticated program that can reasonably be defined as a propaganda effort.

FLAK AND THE ENFORCERS: THE FOURTH FILTER

Flak here refers to negative responses to media statements or programs. It may take the form of letters to the media, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress, or other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action. It may be organized centrally or locally, or it may consist of the entirely independent actions of individuals. For example, individuals may call in or write to protest the showing of a movie they regard as sacrilegious or subversive; or the gun lobby may mobilize its members to complain about a program that points up the hazards of private gun ownership.

If flak is produced on a large scale, it can be both uncomfortable and costly to the media. Positions have to be defended within the organization and without, sometimes before legislatures and possibly even in court. Advertisers may withdraw patronage. TV advertising is mainly of consumer goods that are readily subject to organized boycott. During the McCarthy years in the early 1950s (see below as well as Downing, Chapter 14), many advertisers and broadcasters were coerced into silence and the blacklisting of employees by organized and determined Red hunters' threats to organize consumer boycotts. Advertisers are still concerned about possibly offending constituencies that might produce flak, and demand for "suitable" programming is a continuing feature of the media environment.

The ability to produce flak, especially costly and threatening flak, is related to power. The 1967 CBS documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon*, which focused on armed services and military contractor propaganda designed to scare the public into believing that more weapons are always needed, aroused the ire of very substantial interests, and the negative feedback was great, even including congressional hearings.

Serious flak increased in close parallel with business's increased resentment of media criticism of its activities, and the corporate offensive of the 1970s and 1980s. Along with its other political investments of those years, the corporate community sponsored the growth of institutions such as the American Legal Foundation, Capital Legal Foundation, Accuracy in Media (AIM), the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and the Media Institute. These may be regarded as institutions organized for the specific purpose of producing flak. The function of AIM, for example, is to harass the media and put pressure on them to follow the corporate agenda and a hard-line rightist foreign policy. It conditions the media to expect trouble and cost increases for violating conservative standards.

ANTICOMMUNISM AS A CONTROL MECHANISM: THE FIFTH FILTER

The final filter is the ideology of anticommunism. The threat of social rather than business ownership has always been the specter haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and superior status. The Soviet (1917), Chinese (1949), and Cuban (1959) revolutions were all traumas to U.S. elites. The ongoing conflicts and well-publicized abuses of communist states contributed for decades to elevating opposition to communism to a first principle of U.S. ideology and politics.

This ideology has helped mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept of "communism" is fuzzy, it can be used against anybody advocating policies threatening property interests or supportive of accommodation with communist states, or any kind of radicalism. Being labeled communist has almost always unnerved the U.S. Left and labor movement and served to slow down radical opposition movements.

Liberals, often accused of being procommunist or insufficiently anticommunist, are kept continually on the defensive in a nation where anticommunism is like a dominant unifying religion. This generally causes liberals to behave very much like conservatives. In the cases of the U.S. subversion of Guatemala (1947-1954) and the military attacks on Nicaragua (1981-1987), allegations of communist links and a communist threat caused many liberals to support CIA intervention; others lapsed into silence, paralyzed by fear of being tarred with charges of disloyalty to the national religion. In the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover defined support for African American civil rights as "communist," and even though this

did not stop the movement, almost all felt compelled to take the charge seriously.

The anticommunist control mechanism penetrates the system to exercise a profound influence on the mass media. In normal times as well as in periods of "Red scares" (see below), issues tend to be framed in terms of a two-sided world of communist and anticommunist powers, with gains and losses allocated to one side or the other and rooting for "our side" considered entirely legitimate news practice.

It is a moot question how powerful anticommunism will be in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet communism and disintegration of the Soviet bloc from 1989, and the retreat from communism elsewhere. It should be noted, however, that the fear of communism antedated the Russian revolution, and that inflated claims of a Red (anarchist, or communist) upheaval and "outside agitator" threat were a common characteristic of business, government, and media reactions to labor disputes in the late nineteenth century (Donner, 1990). In Latin America and in some U.S. business circles, communism has long been identified with any demands and challenges from below (Herman, 1982, pp. 3336). The Western establishment will surely be subjected to such challenges in the "new world order," already under economic slowdown and strain, and it is possible that the traditional response will follow.

However, without a powerful and nuclear-armed Evil Empire (Reagan's term for the Soviet Union) in the wings, tying labor disputes to a foreign enemy may be more difficult, and antilabor propaganda may have to rely more on claims of violence and the damage to the community from work stoppages. As regards foreign policy, the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 and the assault on Iraq in 1991 show that demonization of a noncommunist enemy and alleged threats to oil supplies and international law, and from drug dealers, with full mass media cooperation, are a highly satisfactory substitute for anticommunism for U.S. leaders (Mowlana, Gerbner, & Schiller, 1992; Shalom, 1993).

The five filters discussed above narrow the range of news that passes through the gates, and even more sharply limit what can become "big news," that is, sustained news campaigns rather than occasional dissident reports ("little news"). By definition, news from leading establishment sources meets one major filter requirement and is readily used by the mass media.

Propaganda Campaigns and the Mass Media

Dissident voices, opposition to U.S. policies from poorly funded individuals and groups, domestic and foreign, are at a disadvantage as credible sources. They do not seem "serious" in terms of the way reality is perceived by the gatekeepers or other powerful parties who influence the filtering process. The mass media and government can therefore make an event "newsworthy" merely by giving it their sustained attention. By the same token, they can make another perfectly newsworthy event a nonhappening for the bulk of the population. The government and mass media can also make a story that serves their needs into a major propaganda campaign.

Major propaganda campaigns are not spontaneous. They tend to be well timed to provide the ideological mobilization sought by important domestic power groups. The Red scare of 1919-1920 took place at a time when labor organization was very active across the country, and when big business was alarmed at the challenge to its power in the factories. Many thousands of radicals of all sorts of views were arrested, violently hauled from their homes; many were imprisoned, and a number were deported (Kennedy, 1980, pp. 278-279, 288-292). It was claimed that they were plotting to overthrow the government.

A second example of a propaganda campaign is that of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Red scare associated with his name (McCarthyism) in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Caute, 1978). Once again, the nation was said to be under dire threat of collapse from communist subversion, including 205 supposed Soviet agents in the State Department. This campaign served well to weaken the New Deal reform coalition that had formed under the Roosevelt presidency in 1933-1945, and replaced it with a Cold War/arms race/probusiness/laborcontrol policy alignment.

A third example is the alleged Bulgarian/KGB involvement in the 1981 shooting of Pope John Paul II. This factually flimsy claim was transformed into a major international propaganda campaign (Herman & Brodhead, 1986). It was a period of heightened tension between the Soviet Union and the United States—and its allies, including Italy—over the placement of advanced nuclear missiles in Western Europe. Antinuclear movements were becoming extremely active in both Western Europe and the United States, and the "news" of a sinister, callous plot to assassinate the most important leader of world Christendom was a potent way to revivify the communist

specter.

News stories in this framework are selected on a highly politicized basis. In 1984, a respected and militant supporter of Polish Solidarity, Father Popieluszko, was kidnapped in Warsaw, beaten, and murdered by a cell of the Polish secret police. This ugly event was highlighted in U.S. media: The New York Times ran 78 articles and 3 editorials; Time and Newsweek, combined, ran 16 articles; and CBS News broadcast 46 news items. Yet the murders, sometimes even more hideous, of 100 clergy, nuns, and other religious workers by agents of U.S. client regimes in Latin America over the period 1964-1980 attracted far less media coverage. Only 57 New York Times articles (no editorials), 10 Time and Newsweek articles, and 37 CBS News items were allocated to their fates, indicating that "unworthy" victims in a friendly state were valued at less than one-hundredth of "worthy" victims in a communist state, as measured by media attention.

These split standards have great ideological significance. Continued emphasis on the real and alleged misdeeds of the enemy serves to convince people to feel seriously threatened by stop-at-nothing enemies and so of the need for new weapons, even though their research and development have usually been under way for years already. The playing down and rationalization of "own side" repression in friendly client states, such as Indonesia, Zaire, and Guatemala, allow us in the United States to hold on to our self-image as citizens of a beneficent and humane government, in contrast with the image of enemy countries, whose governments assassinate leaders and repress democratic movements.

The elite and the mass media, however, are not a solid monolith on all issues. Where the powerful are in disagreement with each other, the agents of power will reflect a certain diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain their shared overall aims. They will still exclude views and facts that challenge their aims.

Even when there is no internal elite dissent, there is still some slippage in the mass media, and information that tends to undermine the official line can be found, though rarely on the front page. This is one of the strengths of the U.S. system. The volume of inconvenient facts can expand, as it did during the Vietnam War in the period from 1963 to 1975, in response to the growth of a critical constituency. Even in this exceptional case, however, it was very rare for news and

comment to find its way into the mass media unless it was inside the framework of established dogma (postulating benevolent U.S. aims, the United States responding to communist aggression and terror).

Apologists for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia at that time still point to "communist atrocities," periodic "pessimism" of media pundits over the war's winnability, and the debates over tactics as showing that the media were "adversarial" and even "lost" the war (Braestrup, 1977). The seeming "reasonableness" of the media process, with inconvenient facts allowed sparingly and within the official framework of assumptions, with fundamental dissent excluded altogether from "big news," and with small-scale alternative media harassed but not wiped out altogether, makes for a propaganda system far more credible and effective in putting over a patriotic agenda than one with official censorship.

Conclusions

The political economy of the U.S. mass media is dominated by communication gatekeepers who are not media professionals so much as large profit-making organizations with close ties to government and business. This network of the powerful provides news and entertainment filtered to meet elite demands and to avoid offending materials. The filtering process is imperfect, however. Although they agree on basic premises, the elite frequently disagree on tactics, and beyond this, normal news-making processes do not screen out all inconvenient facts and stories. It is extremely rare, however, for such dissonant items to graduate to act as a framework that questions generally accepted principles, or to be part of "big news." This presentation of dissident themes only episodically, within official frameworks, and implemented by free-market forces without state censorship, enhances the credibility of the dominant ideology and perspectives.