

CHAPTER 2

Interview with Edward S. Herman: Ideological Hegemony in Contemporary Societies

Jeffery Klaehn, Joan Pedro-Carañana, Matthew Alford
and Yigal Godler

1. Has social control always been naturalised?

In modern societies, surely. People with wealth and political and social power want to protect and expand their interests, and this requires command over the means of communication that will allow these privileges to be sustained and grow. The growth of inequality enlarges the need and ability to dominate the flow of information and inculcate proper values.

How to cite this book chapter:

Klaehn, J., Pedro-Carañana, J., Alford, M. and Godler, Y. 2018. Interview with Edward S. Herman: Ideological Hegemony in Contemporary Societies. In: Pedro-Carañana, J., Broudy, D. and Klaehn, J. (eds.). *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*. Pp. 21–24. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book27.b>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

2. The PM is concerned with the question of how ideological power and material power intersect and reinforce one another and assumes interrelations between state, corporate capitalism and the corporate media. How does academia factor into the equation, with regard to the dialectic between ideology and power?

Academia is an important institutional segment of information and ideology production and dissemination. As such, it has always been controlled by and in service to elite interests. But because of its functions in teaching and research it is granted a degree of independence beyond that accorded workers in profit-making and governmental bodies. However, this independence is limited by fund-raising imperatives and the pressures to conform to conventional wisdom. As the propaganda model departs from the conventional wisdom that the mainstream media (MSM) are not a part of the power structure but are independent servants of the general public, not the elite, the PM will not be favoured by the general run of academics. Some hard evidence on this point was provided by Andrew Mullen in a 2010 study which reviewed the performance of ten communications and media journals in Europe and North America for the years 1988 through 2007, and which found that only 79 of 3,053 articles (2.6 per cent) even mentioned the PM, a majority of these only citing it without discussion.¹

3. Would you characterise the PM as being grounded in a democratic approach specifically oriented toward public relevance?

Yes. It assumes that high relevance will attach to a model that shows the MSM to be an arm of the elite, and on crucial issues to be serving elite interests rather than those of the general public. On some of these issues, such as 'free trade' agreements (really investor-rights-expansion agreements) polls have regularly showed the public hostile but the MSM dependably supportive of such agreements in accord with elite preferences. The PM helps explain why.

4. The PM was originally designed to focus on elite, agenda-setting newspapers in the United States. How useful is the model in terms of studying patterns of media performance in non-US countries?

It should be useful where basic structural conditions fit the model, as that of the United States does. That is, where they have a dominantly private owner-

ship economy, a mainly commercial media depending heavily on advertising, and substantial inequality. Global trends have tended to strengthen the necessary conditions, and the model has been shown to hold quite well in Britain, Germany and other countries.

5. How does the model position television and the internet in relation to social and political change?

TV was well entrenched in 1988, and its development was perfectly compatible with the workings of the PM (perhaps most notable was the importance of advertising as the funding source). The growth of the internet seemed to hold forth the promise of a more democratic media, but, as it has evolved, a remarkable and rapid concentration of effective platforms has come into existence, with Google and Facebook on top, capturing a very large fraction of advertising revenue and patronage by the general public.² These are not news organisations, and how their monopoly power will eventually work out as regards the journalism function is unclear, but they are very much advertising based, and they have already shown great deference to the wishes of power entities like the CIA, NSA, FBI and State Department. Thus, the likelihood that they will serve the public interest as a democratic force seems extremely slim.

6. In what ways can media foster indifference and how does this serve power?

They can foster indifference by systematically failing to provide information and perspectives that address the public's concerns and ultimately showing the public that they are not on the public's side and that what the public may want is not attainable. The MSM do a better job of amusing and otherwise entertaining than dealing credibly with substantive issues. This will help leave the status quo unthreatened.

7. How is fear used to achieve ideological hegemony, in your view?

It focuses attention on an approved target, diverting the public from real problems that the elite is not prepared to address. Back in 1904, Thorstein Veblen featured the value of a warlike policy in 'directing the popular interest to other, nobler, institutionally less hazardous matters than the unequal distribution of wealth and of creature comforts.'³

8. What does the PM have to say about the media coverage of Trump's election campaign and first months as President?

The MSM clearly favoured Hillary Clinton, but many of the elite were pleased with Trump's anti-regulatory and tax 'reform' plans. They also gave Trump a great deal of free media space because his demagoguery resonated with large numbers and playing him up raised media audience sizes. Since the election the MSM have been much more hostile to him and have teamed with the Democrats in creating a Russo-phobic environment, in good part to squelch any attempt on his part to soften policy on confronting Russia and keeping the war party happy and profitable. This all fits nicely into the PM framework.

9. How would you reply to a critic who suggests that the PM's explanatory filters are simply an arbitrary list of possible causes for the declawing of media?

The filters are all tied to institutions and processes that experience and evidence show decisively influence media choices, and that are embodied in the five named elements of the PM.

10. If 'flak' requires conscious activity, how can it be considered a 'filter'?

Media decisions entail conscious activity, so that the conscious effort of protesters to influence those decisions does not seem incompatible with filtering.

11. So, do you think the PM is still a useful tool to analyse the media in the twenty-first century?

Yes, certainly in the short and medium term, with the commercial media and the power of advertising increasing in strength almost everywhere. The longer-term outlook is hazier with the threat of nuclear and climate-based disaster, the growth of inequality and the possibility of severe social disruption and greater centralisation of political power, militarism, and a new era and new forms of fascism.

Notes and Bibliography

¹ Andrew Mullen, 'Twenty Years On: The Second Order Predictions of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model,' *Media Culture and Society*, 2010.

² Jonathan Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, New York: Little Brown, 2017.

³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, Charles Scribner, 1904, 393.