

CHAPTER 11

American Television: Manufacturing Consumerism

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11.1 Introduction

Television plays a central, highly *visible* role in American society as well as across the globe. It is little wonder then that scores of scholars have examined television in all its facets and from a wide range of perspectives. Equally unsurprising, the conclusions have been diverse. Despite the flood of scholarship, as far as the author can tell, devising a critical model of the political economy of American television has not been a focus, although critical political economists, and scholars often cited by them, have of course studied popular culture and television. This chapter, then, provides a critical political-economic model of American television. It introduces a Propaganda Model for American Television (PMTV) by adapting the five filters of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) to the American television industry and programming.

How to cite this book chapter:

Bergman, T. 2018. American Television: Manufacturing Consumerism. In: Pedro-Carañana, J., Broudy, D. and Klaehn, J. (eds.). *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*. Pp. 159–172. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book27.k>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

11.2 A Propaganda Model for American Television (PMTV)

11.2.1 *Filter One: Private Ownership and Pro-business Regulation*

Not just television news but all programming is ultimately the product of a few corporations. Setting up a television station requires a large amount of capital, which severely limits who can do so. The freedom to influence American culture by broadcasting television thus belongs to the happy few who own and run the handful of corporations that dominate the American market and, thus, the public mind. Additionally, they control many other media holdings, including radio stations, magazines, film studios, cable channels, and so on.¹ Often they bundle their forces in joint ventures. Virtually everyone else is effectively barred from entering the market, though on occasion an independent production breaks into the mainstream.

The television corporations belong to even larger conglomerates. For instance, NBC is owned by telecom giant Comcast and by the Walt Disney Company. The people who own and manage these corporations and conglomerates are wealthy and have definite domestic and foreign policy interests, which they often successfully promote in Washington DC through an army of lobbyists. They often have connections at the highest levels. For instance, Disney's CEO advised President Donald Trump.²

Unlike with print journalism, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has the legal right and duty to regulate US broadcasting in the public interest. The constitutional freedom of the press clause has no bearing on fictional shows and other non-news programming. The FCC prohibits cursing and what it considers excessive nudity, especially during the day and prime-time. More to the point, the FCC holds the authority to distribute and revoke broadcast licenses, and to prevent excessive market concentration by setting limits on cross-ownership and the market share that any one entity is allowed to control.

Potentially, then, the special legal status of broadcasting allows the FCC to take action to ensure that programming serves the interests of the population. Public broadcaster PBS is an underfunded, largely unsuccessful attempt to do just that. The central problem is that the FCC has been effectively co-opted by the media industries it purports to regulate, as illustrated by the revolving door between them. Many FCC commissioners and staffers have gone on to work for media corporations, while many employees of media corporations have accepted positions at the FCC.³

Unsurprisingly, the television industry usually, though not always, gets its way in Washington DC.⁴ For instance, the deregulation of the television industry in the 1990s was a boon to corporations, causing 'all the small [production] businesses [to fall] apart as big TV corporations moved production in-house so that they could sell texts on through infinite other territories and media.'⁵ In short, federal regulation provides crucial support to the television industry in

its never-ending quest for more and more profit. The policy-making process has been captured and co-opted by big business, showing the tight and mutually reinforcing connections between capital and the state in American society. Hence private ownership and regulation make up the first filter together.

11.2.2 Filter Two: Advertising

Advertising is the lifeblood of American television. About a quarter of total broadcast time consists of commercials.⁶ Television additionally features covert advertising, known as product placements. With programming, corporations first amass and then sell audiences to other corporations, the advertisers. The audience thinks of itself as a mass of consumers, but from the perspective of media owners it is the product. If shows prove unable to attract a sizeable, preferably affluent audience – and thus the interest of advertisers – they run a high risk of getting cancelled. From a program's inception particular attention is therefore paid to creating narratives that support the 'buying mood.' Advertisers, big businesses for the most part, generally do not appreciate complicated, socially-engaged programming, especially the kind critical of capitalism.⁷ In short, the needs and demands of advertisers are central to understanding what's on. Television is 'an effective corporate instrument, whose sole purpose – as its executives will tell you – is to sell you to the advertisers.'⁸

It has been like this since the very beginning. In the early years, advertisers even produced the shows themselves, and this still happens on occasion.⁹ The demands of advertising of course influence programming. This is why programs often play up, or at least do not damp, the many supposed joys of consumption. For instance, as Mark Crispin Miller explains, advertisers prefer programming to avoid 'dark suggestiveness':

For advertisers are obsessed not just with selling their own specific images but also with universalizing the whole hermetic ambience for selling itself – the pseudo-festive, mildly jolting, ultimately tranquilizing atmosphere of TV and its bright epiphenomena, the theme park and the shopping mall.¹⁰

In this age of advertising glut, television sometimes consciously provokes to garner attention, for instance by showing gay people kiss. Reality shows are some of the main culprits:

TV execs believe that the more they bait advocacy groups like NOW, the NAACP, and GLAAD, the more controversy a show will generate. Offensiveness = hype = increased eyeballs for advertisers and cash for networks, making outrageous bigotry less a by-product of reality TV than its blueprint.¹¹

In short, both in the past and the present, per the second filter, advertisers supply networks with a de facto licence which permits the networks to remain in show *business*. Or not.

11.2.3 *Filter Three: The Rules and Conventions of Production*

The following discussion of a number of American television's conventions and rules of production intends not to be comprehensive, but merely indicative of how the production process primarily serves the needs of advertisers and the television industry, rarely the interests of citizens. First, it should be noted that the production process is, to a large extent, top down. Making television has always been typified by the 'characteristic modes of production' and the hierarchical 'organization of industrial corporations'.¹² For instance, that shining symbol of American entertainment, Walt Disney, introduced a highly compartmentalised, factory-like process for producing animations.¹³ Industry deregulation in the 1990s strengthened management's hold on production. From then on, 'The people who made the creative decisions about everything from storylines to wallpaper were overridden again and again by men in suits who lacked relevant expertise'.¹⁴ In short, and with exceptions, television's creative intelligentsia are totally free to produce what they like – as long as their bosses like what they produce.

'Common sense' notions as to what constitutes gripping television guide the production process. One of these is that rapid movement works well on the screen. Enter acts of violence, car and other chases, and special effects. The violence is almost always person-on-person and committed for personal motives, including the virtually ubiquitous revenge. Never mind that taking revenge plays a distinctly minor role in motivating people's behaviour in the actual world. The crux to understanding television is realizing that it resembles more of a fun house mirror than an ordinary one. Television thrives when the focus is on individuals, with plenty of opportunity for close-ups conveying stark emotions. Shots are kept short, not to say ultra-short, as the act of changing shots and thereby the viewer's perspective is a tested way of keeping eyeballs glued to the screen. It's simple physiology. Too much information, on the other hand, confuses the screen. In short, commercial television focuses on depicting individuals and providing compelling images, with the result that the content tends to be superficial and more about conveying emotions than explicating ideas.

Much more than print journalism, making television is a long, collective undertaking. The vision of the screenwriter, the true creative, often gets diluted by the subsequent persons that revise the original work with an eye on the bottom line. The original work gets 'mainstreamed': made more palatable for the market. The short length of shows, which in part is a result of the need to reserve time for commercials, together with their highly formulaic structure, probably limit the ability to tell non-stereotypical stories. Sitcoms, for instance,

are only about 22 minutes long and adhere to a rigid, almost minute-by-minute structure.¹⁵

Like corporate journalists, then, the individuals working in television production are highly restricted in their creativity. They need to honour the common conventions and rules of production, which are enforced by management with the bottom line in mind. On occasion, the process produces (or rather allows) enlightening or subversive programming. A tiny number of writers and actors has reached such an exalted status that they can push through projects that normally would not stand a chance. Yet most of the time, the production process serves the interests of owners and advertisers. In short, the business of television strongly prefers the profitable predictability of business as usual.

11.2.4 *Filter Four: Overt and Covert Influence*

Aside from media corporations themselves, and regulators and advertisers, many other organizations and institutions are profoundly concerned with, and try to influence, television content. Congressional hearings on supposed communist subversion in Hollywood right after World War II sent a chill through the entertainment industry by making suspect anything that smacked of progressivism. All through the Cold War, state agencies influenced television and movies, often with the active cooperation of the networks. The CIA has a long and successful history of influencing, behind the scenes, its image in movies and television shows.¹⁶ Right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, executives from Hollywood and the major television networks met with a top advisor of President George W. Bush. The goal of the meeting reportedly was ‘to discuss how the entertainment industry could cooperate in the war on terrorism and to begin setting up a structure to make it happen.’¹⁷

It is no different today, as files released by the Department of Defense show:

The sheer scale of the Army and the Air Force’s involvement in TV shows, particularly reality TV shows, is the most remarkable thing about these files. ‘*American Idol*,’ ‘*The X-Factor*,’ ‘*Masterchef*,’ ‘*Cupcake Wars*,’ numerous Oprah Winfrey shows, ‘*Ice Road Truckers*,’ ‘*Battlefield Priests*,’ ‘*America’s Got Talent*,’ ‘*Hawaii Five-O*,’ lots of BBC, History Channel and National Geographic documentaries, ‘*War Dogs*,’ ‘*Big Kitchens*’ — the list is almost endless.¹⁸

State agencies, thus, frequently enlist the entertainment industry, including television, in information campaigns, which are likely to be all the more effective for not easily being identifiable as such.

In addition, various kinds of pressure groups on both the left and the right organise campaigns to influence content. The conservative Parents Television Council mounted so many successful campaigns against broadcasters that the

New York Times once dubbed it a ‘superstar in the culture wars.’ The Council was responsible for ‘record-setting fines against media giants like CBS’ as punishment for programming that supposedly crossed the line, for instance as to profanities or nudity.¹⁹ Yet, in the final analysis, broadcasters probably care more about displaying shapely bottoms to pad bottom lines than catering to the sensibilities of cultural conservatives, or anyone else for that matter. In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 a media expert remarked on the difficulty for the Parents Television Council ‘to stir up indignation about cultural issues at a time of economic woe.’²⁰ Additionally, compared to the state and big corporations, the resources at the disposal of pressure groups are paltry. They are likely to lose out, in the end, to the needs of capital.

11.2.5 Filter Five: Neoliberalism as a Control Mechanism

Neoliberalism is America’s dominant ideology. It is a worldview that includes the core belief that private interests can do just about anything better than the state. With its opposition to social welfare programs, unions, public education, and idolization of the individual and ‘free markets,’ neoliberalism serves the interests of economic elites, including media owners. Just like ‘anti-communism’ during the Cold War, the ideology called neoliberalism

helps mobilise the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with [left-wing] states and radicalism. It therefore helps fragment the left and labour movements and serves as a political control mechanism.²¹

The people involved in creating programming will, to some extent, be believers in American society’s dominant myths taught in school and by the media. And many people working in the television industry, especially the higher-ups, will have ‘fully internalised’ neoliberal values.²² Dissenters will encounter opposition in a myriad of subtle or overt ways. It is, thus, logical to expect programming to reflect neoliberal biases.

Indeed, neoliberalism pervades much television content. The iconic *Oprah Winfrey Show*, with its incessant refrain of self-reliance and self-help, is a shining example.²³ Many reality shows, including *The Apprentice* starring the future American president, mirror the neoliberal vision of society. The few at the top advise, criticise and disdain. From Olympian heights, they pronounce harsh verdicts on the countless aspirants, who desperately compete among each other in the vain hope of one day reaching an exalted position themselves. Cooperation often ends up with deceit, which teaches a valuable lesson. In the quest for fame and fortune that is every American’s Reagan-given right, if not duty, no one can be trusted. We are all lone individuals trying to make it big in the

only way society affords. Cooking competitions mirror the worker's precarious position in a neoliberal economy by depicting cooking as a 'strictly regimented, highly individuated, labour hierarchy within an economic circuit.'²⁴ Extreme makeover shows often promulgate individual solutions to problems, like obesity, that have an inescapable social dimension.

Dramas also often affirm neoliberal articles of faith. They bubble over with depictions of physical or emotional blackmail, violence, manipulation, and assertions of authority. Time and again the moral of the story appears to be that individuals simply pursue their own self-interest, which is necessarily distinct from and in opposition to everybody else's. The popular crime series *CSI*, for instance, 'promises a form of governance that appeals to a post-9/11 society in which mitigating factors of social life are rendered irrelevant. On *CSI*, the state has or will fail the citizen, but science cannot.'²⁵ The hospital series *House*, with its recurring mantra that 'Everybody lies,' also portrays other people as necessarily hostile and selfish, and preaches a belief in science. Much content, thus, primes viewers to think in neoliberal terms, before, during and after which advertisers tickle status anxiety, generously providing the instant 'scratch' of consumerism.

The PM highlights what was not chosen as fit for print. So it is instructive to consider not just what American television is, but also what it is not. For only then the ideological limits that its 'invisible' political economy imposes on content become clearly discernible. Television is hardly concerned with the plight of the dozens of millions of poor people in the US. It is not anti-capitalist, anti-corporate or even merely critical of capitalism. It hardly criticises US foreign policy or the many wars the US has been involved in; in fact, it has often cheered the armed forces on. It rarely portrays unions or other social organizations in a positive light. It can hardly be deemed democratic, because it rarely portrays citizens successfully coming together to improve their lives.

11.3 Additional Thoughts on a PMTV

11.3.1 *Television as Technology*

The PM identifies factors that influence information across media, but a PMTV models a medium. Thus, the influence of the technology of television needs to be considered. In the author's view, the medium influences the content. As earlier noted, television makers know that rapid movements on the screen make for more gripping television than static 'talking heads.' So, it is unsurprising that programming has greatly sped up over the years. Quite a few contemporary viewers will find it hard to watch old movies, because of their leisurely pace. The question is whether the technology or commercialism is the driving force, or rather, to which extent each can be considered responsible. In the author's opinion, where technology ends and capitalism begins, is impossible to tell. The

issue appears intractable beyond the observation that television's technological characteristics *to some extent* influence content. Technology's influence is subsumed in the PMTV's third filter, for technology's assumed characteristics help shape the rules and conventions of production.

11.3.2 *The Uses of Television*

Apart from content and technology, other features of the phenomenon of television broadly conceived also promote inimical values and behaviours. For instance, the widespread association of television with the home might reinforce in people a view of society as nothing but separate individuals with competing interests. There is, of course, nothing inevitable in the widespread practice of watching TV at home alone, although capitalism certainly has had a hand in stimulating the idea that the good life constitutes owning one's own home, car, lawnmower, television, and so on. These days, mobile television affords watching in many places, but the smallness of the screen still favours watching alone. On the other hand, social media do stimulate sharing content and interaction. To be clear, the ways people use television are not part of a PMTV.

11.3.3 *Methodology: Comparing the PM and PMTV*

Compared with the original model, a PMTV has a notable methodological weakness. After describing the political economy of the news media, Herman and Chomsky prove in detail that the biases one would expect the American news to exhibit can indeed be found. First, they identify 'paired examples,' for instance two sets of atrocities of similar scale occurring at about the same time, the main difference being that one is committed by Washington or with its complicity, and the other by an enemy state. Then, they document that the news media treat these two similar series of events very differently. When Washington is implicated in crimes, coverage is sparse and condemnation mild at best, whereas when official enemies are the culprits, coverage is plentiful and condemning. Unfortunately, such a sophisticated method is unavailable for a PMTV. Herman and Chomsky disprove much of the mainstream media's coverage with facts from more reliable and independent sources, but because fiction cannot be proven factually right or wrong, the same cannot be done for American television as a whole. As to evidence, then, the PM is more convincing than a PMTV. Yet, an added value of a PMTV is that it contextualises the PM. A PMTV provides a critical evaluation of the programming that surrounds, arguably overwhelms, television news. A PMTV, thus, helps explain the media environment in which the PM is embedded.

11.3.4 *Strength: Comparing the PM and PMTV*

The PMTV's filters perhaps function as even more potent censorship mechanisms than the PM's. The PMTV's first, second and third filters – ownership and regulation, advertising, and the production rules and conventions – are unrestrained by professional journalism's norm of a separation between management and editors. In other words, because pandering to advertisers is simply an integral part of television's business model, it might be that a PMTV is stronger than the PM. The same goes for the fourth filter, overt and covert influence on the television industry. Among television producers one might expect less reticence to cooperate openly or behind the scenes with state agencies than among journalists. One might also expect the former to be more amenable to influence by other organizations, unless the supreme right to make money is challenged.

As to the fifth filter, both television's creators and journalists have a reputation for liberal politics. Beyond that observation, we can only speculate as to the relative strength of the respective fifth filters. One might argue for instance that, compared to the news, dramas contain more opportunities for and actual instances of fundamental criticisms of society. For the driving force behind drama is conflict. The need for stark conflict opens the door for perspectives that challenge received wisdom. Yet, even if this point has merit, it remains doubtful that fictionalised criticism leads to a more socially engaged audience. Perhaps its consumption often has the opposite effect, amounting to just another form of escapism through catharsis.

11.3.5 *American Television: Aim and Effects*

There can be no dispute as to what American television aims for. Those in charge have clearly explained. The goal is to sell people's attention to large corporations that promote buying stuff, experiences, and services. Corporate television, thus, attempts to manufacture consumerism. Draping itself in the flag, especially during times of war and other crises, television routinely links consumerism with patriotism. Corporate television happily relayed President George W. Bush's admonition in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks that Americans continue shopping, to show the terrorists that they were not cowed. Consumerism, of course, does not serve the public's interests. In fact, much empirical evidence shows that it damages people's mental and physical health.²⁶

Corporate television provides an additional crucial service to elites by inun- dating people with depoliticizing entertainment. It is the Great Distraction Machine. As one of the foremost thinkers on propaganda, Jacques Ellul, noted in the late 1980s:

Today the greatest threat is that propaganda is seeking not to attract people, but to weaken their interest in society. I am astonished by the enormous number of TV game shows, football games, computer games.

They encourage people to play: ‘Let yourselves be entertained, amuse yourselves, do not concern yourselves with politics, it’s not worth the trouble.’²⁷

This second service, too, is rendered not without premeditation. As the late founder of the Mexican network Televisa frankly proclaimed: ‘Mexico is a country of a modest, very fucked class, which will never stop being fucked. Television has the obligation to bring diversion to these people and remove them from their sad reality and difficult future.’²⁸

How effective is American television in stimulating consumerism and depoliticizing citizens? Like the original PM, a PMTV is not an effects model. It remains silent on the extent to which American television succeeds. Indeed, empirically establishing media effects is tricky. On the individual level, effects are mediated by a myriad of factors, including gender, religion, education, age, and so on. Even after thousands of studies much uncertainty and controversy remain.²⁹ Nonetheless, Americans clearly live in a depoliticised, consumerist society. To imagine American television washing its hands in innocence of all that does not seem right at all. An American businessman once famously complained that, ‘Half my advertising is wasted, I just don’t know which half.’³⁰ Usually, this statement is trotted out to illustrate the *difficulty* of influencing people with media or establishing media effects. But, if one half of the money spent on advertising is wasted, then the other half is not. The statement, thus, simultaneously points out a truth that probably all media influencers have discovered: the media do in fact influence people.

11.4 Addressing Objections to a PMTV

Some will reject a PMTV. Here, five anticipated objections are discussed. One, a PMTV is only a general model, a first approximation, for understanding American television. A PMTV surveys the television industry and captures the thrust of the programming, but recognises that social reality is endlessly complicated and that exceptions exist. To point to examples of anti-neoliberal content on American television, for instance, thus constitutes an unconvincing argument for dismissing the model.

Two, advancing a PMTV is not meant to imply that people who enjoy watching television, including the author, are therefore stupid or inferior. People can love American television – wholly but more likely in part – while at the same time cultivating a critical distance as to its overall social function. Three, some will object to the word ‘propaganda,’ with its connotations of conscious duplicity. But the word means not to suggest that the television industry is populated with conscious propagandists, although some owners and producers will knowingly act as propagandists some of the time. The term is still apt because it is often defined, including here, as exerting influence that serves special interests as opposed to the public interest.³¹

Four, a PMTV does not contend that American television serves a conservative agenda on cultural matters. Television has, in fact, become more progressive on a range of issues, for instance playing a role in promoting the social acceptance of gay relationships, however problematic the portrayals often remain. A PMTV does contend that on issues that directly affect the interests of elites, for instance the economy, television remains a steadfast supporter of the status quo.

Five, some will assert that recent changes in society, including the rise of the internet and streaming services, undermine a PMTV. Certainly, much has changed since the broadcast era. In this digital age, viewers can enjoy an ample array of quality shows and have more control over when and where they watch. No wonder that some have talked of television's New Golden Age. But as a late media columnist for the *New York Times* recognised, there is a dark side: "Television's golden age is also a gilded cage, an always-on ecosystem of immense riches that leaves me feeling less like the master of my own universe, and more as if I am surrounded."³² Indeed, in an age of climate change, with progressive change possibly necessary for survival, the recent flood of quality programming poses a peculiar problem. Depoliticizing programming so enjoyable that many people, including hard-to-please viewers like professional media columnists, simply cannot resist, constitutes bad news for the prospects of change instigated by an engaged citizenry.

The rapid permutations taking place in the television industry perhaps affect the efficacy of a PMTV because, for instance, consumers can now easily block advertising. Yet, apart from a PMTV not being an effects model, the changes hardly threaten the television industry or its dominance, and therefore also do not threaten the analytical viability of a PMTV. Streaming services like Hulu are growing rapidly but are still dwarfed by traditional delivery channels.³³ Networks and cable channels supply the bulk of the offerings on streaming services. Leading streaming service Netflix is itself a publicly-traded global enterprise. It has dispensed with commercials, but other streaming services, including Hulu, which are owned by traditional television powerhouses, in part depend on them.

The television industry, thus, remains a highly concentrated, corporate undertaking buttressed by pro-business regulation. It remains firmly in elite hands. Although the relative importance of advertising as a revenue source is on the decline, it remains crucially important. Programming is still a commodity.³⁴ The television industry is still influenced by a myriad of powerful organizations, including state intelligence agencies, and they promote neoliberal ideology. Viewers do currently enjoy more convenient access to television and more control over how to consume it. Although liberating in a way, these innovations also deepen television's reach into the everyday fabric of people's lives. Once upon a time, we could run away from the television set. These days, who runs without a smart phone? Television also remains profitable and popular, although perhaps not all is well on the horizon.³⁵ In 2014, the average

American over fifteen years old watched almost three hours of television per day.³⁶ Baseball is often referred to as America's national pastime, but would it not be more accurate to grant watching television that honour? How, after all, do most Americans watch their games?

11.5 Conclusion

The internet is turning out to be mostly a faux threat to the television industry. Compared to the 1990s, when many observers were sanguine about the democratic potential of the internet, elites have made great strides in incorporating the internet in existing power structures. Intrusive surveillance practices are shifting much of the power early internet users once had to comment and organise back to elites. Commercialism runs rampant online. Google and Facebook depend on advertisers too. A mutually beneficial synergy has developed between the television industry and the internet giants, including Google, which owns advertising-supported YouTube. The website has become an additional treasured outlet for mainstream channels.³⁷

In other words, it is unlikely that the mere availability of certain technologies will upend a PMTV as long as the five filters, especially the first two, remain in place. Hope, such as there is, lies with the coming together of people who realise the need for change, and who will employ the available technologies not for tuning out the crucial issues of the day by tuning into American television, but for raising critical awareness and organizing resistance.

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