CHAPTER 18

Conclusion

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This book has tested the three main hypotheses that Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky propose for empirically validating the Propaganda Model (PM). Authors have provided qualitative and quantitative evidence based on case studies and comparative analyses, evaluated the influence of the five filters, identified propaganda tactics and strategies and proposed ways of extending and improving the model. We shall explain next how this volume has addressed each of the main hypotheses.

18.1 First Hypothesis

The analyses featured in this volume have confirmed the first hypothesis that predicts that when the interests of the economic and political elites are strong, when there is consensus among them and oppositional forces are weak and disorganized, the most influential media (both analog and digital) will strongly support such consensus and their projects for imperial, class and racial domination both nationally and internationally.

Contributors have presented evidence of such a propagandistic role in the online and offline mainstream news coverage of the so-called 'war on terror'

and 'humanitarian interventions', nuclear weapons and deterrence, the economic crash, the policies of austerity, inequality and poverty and race relations in the United States and Cuba. Contributors have analysed the demonisation and defamation of emergent social movements and political forces, as well as the media support of the 2002 coup in Venezuela while criminalizing protest in Mexico. As predicted by the PM, comparable events are considered newsworthy or not depending on the vested interests of powerful actors; there are worthy and unworthy victims, worthy and unworthy malefactors. Even the dramatic reporting on climate change in a crucial period for both the environment and humans meets the expectations of the PM. Concrete interests are not analysed with scrutiny. The need for a macro-transformation to move towards new socio-economic systems not based upon accelerated usage and consumption of natural resources is similarly not highlighted.

We have also featured applications of the PM to forms of media and content not previously analysed within this theoretical framework, particularly the entertainment industry. Through the study of television, professional sports, videogames, online media platforms, social networks and search engines, and the Hollywood film industry, authors have argued that the PM with a broadened analytical range of media remains to be a strong conceptual tool for explaining and predicting media performance.

The authors acknowledge a greater difficulty to measuring the PM hypotheses in entertainment media, but applied textual and political economy analyses to identify different types of entertainment products in relation to elite consensus. In order for their presence in the media, these types include: (a) Those which are overtly supportive of establishment goals; (b) Those that initially appear to criticize the political system but, on closer reading, provide it with fundamental support; (c) those that do genuinely challenge Western systems of hegemonic power but are explicitly marginalized by the corporate media mechanisms of control; (d) Those that are genuine cases of breaking through the filtration system, which invariably occur for irregular reasons and/or with serious caveats and little promotion.

A Propaganda Model for Television contextualizes the PM and provides a critical evaluation of the programming that surrounds television news. It considers the involvement of major corporations, the State, the military and other elite institutions and actors in TV shows and posits that most of the contents promote the basic tenets of neoliberalism: consumerism, selfish individualism, priority of the physical image, hierarchical organization of economic and social activities, entrepreneurial attitude, profit-making, jingoism, technocracy, war, the belief that everybody lies and that human nature is intrinsically bad, and the proposal of individual solutions to social problems.

A content analysis of both Google results and the *New York Times* has demonstrated that stigmatizing terms are used far more often to disparage professional athletes, particularly NFL players, than to describe team owners; by con-

trast, benevolent terms are used far more often to describe team owners than to describe players. It is worth noting that the *New York Times* was even slightly more favorable to NFL team owners than Google was.

Even though there is much more diversity on the internet than in a single newspaper (*New York Times*), the level of plurality is diminished by the mediation of Google search engine, as it operates as a power-law. Although there are possibilities for smaller media to compete and obtain visibility, the selection and ordering of the results respond to hierarchical criteria which tend to favor sites belonging to established, dominant institutions, at the expense of new and less well-established sites, and thus for innovation and diversity.

From the perspective of the first hypothesis of the PM, an important innovation ought to be observed. Even though internet media are important channels for the dissemination of commercialism and right-wing propaganda, the ongoing technological revolution also provides opportunities for critical citizens and social movements to spread their messages across geographical boundaries with unprecedented speed. Far from the one-sidedness of both techno-utopian and techno-dystopian views, contributors reflect dialectically on propaganda in the new digital communications systems. Authors apply the elements of the PM to corporate media as components of a larger System of social and ideological influence and coercion, and examine responses through digital and physical activism carried out by actors against the prevailing political order.

In other words, digital technologies have allowed for both a tighter cultural control of citizens by elites as well as opportunities for social movements, new political forces and individual citizens to create and distribute their communication. For the first time in history, most people have the possibility of creating contents and introducing more plurality into the public sphere. However, it is the traditional media that are now dominating the internet. Corporate and State actors have more economic resources and are better organized, but organized social movements have used collective intelligence to deliver creative and critical messages and achieve an important level of influence. Citizens can respond to a tweet from politicians, but they might as well be ignored. Celebrities are most widely followed, but new politicians and journalists in favor of change have more followers than traditional politicians. Thus, the study of the internet requires further analysis of the relation between digital labour (users) and digital capital, the Left online and the Right online, everyday users and online celebrities and influencers.

Contributors have provided empirical and political economy analysis of the power relations affecting the internet and of the functioning and contents of online media. They discovered that the communication practices of alternative movements have a noteworthy impact on the cyber-sphere, although they are usually limited to 'hot moments' of protests and dissent. However, the fact is that a small elite of users usually dominates most online visibility and attention. In addition, social networks reproduce abundantly the contents of the mainstream media, while the mainstream media does not include so many of

the contents created by citizens and social movements (especially the critical-transformative messages). Still, digital media are fundamental for social movements to make powerful discursive interventions in moments of crisis. They can do so by exploring the contradictions, utilizing specific software, platforms and institutions, and using creativity and humour. The exceptions to the PM are, therefore, important in developing greater understanding for the possibilities of change. The potential for contestation is acknowledged since power relations are contradictory and are affected by change.

The propaganda role of the media systems has been confirmed empirically in several geographical areas, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Latin America, and Spain. We can, therefore, confirm the validity of the PM to explain news reporting in other countries different from the US where the original PM analysis was conducted.

18.2 Exceptions

The media in some countries have experienced overtures in which a wider diversity of opinions enjoyed their space. This is consistent with the first hypothesis of the PM: when there is no elite consensus, the media will tend to portray all the sides of the elite conflict and even allow more voices. This is what happened in Spain where the new political party Podemos was given more time on air to criticize the government. By doing this, media companies were trying to force the government to resist pressure from global digital giants (such as Netflix, Google, and Amazon) and favor national industries. The media had strategies to discipline and delegitimize Podemos, such as producing flak and accusing it members of being communists and receiving funds from Venezuela and Iran. However, their leaders did receive significant space when they were building the party.

Previously, the 15-M movement was often vilipended and misunderstood by the media, but it did also have space to express its views. In addition, the 15-M (and Podemos to a certain extent) was able to shape the online environment for some time and achieve a lot of visibility by sharing a great number of discourses. As the PM holds, when the interests of the elites are divided, when the burden for the practices of a part of the elites (especially corruption) is not to be accepted by another part of the elite, and when strong social and political movements with a communication strategy emerge, the media will tend to become more open and include more diverse views. The media frames still remain mainly within elite interests (reflecting the different sides), but there are more possibilities for journalistic autonomy, and this opens a window of opportunity for radical forces to develop strategies of critical intervention in the media. It is, thus, important to focus on national and local factors, which include the political tradition, the existence of strong social movements, the degree of hegemony exercised by neoliberalism, the State and global capitalism as well as the openness of the cultural and ideological context.

Elite differences, social and political movements for change, national and local contexts, and the innovative and creative use of the digital media are important factors to understand the functioning of the traditional and new media and exploring the possibilities of meaningfully intervening in them. It is worth highlighting the capacity of human agency, especially collective action, to influence the media system and eventually transform it. Herman and Chomsky did not reflect thoroughly on the role of social movements and civil society, but the underlying assumption is that even though propaganda tends to be effective, there are always resistance and movements for change. Chomsky has emphasized that polls show systematically that the general population in the US holds rather diverging views on important topics to those held by the elites. The System establishes determinations, but there are also degrees of freedom in which creative and transformative communication and action can have a meaningful impact.

18.3 Second Hypothesis

It has also been demonstrated that the five operative principles or 'filters' that comprise the model (ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and dominant ideology) have a strong impact on media systems that are guided by market forces rather than by direct State control (second hypothesis).

It has been shown in accordance with the perspective of the PM that the main online and offline media outlets are controlled by large concentrations of corporate power that are interconnected with States and governments. Such corporations are characterized by their secrecy. Moreover, financial capital has further penetrated the media sector and is exercising increasing control over the editorial lines and the production of contents. It has been shown that internet technologies have made it easier to commodify stories. Deregulation by policy-makers has been fundamental in the marketization of both the internet and traditional media.

Advertising also plays a key role since the most important social networks, search engines, and online media depend on advertising revenues. Native advertising, branded content, and product placement have become pervasive. Individualized ads based on Big Data contribute to the culture of commercialism and its acceptance to the detriment of privacy. On television, about a quarter of total broadcast time consists of commercials.

The sourcing filter may adopt different forms depending on the media product. There is a preponderance of the traditional conventions and rules of production that guide producers towards safe sources and predictability. Large corporations, entertainment industries, traditional news organizations, and State actors (including the military) are the main sources of influence in both the online and offline environments. In addition, bots are often used to manipulate the cyber-sphere, especially in politics.

Traditional forms of flak have reached a new level of presence on the internet and often appear as hate speech. Corporate organizations, politicians, parties, movements and individuals often attack people who hold different ideas. This influence on the cyber-sphere can be conducted overtly or covertly and is often done through bots. The capacity to deliver flak obviously depends on resources and organization. The persecution of Snowden and Assange as well as the prosecution of Manning provides evidence on the severity of flak when important information affects the System negatively.

The fifth filter presents a variety of dimensions that are related to the dominant ideologies. News reporting, entertainment, and the internet tend to be influenced by dominant ideologies and usually reproduce them. Neoliberal ideology, with its commercialism, entrepreneurialism, individualism, and cynicism are amplified by online algorithms, videogames, and TV shows. The Orwellian language of the 'war on terror', 'humanitarian interventions' and 'them vs. us' also finds abundant space to generate fear, hatred, and unquestioning conformity. It is also important to note that this volume has included evidence on the renewed influence of anti-communism. In spite of the fall of the Soviet Union, the media continue to accuse social and political forces in favor of change of supporting communism and, specifically Bolivarian Castro-communism in the case of Podemos.

When analyzing the media from a dialectical perspective, it is noticed that where there is commercialization there are also social actors that share technologies and communication without a profit motive. Internet users do sometimes block advertising and use their critical skills to search for alternative media products. Citizens sometimes defend themselves collectively against flak and promote new cultural frameworks and forms of sociability and systemic organization based on equality, freedom, and solidarity. Their influence is limited, but it cannot be underestimated. As Herman and Chomsky have emphasized, governments consider the general population their main enemy; one that has to be persuaded (or coerced) to accept the social order.

The five filters of the PM have a stronger influence in both the analog and the digital media than in the past. Thus, they are relevant for analyzing new media production. However, the question remains whether there are more important factors that come into play, especially in the functioning of the internet. It could be that the first hypothesis on media contents is validated, but that the explanatory principles are insufficient. Is the PM exhaustive? Some contributors have suggested extending the PM as follows:

18.4 The Propaganda and Security System

The propaganda and security system refers to the nexus of decision-making power. It involves the interconnection between State and corporate actors that makes investment and political decisions, setting the framework for public

policy. The System develops tactics and strategies to protect from critical forces and prevent change. It includes material actions as well as the management, dissemination, and control of information. Attention has been paid to the practices of distortion, omission, and misdirection of information put into practice by the System. It involves organisational and bureaucratic entities, government and corporation 'spin doctors' and 'PR' agents, think tanks, NGOs, co-opted elite journalists and even academia. It also involves surveillance and actors from within the so-called 'deep state' such as the intelligence services as well as online corporations based on Big Data. By taking into account the larger context, the PM considers the actors that produce propaganda in first place and who work to shape the media environments.

18.5 Agency: Social Movements, Journalists, Audiences-users

An exhaustive analysis of the media can be conducted by combining the structural approach of the PM with the topic of agency. In the relations between structure and agency, one can observe the degree of adjustment and contradiction between both dimensions of social reality. It is, thereby, possible to identify the forces in conflict and the disruptive factors that might be explored for promoting changes in the media systems. The historical agents of change can be identified and media strategies can be developed. Social and political movements and organizations are important, we have argued, because they can expand the limits of debate in the media. They often resist against the worsening of the state of affairs. When they errupt on the public stage during key moments of history, they can contribute to a democratization of mentalities and societies with lasting effects.

   The PM views the role of journalists as overwhelmed by the constraints of the filters. It is held that journalists tend to internalize the editorial values of their employer. Our volume has provided evidence from sociological research of journalism that confirms this. This process of institutionalization of journalists does not follow a behaviourist pattern, but is instead instilled through socialisation and fear – and resistance does take place. Many critical journalists have surely been fired and received other forms of flak, but journalists, especially when they are well-organized, do sometimes question the ownership and organisational structures, the influence of advertisers and the limitations and precariousness they experience. The power relation is asymmetrical, but unions of journalists and professional organizations can wield some influence. Journalists can also feel encouraged to exercise a critical autonomy if there are strong social currents that demand and defend such autonomy. The volume has also shown that some 'journalist stars' transmit alternative information that is widely demanded.

   The existence of a strong demand for alternative information and for 'journalist stars' shows that audiences are important in media production. However,

citizens are more effective when organized to communicate in the media or to promote media reform through social movements.

The role of social movements, audiences-users, and journalists is understood here in the framework of the power relations *vis á vis* the structures that constrain the possibilities of agency. There is a clear imbalance in the power relations, but the small and seemingly insignificant do sometimes bring about important changes.

18.6 Third Hypothesis

The third hypothesis predicts that critical studies and commentary on media performance will tend to be ignored and marginalized. Our volume addresses this hypothesis and shows that Journalism Studies tend to avoid subjecting journalism to a critical analysis that highlights structural power inequalities. This is not achieved through censorship. Instead, the academic system orients human capacities and financial resources towards large-scale, data-intensive research projects. These projects avoid being critical of the media and the role of journalists and focus instead on minor and de-contextualized micro-practices. The academic system rewards these projects with funding and publications in monopolistic profit-driven publishers. In other words, academia also has a political economy.

18.7 Final Remarks

This volume has analysed both analog and digital media from the perspective of the PM. The three main hypotheses of the model have been confirmed in both news and entertainment products. Areas of extension and improvement have also been addressed and explanations for exceptions have been provided. The propaganda and security system as well as critical-transformative social movements are relevant factors to include in media analysis. The role of media professionals and audiences-users is also to be taken into consideration. The interplay between structure and agency in the framework of the existing, unequal power relations can be seen as key to critical media studies.

We looked back through history to identify the continuities and the changes. We focused on the social totalities, their parts and their contradictions to understand the relations of and the possibilities for democratic change. The PM still provides a fundamental, critical analytical tool to explain the functioning of hegemonic media systems in the twenty-first century. It aligns well with other theoretical and methodological approaches and is grounded in the perspective of providing a critical analysis that enables eventual transformation of both society and the media in a more egalitarian, free, democratic, and fraternal direction.