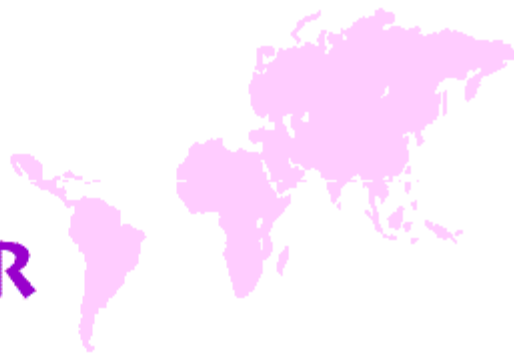


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# THIRD WORLD TRAVELER



## Conclusions

excerpted from the book

## Manufacturing Consent

by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky

Pantheon Books, 1988



Defending the media against the charge that they have become too independent and too powerful for the public good, Anthony Lewis of the New York Times writes that

The press is protected [by the First Amendment] not for its own sake but to enable a free political system to operate. In the end, the concern is not for the reporter or the editor but for the citizen-critic of government.

What is at stake when we speak about freedom of the press "is the freedom to perform a function on behalf of the polity." Lewis cites Supreme Court Justice Powell, who observed: "no individual can obtain for himself the information needed for the intelligent discharge of his political responsibilities.... By enabling the public to assert meaningful control over the political process, the press performs a crucial function in effecting the societal purpose of the First Amendment." Therefore, as Judge Gurfein ruled in supporting the right of the New York Times to publish the Pentagon Papers after the government had failed to show any threat of a breach of security but only the possibility of embarrassment: "a cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know."

We do not accept the view that freedom of expression must be defended in instrumental terms, by virtue of its contribution to some higher good; rather, it is a value in itself. But that apart, these

ringing declarations express valid aspirations, and beyond that, they surely express the self-image of the American media. Our concern in this book has been to inquire into the relation between this image and the reality. In contrast to the standard conception of the media as cantankerous obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and their independence of authority, we have spelled out and applied a propaganda model that indeed sees the media as serving a societal purpose, not that of enabling the public to assert meaningful control over the political process by providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of political responsibilities. On the contrary, a propaganda model suggests that the "societal purpose" of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises. We have sought to show that the expectations of this model are realized, and often considerably surpassed, in the actual practice of the media in a range of crucial cases. We quite agree with Chief Justice Hughes, whom Lewis also cites, on "the primary need of a vigilant and courageous press" if democratic processes are to function in a meaningful way. But the evidence we have reviewed indicates that this need is not met or even weakly approximated in actual practice.

It is frequently asserted that the media were not always as independent, vigilant, and defiant of authority as they allegedly are today; rather, the experiences of the past generation are held to have taught the media to exercise "the power to root about in our national life, exposing what they deem right for exposure," without regard to external pressures or the dictates of authority (Lewis). It is this period, then, that poses a challenge to a propaganda model, and we have therefore taken it as the focus of our inquiry. Many of the examples we discuss are from the past decade, when the liberal media were allegedly in confrontation with a "conservative" administration that they would have been expected to oppose vigorously. In a further effort to ensure that we are not selecting exceptional cases, we have cast the net widely. We have selected for close examination cases that pose the most severe challenge to our model, namely, those put forth by critics as demonstrating that the media have gone too far in their exuberant independence and challenge to authority, so far that they must be curbed if democracy is to survive: for example, the coverage of the Tet offensive, the prime illustration of alleged excesses of the media offered in the 1970s and 1980s. Even these cases demonstrate the subordination of the media to the requirements of the state propaganda system. At the peak of alleged media independence, as the Vietnam War entered its final period and the media were threatening Nixon's presidency, the subordination to these demands never flagged, as illustrated by the media coverage of the Paris peace treaty of 1973, one of the most flagrant examples of media misrepresentation based on an uncritical reiteration of official claims and adherence to the political agenda of the state.

We may illustrate the point in yet another case, chosen by those who defend the standard version of the media as their strongest ground: the Watergate affair. To many critics of the media, this incident illustrates their irresponsible excesses; to those who proudly defend the media, it illustrates their independence of higher authority and commitment to the values of professional journalism. What, then, are the lessons of Watergate?

The major scandal of Watergate as portrayed in the mainstream press was that the Nixon administration sent a collection of petty criminals to break into the Democratic party headquarters, for reasons that remain obscure. The Democratic party represents powerful domestic interests, solidly based in the business community. Nixon's actions were therefore a scandal. The Socialist Workers party, a legal political party, represents no powerful interests. Therefore, there was no scandal when it was revealed, just as passions over Watergate reached their zenith, that the FBI had been disrupting its activities by illegal break-ins and other measures for a decade, a violation of democratic principle

far more extensive and serious than anything charged during the Watergate hearings. What is more, these actions of the national political police were only one element of government programs extending over many administrations to deter independent political action, stir up violence in the ghettos, and undermine the popular movements that were beginning to engage sectors of the generally marginalized public in the arena of decision-making. These covert and illegal programs were revealed in court cases and elsewhere during the Watergate period, but they never entered the congressional proceedings and received only limited media attention. Even the complicity of the FBI in the police assassination of a Black Panther organizer in Chicago was not a scandal, in marked contrast to Nixon's "enemies list," which identified powerful people who were denigrated in private but suffered no consequences. As we have noted, the U.S. role in initiating and carrying out the first phase of "the decade of the genocide" in Cambodia entered the Watergate proceedings only marginally: not because hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were slaughtered in the course of a major war crime, -but because Congress was not properly notified, so that its privileges were infringed, and even this was considered too slight an infraction to enter the final charges. What was true of Congress was also true of the media and their investigative reporting that "helped force a President from office" (Lewis) in what is held to be a most remarkable display of media independence, or arrogance, depending on one's point of view.

History has been kind enough to contrive for us a "controlled experiment" to determine just what was at stake during the Watergate period, when the confrontational stance of the media reached its peak. The answer is clear and precise: powerful groups are capable of defending themselves; not surprisingly; and by media standards, it is a scandal when their position and rights are threatened. By contrast, as long as illegalities and violations of democratic substance are confined to marginal groups or distant victims of U.S. military attack, or result in a diffused cost imposed on the general population, media opposition is muted or absent altogether. This is why Nixon could go so far, lulled into a false sense of security precisely because the watchdog only barked when he began to threaten the privileged.

Exactly the same lessons were taught by the Iran-contra scandals and the media reaction to them. It was a scandal when the Reagan administration was found to have violated congressional prerogatives during the Iran-contra affair, but not when it dismissed with contempt the judgment of the International Court of Justice that the United States was engaged in the "unlawful use of force" and violation of treaties-that is, violation of the supreme law of the land and customary international law-in its attack against Nicaragua. The sponsorship and support of state terror that cost some 200,000 lives in Central America in the preceding decade was not the subject of congressional inquiries or media concern. These actions were conducted in accord with an elite consensus, and they received steady media support...

In the case of the Vietnam War as well ... even those who condemn the media for their alleged adversarial stance acknowledge that they were almost universally supportive of U.S. policy until after large numbers of U.S. troops had been engaged in the "intervention" in South Vietnam, heavy casualties had been taken, huge dollar sums had been spent, and elite protest had surfaced on grounds of threats to elite interests. Only then did elements of the media undertake qualified reassessments of the "cost-benefit" trade-off. But during the period of growing involvement that eventually made extrication difficult, the watchdog actually encouraged the burglar to make himself at home in a distant land, and to bomb and destroy it with abandon.

In short, the very examples offered in praise of the media for their independence, or criticism of their excessive zeal, illustrate exactly the opposite. Contrary to the usual image of an "adversary press" boldly attacking a pitiful executive giant, the media's lack of interest, investigative zeal, and basic news reporting on the accumulating illegalities of the executive branch have regularly permitted and even

encouraged ever larger violations of law, whose ultimate exposure when elite interests were threatened is offered as a demonstration of media service "on behalf of the polity." These observations reinforce the conclusions that we have documented throughout.

The existing level of media subordination to state authority is often deemed unsatisfactory by critics. We have discussed several examples. Thus, Freedom House and others who are concerned to protect state authority from an intrusive public condemn the media for lack of sufficient enthusiasm in supporting official crusades, and even the limited challenge to established authority during the Vietnam War and the Watergate period aroused concerns over the excessive power of the media. Quite commonly, the slight opening occasionally granted to dissent is considered far too dangerous to permit. This perception sometimes even takes the form of a paranoid vision of left-wing power that sweeps all in its path: for example, the plea of Claire Sterling and others who dominated media coverage of the Bulgarian Connection that they could barely be heard above the din of Soviet propaganda. A still more striking case is the Aikman-Shawcross fantasy, eagerly echoed by many others, about the "silencing" of the international media and governments by the left during the Pol Pot era. In reality, there was a huge chorus of protest over Khmer Rouge atrocities, which reached an extraordinary level of fabrication and deceit. The significance of these facts, and of the pretense of left-imposed "silence," is highlighted by the contrast with the real silence over comparable atrocities in Timor at the same time, and the evasions and suppressions during the first phase of "the decade of the genocide," to mention two cases where the United States was the responsible agent and protest could have been effective in diminishing or terminating large-scale atrocities.

A propaganda model provides a ready explanation for this quite typical dichotomous treatment. Atrocities by the Khmer Rouge could be attributed to the Communist enemy and valuable propaganda points could be scored, although nothing useful could be done, or was even proposed, for the Cambodian victims. The image of Communist monsters would also be useful for subsequent U.S. participation in terror and violence, as in its crusades in Central America shortly after. In El Salvador, the United States backed the murderous junta in its struggle against what was depicted as "the Pol Pot left," while Jeane Kirkpatrick mused darkly about the threat to El Salvador of "well-armed guerrillas whose fanaticism and violence remind some observers of Pol Pot"- shortly after the archbishop had denounced her junta friends for conducting a "war of extermination and genocide against a defenseless civilian population." Some are more circumspect-for example, William Buckley, who observes that "the Sandinistas have given their people genocide" and are clearly heading in the direction of Pol Pot, although they have not quite reached that level yet. The utility of the show of outrage over Pol Pot atrocities is evident from the way the fate of these worthy victims was immediately exploited to justify U.S. organization of atrocities that, in fact, do merit comparison to Pol Pot.

Atrocities in East Timor, however, have no such utilitarian function; quite the opposite. These atrocities were carried out by our Indonesian client, so that the United States could readily have acted to reduce or terminate them. But attention to the Indonesian invasion would have embarrassed a loyal ally and quickly disclosed the crucial role of the United States in providing military aid and diplomatic support for aggression and slaughter. Plainly, news about East Timor would not have been useful, and would, in fact, have discomfited important domestic power groups. The mass media-and the intellectual community generally-therefore channeled their benevolent impulses elsewhere: to Cambodia, not Timor.

... the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit-indeed, encourage spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a

system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness. No one instructed the media to focus on Cambodia and ignore East Timor. They gravitated naturally to the Khmer Rouge and discussed them freely-just as they naturally suppressed information on Indonesian atrocities in East Timor and U.S. responsibility for the aggression and massacres. In the process, the media provided neither facts nor analyses that would have enabled the public to understand the issues or the bases of government policies toward Cambodia and Timor, and they thereby assured that the public could not exert any meaningful influence on the decisions that were made. This is quite typical of the actual "societal purpose" of the media on matters that are of significance for established power; not "enabling the public to assert meaningful control over the political process," but rather averting any such danger. In these cases, as in numerous others, the public was managed and mobilized from above, by means of the media's highly selective messages and evasions. As noted by media analyst W. Lance Bennett,

The public is exposed to powerful persuasive messages from above and is unable to communicate meaningfully through the media in response to these messages.... Leaders have usurped enormous amounts of political power and reduced popular control over the political system by using the media to generate support, compliance, and just plain confusion among the public.

More significantly for our particular concerns here, the media typically provide their own independent contribution even without being "used," in the manner and for the reasons that we have discussed. Another media analyst, Ben Bagdikian, observes that the institutional bias of the private mass media "does not merely protect the corporate system. It robs the public of a chance to understand the real world.

That conclusion is well supported by the evidence we have reviewed. A propaganda model has a certain initial plausibility on guided freemarket assumptions that are not particularly controversial. In essence, the private media are major corporations selling a product (readers and audiences) to other businesses (advertisers). The national media typically target and serve elite opinion, groups that, on the one hand, provide an optimal "profile" for advertising purposes, and, on the other, play a role in decision-making in the private and public spheres. The national media would be failing to meet their elite audience's needs if they did not present a tolerably realistic portrayal of the world. But their "societal purpose" also requires that the media's interpretation of the world reflect the interests and concerns of the sellers, the buyers, and the governmental and private institutions dominated by these groups.

A propaganda model also helps us to understand how media personnel adapt, and are adapted, to systemic demands. Given the imperatives of corporate organization and the workings of the various filters, conformity to the needs and interests of privileged sectors is essential to success. In the media, as in other major institutions, those who do not display the requisite values and perspectives will be regarded as "irresponsible," "ideological, or otherwise aberrant, and will tend to fall by the wayside. While there may be a small number of exceptions, the pattern is pervasive, and expected. Those who adapt, perhaps quite honestly, will then be free to express themselves with little managerial control, and they will be able to assert, accurately, that they perceive no pressures to conform. The media are indeed free - for those who adopt the principles required for their "societal purpose." There may be some who are simply corrupt, and who serve as "errand boys" for state and other authority, but this is not the norm. We know from personal experience that many journalists are quite aware of the way the system operates, and utilize the occasional openings it affords to provide information and analysis that departs in some measure from the elite consensus, carefully shaping it so as to accommodate to required norms in a general way. But this degree of insight is surely not common. Rather, the norm is a belief that freedom prevails, which is true for those who have internalized the required values and

**perspectives.**

**These matters are of some importance. We can readily understand why Guatemalan reporters do not report the atrocities of the 1980s; some fifty corpses dramatically illustrate the costs of deviance from authority on the part of independent journalists. To explain why American reporters avoid such topics, and even go so far as to describe Guatemala as a model for Nicaragua requires further explanation, and the same is true in innumerable other similar cases, some of which we have analyzed in detail. A propaganda model provides a basis for understanding this pervasive phenomenon.**

**No simple model will suffice, however, to account for every detail of such a complex matter as the working of the national mass media. A propaganda model, we believe, captures essential features of the process, but it leaves many nuances and secondary effects unanalyzed. There are other factors that should be recognized. Some of these conflict with the "societal purpose" of the media as described by the propaganda model; some support it. In the former category, the humanity and professional integrity of journalists often leads them in directions that are unacceptable in the ideological institutions, and one should not underestimate the psychological burden of suppressing obvious truths and maintaining the required doctrines of benevolence (possibly gone awry), inexplicable error, good intentions, injured innocence, and so on, in the face of overwhelming evidence incompatible with these patriotic premises. The resulting tensions sometimes find limited expression, but more often they are suppressed either consciously or unconsciously, with the help of belief systems that permit the pursuit of narrow interest, whatever the facts.**

**In the category of supportive factors, we find, first of all, elemental patriotism, the overwhelming wish to think well of ourselves, our institutions, and our leaders. We see ourselves as basically good and decent in personal life, so it must be that our institutions function in accordance with the same benevolent intent, an argument that is often persuasive even though it is a transparent non sequitur. The patriotic premise is reinforced by the belief that "we the people" rule, a central principle of the system of indoctrination from early childhood, but also one with little merit, as an analysis of the social and political system will quickly reveal. There are also real advantages in conformity beyond the rewards and privilege that it yields. If one chooses to denounce Qaddafi, or the Sandinistas, or the PLO, or the Soviet Union, no credible evidence is required. The same is true if one repeats conventional doctrines about our own society and its behavior—say, that the U.S. government is dedicated to our traditional noble commitment to democracy and human rights. But a critical analysis of American institutions, the way they function domestically and their international operations, must meet far higher standards; in fact, standards are often imposed that can barely be met in the natural sciences. One has to work hard, to produce evidence that is credible, to construct serious arguments, to present extensive documentation—all tasks that are superfluous as long as one remains within the presuppositional framework of the doctrinal consensus. It is small wonder that few are willing to undertake the effort, quite apart from the rewards that accrue to conformity and the costs of honest dissidence.**

**There are other considerations that tend to induce obedience. A journalist or commentator who does not want to have to work too hard can survive, even gain respectability, by publishing information (official or leaks) from standard sources; these opportunities may well be denied to those who are not content to relay the constructions of state propaganda as fact. The technical structure of the media virtually compels adherence to conventional thoughts, nothing else can be expressed between two commercials, or in seven hundred words, without the appearance of absurdity that is difficult to avoid when one is challenging familiar doctrine with no opportunity to develop facts or argument. In this respect, the U.S. media are rather different from those in most other industrial democracies, and the consequences are noticeable in the narrowness of articulated opinion and analysis. The critic must also**

be prepared to face a defamation apparatus against which there is little recourse an inhibiting factor that is not insubstantial. Many such factors exist, related to the essential structural features brought to light by a propaganda model but nevertheless worthy of detailed examination in themselves. The result is a powerful system of induced conformity to the needs of privilege and power.

In sum, the mass media of the United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion. This propaganda system has become even more efficient in recent decades with the rise of the national television networks, greater mass-media concentration right-wing pressures on public radio and television, and the growth in scope and sophistication of public relations and news management.

This system is not all-powerful, however. Government and elite domination of the media have not succeeded in overcoming the Vietnam syndrome and public hostility to direct U.S. involvement in the destabilization and overthrow of foreign governments. A massive Reagan-era disinformation and propaganda effort, reflecting in large measure an elite consensus, did succeed in its major aims of mobilizing support for the U.S. terror states (the "fledgling democracies"), while demonizing the Sandinistas and eliminating from Congress and the mass media all controversy beyond tactical debate over the means that should be employed to return Nicaragua to the "Central American mode" and "contain" its "aggressiveness" in attempting to defend itself from a murderous and destructive U.S. assault on all fronts. But it failed to win public support even for proxy army warfare against Nicaragua, and as the costs to the U.S. mounted, and the proxy war accompanied by embargo and other pressures succeeded in restoring the "Central American mode" of misery and suffering in Nicaragua and aborting the highly successful reforms and prospects for development of the early years after the overthrow of Washington's ally Somoza, elite opinion too shifted—quite dramatically, in fact—toward resort to other, more cost-effective means to attain shared ends. The partial failures of the very well organized and extensive state propaganda effort, and the simultaneous rise of an active grass-roots oppositional movement with very limited media access, was crucial in making an outright U.S. invasion of Nicaragua unfeasible and driving the state underground, to illegal clandestine operations that could be better concealed from the domestic population—with, in fact, considerable media complicity.

Furthermore, while there have been important structural changes centralizing and strengthening the propaganda system, there have been counterforces at work with a potential for broader access. The rise of cable and satellite communications, while initially captured and dominated by commercial interests, has weakened the power of the network oligopoly and retains a potential for enhanced local-group access. There are already some 3,000 public-access channels in use in the United States, offering 20,000 hours of locally produced programs per week, and there are even national producers and distributors of programs for access channels through satellites (e.g., Deep-Dish Television), as well as hundreds of local suppliers, although all of them must struggle for funding. Grass-roots and public-interest organizations need to recognize and try to avail themselves of these media (and organizational) opportunities.' Local nonprofit radio and television stations also provide an opportunity for direct media access that has been underutilized in the United States. In France, many local groups have their own radio stations. In a notable case, the progressive cooperative Longo Mai, in Upper Provence, has its own 24-hours-a-day Radio Zinzine, which has become an important community institution that has helped inform and activate many previously isolated farmers. The potential value of non-commercial radio can be perceived in sections of the country where stations such as Pacifica Radio offer a view of the world, depth of coverage, and scope of discussion and debate that is generally excluded from the major media. Public radio and television, despite having suffered serious damage during the Reagan years, also represent an alternative media channel whose

**resuscitation and improvement should be of serious concern to those interested in contesting the propaganda system. The steady commercialization of the publicly owned air waves should be vigorously opposed. In the long run, a democratic political order requires far wider control of and access to the media. Serious discussion of how this can be done, and the incorporation of fundamental media reform into political programs, should be high on progressive agendas.**

**The organization and self-education of groups in the community and workplace, and their networking and activism, continue to be the fundamental elements in steps toward the democratization of our social life and any meaningful social change. Only to the extent that such developments succeed can we hope to see media that are free and independent.**

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