

Twenty Years at the Margins: The Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model and Critical Media and Communication Studies, 1988-2008

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Report on some of the conference proceedings

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Following my comment piece in January 2008 about the continuing relevance of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) twenty years after the publication of *Manufacturing Consent* (Pantheon, 1988), what follows is a brief account of the conference that I organised at Northumbria University in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to mark the twentieth anniversary of the book.

Conference Overview

The one-day 'Twenty Years at the Margins' conference aimed to critically evaluate the continued relevance of the PM and to answer a number of important questions: what are the strengths and weaknesses of the PM, is the PM applicable outside of the United States (US), does the PM need to be revised and updated for the twenty-first century, is the PM rendered obsolete by the emergence of the Internet and other new media as sources of news, and why has the PM been generally ignored within critical and Marxist media and communication studies? Delegates to the conference included colleagues from Germany, New Zealand and the US – this conference was the third event to focus on the contribution of Herman and Chomsky to media and communication studies (the other two being the one-day 'Distorted Democracy' conference in London in February 2004 and the three-day '20 Years of Propaganda' conference at the University of Windsor in Canada in May 2007).

Plenary Discussion

Herman and Chomsky were unable to attend the conference. Nevertheless, they responded to a number of questions, with the answers presented on their behalf. These included questions about the likely policy issues around which elite consensus would exist and where the PM would operate most effectively; how the five filters were faring twenty years on; their response to critics of the PM; why the PM had been generally ignored within media and communication studies; whether the PM was applicable to other forms of media (Internet, television, etc.); the PM, which is concerned with media performance, and media effects; and resistance to the corporate domination of the mass media.

In terms of keynote speakers, Alison Edgley, who is the author of *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky* (Routledge 2000), talked about the wider contribution of Chomsky to the social sciences. Edgley focused upon two aspects of Chomsky's theoretical work: his observations about the nature of the state under capitalism and his view of human nature. [Herman, I would like to point out, has also made important contributions to the social sciences, not least his work on corporations (*Corporate Control, Corporate Power*, Cambridge University Press 1981), elections (*Demonstration Elections*, South End Press 1984) and terrorism (*The Real Terror Network*, South End Press 1982 and *The 'Terrorism' Industry*, Pantheon, 1989). Tom O'Malley, the co-author of *A Journalism Reader* (Routledge, 1997) and author of *Reconstructing the Past* (Routledge, 2009), spoke about the tradition of Marxist media studies in Britain and the reception of the PM. This history is usefully contextualised in *Radical Mass Media Criticism*, edited by David Berry and John Theobald (Black Rose Books 2006). David Miller, co-author of *A Century of Spin* (Pluto, 2008), set his discussion of the PM within the wider context of the impact of propaganda on societies and argued that there was a pressing need to theorise the operation of Western propaganda-managed democracies. I presented some empirical evidence, regarding the second-order prediction of the PM (concerning its reception), which confirmed Herman and Chomsky's hypothesis that the PM would be dismissed within academia. Of the 3,053 articles I sampled from ten media and communication journals published in Europe and North America over the 1988 to 2007 period, only 79 articles (representing 2.6 per cent of the total) attended to the PM. Furthermore, of the 48 media and communication texts that I surveyed, published during the 1990 to 2007 period and which constitute key texts on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, only 11 (representing 22.9 per cent) actually engaged with the PM (usually a few lines or paragraphs) and, of these, only four texts contained an extensive discussion. The vast majority either ignored the PM (43.8 per cent) or merely included *Manufacturing Consent* in their bibliographies (33.3 per cent).

Panels

The first panel, 'The Propaganda Model and Marxism', featured papers by Des Freedman, Deepa Kumar, David Miller and Colin Sparks, while the second panel, 'Complementary Theories', included papers by Maarja Lõhmus, Andreas Scheu and Marc Stanton. There were panels on the advertising filter (with papers by Hilary Isamah and Anthanassios Samaras); the sourcing filter (Andrew Kennis and Florian Zollman); journalism (Marx Hudson, Uwe Krueger, Mark Passera and Peter Thompson); and applying the PM outside the US (Matthew Alford, Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman, Andrew Kennis, Michael Markwick, Anis Rahman, Lee Salter and Dave Weltman).

Special Journal Issue

Several of the papers listed above, plus Herman and Chomsky's written submission and many of speakers' contributions, will be published in a special issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. Edited by Andy Mullen and Katharina Noetzold, the special issue will be out in early summer 2009.