

## CHAPTER 3

# What the Propaganda Model Can Learn from the Sociology of Journalism

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter will attempt to resolve one of the major conflicts surrounding Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM). This conflict is the result of the political-economic focus of the model, achieved by leaving out consideration of journalists themselves. I argue that incorporating sociological theory about journalism, specifically professionalism, self-censorship, and secondary socialisation, will better enhance the PM's explanatory power and help address concerns about its limitations. Such sociological aspects function as 'filters' in a similar way to the five described in the PM and are, in fact, implied heavily in the PM, especially in the sourcing and ideology filters.

This analysis will hearken back to advice given in the 1970s, that 'any sociological analysis of the ways in which the mass media operate as ideological agencies which fails to pay serious attention to the economic determinants framing production is bound to be partial.'<sup>1</sup> We might state the opposite as well, that any political-economic analysis which 'fails to pay serious attention' to sociological aspects of news production is 'partial.' The flow must go both ways; neither approach can offer rounded and robust explanations in isolation.

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Historically speaking, ‘industry self-regulation assumed the form of professional journalism’ in the early twentieth century, relying on the notion that ‘journalists would learn to sublimate their own values’ so that the audience ‘could trust what they read and not worry about who owned or worked on the newspaper,’ and thus ‘press concentration would become a moot issue.’<sup>2</sup> Professional ethical standards for journalists are intimately tied to the political economy of the press, acting as a smoke screen for the economic interests of the owners. Professionalism and journalistic socialisation are therefore the consequences of media concentration, not the cures for it, and must be viewed in this context, not as a separate, neutral element serving only to give ‘objective’ news. McChesney’s main points to support this are very PM-related; sourcing patterns and the reliance on official sources, the ‘avoidance of contextualisation’ outside of the elite debate on issues, and the avoidance of critical examination of big businesses, instead focusing on entertainment, crime, and government.<sup>3</sup>

Before going more fully into professionalism and socialisation, I will describe the ways in which ambiguity about the role of journalists in political-economic analysis such as the PM occurs. I will then elaborate on research into professionalism and secondary socialisation. This will then be applied to critiques that the PM is a ‘conspiracy theory’ in order to show how such sociological research will bolster, not refute, the findings of the PM and related political-economic research.

## 2. PM and Journalists

One point of criticism for the PM comes from its lack of consideration of the sociology of journalists.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, its analysis is of the political-economic roots of news media organisations and the subsequent texts produced, not the practices of journalists. As Klaehn notes, the PM ‘is not concerned to analyse practical, organisational, or mundane aspects of newsroom work’ because ‘deliberate intent (‘conspiracy’) and unconscious hegemony (‘professional ideology’) are for the most part unknowable and unmeasurable.’<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the PM is to measure what can be measured, the texts the journalists write, because it is impossible to differentiate between the conscious and unconscious drives behind journalists’ activities. It also extends from Chomsky’s own perspective on the role of journalists within the news media industry: ‘this analysis tends to downplay the role of individuals: they’re just replaceable parts.’<sup>6</sup> The argument is, therefore, that it is a waste of time to analyse these ‘replaceable parts’ of a machine. The reason the machine was made, what the machine makes, the political and economic context in which the machine operates, all of these elements are what *can* and *should* be examined.

This exclusion leads to several different criticisms. Comeforo, for example, argues that the PM has two incompatible points of view when describing the activeness and agency of journalists. It casts them as being *too active* when in fact

they are *passive*.<sup>7</sup> Journalistic routines, the hierarchy of the newsroom and influence of the editor, the news company's organisational culture, the sourcing patterns for their information, and other elements outside of the journalists' control are far more important and influential than active subversion by or the inherent subjectivity of the journalists. At the same time, Comeforo argues that the PM casts them as *too passive* when in fact they are often very active and have a large measure of control. This includes journalists' maintenance of relationships with politicians and suppression of stories to maintain these relationships, and also examples of the CIA infiltrating newsrooms to actively spread disinformation.<sup>8</sup>

This duality is, however, not a problem only of the PM itself but of Journalism Studies in general, and perhaps is an underlying dialectic that grounds journalism. Blumler and Gurevitch previously noted as much, that journalists have control over some areas and not others and thereby have to negotiate and adapt depending on the circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Journalists can be very active about, for example, finding 'alternative' sources of information, or can passively relay the same old elite perspectives, as long as it remains in the realm of legitimate debate about that specific topic.

Responding to a similar critique made by Lang and Lang,<sup>10</sup> Herman and Chomsky reply:

We believe that our focus on media performance as opposed to journalists' thoughts and practices is fully justified. If a reporter deals entirely differently with an election supported by his or her government and one opposed by it, we do not feel that it is urgent to try to find out what goes on in that reporter's (or the editor's) head in following this dichotomous agenda; those facts speak for themselves and the reporter's explanations and rationalisations are of far lesser interest.<sup>11</sup>

However, as Thompson points out, 'there is plenty of empirical evidence from sociological studies of media organisations available to support the proposition that the various filters can and do shape news content.'<sup>12</sup> The PM's study itself only uses a mixed qualitative and quantitative content analysis to produce evidence of the different treatment that American media gives to the government's official enemies, and this data could not have been gathered sociologically.

It is, thus, not fair to hastily dismiss the findings of the PM because they did not conduct interviews with journalists or do focus groups or use other sociological methods. That was simply not the purpose of the PM. However, my argument is that that the inclusion of such sociological research on news media professionals would not refute the PM and can, in fact, greatly assist in the robustness of the model.

Counter to Herman and Chomsky's rejection of sociological methods,<sup>13</sup> I argue that including research gathered through interviews with journalists and ethnographic work does not simply give the journalists' 'rationalisations' for their work.

This is a very narrow interpretation of what vigorous sociological research does. Much like the content analysis of the original PM, the surface-level expressions of these professionals cannot be taken at face value. As this discourse is a result of the system in which the journalists operate, their talk must be viewed in this way.

Linguists, such as Potter and Wetherell, argue that consistency in a discourse could indicate the same ‘function’ of language in that ‘two people may put their discourse together in the same way because they are **doing the same thing with it**.’<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Fairclough argues that ‘institutions construct their ideological and discursal subjects’ in that ‘they impose ideological and discursal constraints upon them as a condition for qualifying them as subjects.’<sup>15</sup> Thus, we can say that if journalists give a more or less unified take on certain issues this does not mean that they all agree or ‘believe’ this position is true; it means that they are required, as members of the institution of journalism, to produce the same discourse. Thus, the ‘rationalisations’ their discourse provides are not useless; they indicate the ways in which they have been socialised into the journalistic discourse. If a journalist says, for example, that they are not under the influence of their owners or advertisers, this assertion does not necessarily mean that they are not under such influence but that, instead, admitting to that influence is not permissible within journalistic discourse.

Others have argued that ‘it is social and economic interests which are embodied by the institutions created and operated by real humans which provide the link between the economic and the ideological.’<sup>16</sup> This link is missing from the PM and inclusion of the talk of professionals embedded in the journalistic discourse can only further enlighten how the political economy and ideology of the news media is linked.

### 3. Journalistic Professionalism

Journalism as a profession is a notion that is not covered well in the PM. Yet research about professionalism in general gives a lot of support to PM’s thesis. Professionalism has a conflicting relationship with ‘democracy’ because it involves ‘formal’ or ‘elite’ knowledge which is ‘not open to the active participation of all’ and could be ‘seen as a threat to democracy.’<sup>17</sup> While this is talking about professions in general, it seems even more suitable to journalism. Medical professionals, for example, possess ‘formal’ and ‘elite’ knowledge, yet they are not considered to be an integral aspect of democratic forms of governance. Journalism, on the other hand, is intimately connected with democratic processes to a degree surpassing all other professions, except perhaps politics and public service jobs to the extent that they can be considered professions.

Additionally, a major aspect of the growth of professions was ‘its traditional connotations of disinterested dedication and learning provided political legitimacy.’<sup>18</sup> Such ‘disinterested dedication’ is also a hallmark of professional journalism, implicating such important journalistic concepts of ethical behaviour,

objectivity and a corresponding lack of subjectivity, and standardised routines and practices.

Speaking of journalism as a profession, Deuze argues that ‘ideology can be seen as a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including – but not limited to – the general process of the production of meanings and ideas (within that group).<sup>19</sup> It is thus ‘possible to speak of a dominant occupational ideology of journalism,’ one that is still open to interpretation and different usage, but it still based on ‘a collection of values, strategies and formal codes’ which are ‘shared most widely’ in the journalistic field.<sup>20</sup> The critique of the PM as a conspiracy theory, as will be discussed later, would then need to apply to *all* such professions. While fringe groups would see the medical field as a conspiracy, such a critique is not sustainable. Doctors, surgeons, nurses, etc., certainly have a ‘system of beliefs’ and hopefully have a ‘disinterested dedication’ to their profession. Medical professionals are part of an institutional structure that operates more or less uniformly and with the same results in the same way as journalism, thus describing the political-economic structure of journalism in such a manner is highly consistent with that of other professions.

Bourdieu criticised political-economic approaches in general, arguing that ‘to understand what happens in journalism, it is not sufficient to know who finances the publications, who the advertisers are, who pays for the advertising [...] and so on,<sup>21</sup> such as what the PM does. He argues that ‘what is produced in the world of journalism cannot be understood unless one conceptualises this microcosm as such and endeavours to understand the effects that the people engaged in this microcosm exert on one another,<sup>22</sup> that is, the interactions within the field of journalism. The latter does not disprove the former, it can only help support it. An ‘individual’s predispositions, assumptions, judgments, and behaviours are the result of a long-term process of socialisation, most importantly in the family, and secondarily, via primary, secondary, and professional education.<sup>23</sup> Hand in hand with professionalism is the secondary process of socialisation that occurs when journalists enter the profession, a process that will now be discussed in further detail.

#### 4. Socialisation of Journalists

[M]ost of the people at the [*New York*] *Times* who make it to be correspondent or editor or whatever tend to be either very obedient or very cynical. The obedient ones have adapted – they’ve internalized the values and believe what they’re saying.<sup>24</sup>

While primary socialisation takes place during childhood, at home with input from parents and immediate family, secondary socialisation occurs outside the first close-knit group we spend time with.<sup>25</sup> This includes, initially, school and

other social activities. When we enter the workplace, secondary socialisation continues to occur throughout our careers.

As Shoemaker and Reese note, this happens through a process of filtering out people unsuitable for the job: 'Because they strive to be taken seriously, reporters are vulnerable to pressure to conform. If they start saying things that diverge from the common wisdom, they are noticed. Editors may doubt their credibility and wonder if they can be trusted – it's safer to hew to the common wisdom.'<sup>26</sup> Hiring, firing, promotions, demotions, prestigious and non-prestigious assignments, all of these factors contribute to the secondary socialisation of journalists, as well as all other professions.

One example of socialisation comes from Gans' study conducted via newsroom ethnography, which examined television and magazine journalism in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> He argues this is expressed through self-censorship or 'anticipatory avoidance' in which 'journalists are restrained from straying into subjects and ideas that could generate pressure, even if their own inclinations, as professionals or individuals, do not often encourage them to stray in the first place.'<sup>28</sup> These rules for performance are learnt both through education and on the job, although the latter is ultimately more important.

This occurs at two levels, conscious and unconscious. While journalists define self-censorship as 'the conscious response to anticipated pressure from non-journalists,' it can also be 'unconscious, in which case journalists may not be aware they are responding to pressure.'<sup>29</sup> The consequence of this is, however, that it becomes hard for researchers to distinguish between conscious and unconscious choices made by media professionals, and it is nearly impossible for media professionals themselves to distinguish, let alone relay that information to researchers. For example, '[s]urrender to pressure is viewed as an act of cowardice and a sign of powerlessness, and those who must surrender are loath to discuss it.'<sup>30</sup> Even if a journalist is consciously bowing to pressure, they are unlikely to reveal it to researchers.

This indicates why Herman and Chomsky are reluctant to consider primary sociological research on journalists, due to the limits of certain versions of that method into gaining insight into journalists' thoughts and performance. Yet they still give plenty of hypothetical examples of socialisation and self-censorship and implicitly rely on it to deal with the notion of individual journalists' performance.

For example, the 'learned and understood limits of subject matter, tone, balance and the like' are what teach journalists how to self-censor.<sup>31</sup> As Chomsky notes, 'The general subservience of the media to the state propaganda system does not result from direct government order, threats or coercion, centralized decisions, and other devices characteristic of totalitarian states, but from a complex interplay of more subtle factors.'<sup>32</sup> These 'subtle factors' include secondary socialisation, professionalism, and self-censorship, as discussed above. Chomsky gives a detailed hypothetical example of this:

Suppose that as a reporter you start going outside of vested interests. You will find, first of all, that the level of evidence that's required is far higher. You don't need verification when you go to vested interests, they're self-verifying. Like, if you report an atrocity carried out by guerillas, all you need is one hearsay witness. You talk about torture carried out by an American military officer, you're going to need videotapes. [...] if a journalist quoted an unnamed 'high U.S. government official,' that suffices as evidence. What if they were to quote some dissident, or some official from a foreign government that's an enemy? Well, they'd have to start digging, and backing it up, and the reporter would have to have mountains of evidence, and expect to pick up a ton of flak, and maybe lose their job, and so on. With factors of that kind, it's predictable which way they're going to go.<sup>33</sup>

We, thus, can see the direct connection between socialisation via 'flak' and the potential to 'lose their job' and the effect of those processes on the selection of sources, framing of events, and the sphere of legitimate consensus.

Chomsky often connects this process to ideological control in society in general and the specific expression of that on journalism

[I]f you're, say, a young person in college, or in journalism, or for that matter a fourth grader, and you have too much of an independent mind, there's a whole variety of devices that will be used to deflect you from that error – and that if you can't be controlled, to marginalize or just eliminate you [...] If you're a young journalist and you're pursuing stories that the people at the managerial level above you understand, either intuitively or explicitly, are not to be pursued, you can be sent off to work at the Police Desk, and advised that you don't have 'proper standards of objectivity' [...]<sup>34</sup>

The institutional necessity for professionalism and the practice of socialisation of journalists can explain why the 'media' perform the way they do. This provides a better basis for a defence of the PM against attacks that it is a conspiracy theory.

## 5. Institutional Ideology vs Conspiracy Theory

As Herman puts it, the PM is 'a model of media *behaviour and performance*, not of media effects,'<sup>35</sup> yet this metonymic use of 'media' creates additional ambiguities. Removing the separation between journalists as individuals and journalists as inculcated in the news media system is necessary for the PM's fundamental thesis. The result, however, leaves the PM open to charges that

it is nothing more than a conspiracy theory. How can an international system which consists of millions of individuals, the ‘media,’ act in a consistent manner without being directed by a single hand?

This leads to another critique of the PM and why, unfairly, it is difficult for it to be accepted in the mainstream debates about media performance. Lester points out that many institutions in the USA ‘teach that the press and news media generally are our check on the abuses of power, assuring a continuing adversarial relationship between the governed and the governors and between the “little guy” [...] and big business.’<sup>36</sup> Because the PM takes a position highly contrary to this, it automatically faces an uphill battle to make its point. If the media is not free and independent, it must mean that there is a conspiracy between the government, media organisations, and journalists for some ulterior motive.

Chomsky, of course strongly refutes this: ‘With equal logic, one could argue that an analyst of General Motors who concludes that its managers try to maximize profits (instead of selflessly labouring to satisfy the needs of the public) is adopting a conspiracy theory.’<sup>37</sup> The news media live and die by remaining profitable, more so now than in the 1980s when the PM was conceived. As the PM highlights the ways in which this effort to remain profitable leads to practices which structurally filter out a lot of potential media content, this is conceptually the same as the way General Motors or any other company would make efforts to increase their profitability.

Corner responds to Chomsky’s defence, arguing that ‘few managers at General Motors would find it at all surprising or disturbing that their corporate system worked with such an imperative, however much they might want to understate the social harm caused,’ while ‘media managers, editors and journalists will strongly disagree that their efforts are essentially in the service of the rich and powerful and systematically against democratic values.’<sup>38</sup> In other words, Corner is stating that the PM assumes there must be a great deal of self-delusion amongst news media professionals for them not to view their business the same way car manufacturers do so. There must be many mechanisms in place to fool journalists into doing the opposite of what they want to do. A criticism of Corner’s criticism of Chomsky’s defence would be that it does not really matter if news media professionals agree or disagree with a certain characterisation of their job, the evidence points that way and so it is that way we must follow. As discussed above, their talk indicates more their expression of an institutional discourse than their ‘real’ thoughts and feelings.

A better example to counter Corner and defend the PM would be to point out that, for example, assembly-line workers at a factory would not talk about their work contributing to climate change and pollution. They simply focus on their next task at hand and not on the larger damage done to the environment from the carbon emissions their vehicles produce. Similarly, potential managers at a car company who worried about such issues would never successfully climb to the top of the business ladder; their concerns for the environment over the profitability of the company would preclude them from being

promoted over those without such qualms. In a similar way, the socialisation processes at news organisations filter out troublesome journalists who never rise to being editors.

Herman notes that the PM 'suggest[s] that the mainstream media, as elite institutions, commonly frame news and allow debate only within the parameters of elite perspectives.'<sup>39</sup> However, Herman does not elaborate on how 'media,' an abstract noun implicating not just 'institutions' but those who work within those institutions, frame events. To say that 'media frame news' is conceptually the same as saying 'plants grow' or 'the sun shines'? Why not say that 'journalists frame news'? That would implicate specific journalistic actors and imbue them alone with the power to frame, and thus be highly inaccurate. Plants grow because those plants that do not grow die and thus cannot perpetuate their genome; journalists that do not frame events 'within the parameters of elite perspectives' are eventually socialised out of journalism and, thus, are no longer journalists. Asserting the position that 'media frame news' seems to remove the actions of the journalists themselves when those institutionally approved actions are what make them part of the mainstream media.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the weaknesses within the PM for dealing with the performance of individual journalists. The inclusion of sociological research on journalists is fully compatible with the PM's argument. Unlike others' critiques, examining the discourse of journalists themselves does not refute the PM; in fact, it can more fully explain media performance. Journalists have to adhere to professional standards and face secondary socialisation when they enter the workplace. This, perhaps, gives the appearance of an ugly and anti-normative 'conspiracy,' yet from many different angles, this is the basic institutional functioning of the news media.

I do not wish to present the newspaper industry as deliberately and cynically working [...] to disseminate official ideology for commercial gain; to mystify the actions and the motive of government and industry; and to discredit opponents and silence the majority. Though these are indeed the goals and effects of the media, they need not be consciously formulated and strategically planned, because their implementation takes place automatically.<sup>40</sup>

Even critical linguists such as Fowler make this basic argument. It is not a matter of conspiracy among journalists, editors, ownership, and outside businesses to present non-capitalist ideas in an inevitably negative light; it is the way the system has been designed by those capitalist media owners to legitimate capitalism, again done through professionalism and secondary socialisation.

Future research from both political-economic and sociological or linguistic perspectives should better incorporate each other's perspectives. For example, my earlier research involved linguistic analysis of media texts to show how foreign policy positions are replicated in the coverage of the Iran nuclear 'crisis'.<sup>41</sup> This involved an analysis of the transitivity of verbs used by American, British, Iranian, and Chinese news texts to illustrate how the PM's concept of 'official enemies,' a notion inculcated in the socialisation of journalists, are expressed. For example:

American and British media [the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*] de-emphasize Western (United States, Israel, European Union) material actions while strongly emphasizing Iranian ones, while *Fars* and the *Tehran Times* underplay Iran's material actions but strongly emphasize those of Western countries.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, my study on applying the PM to Chinese media included sociological research on journalists in China.<sup>43</sup> This helped show how differing political-economic structures are expressed in the discourse of the respective journalists.

By better incorporating a diversity of research, political-economic studies in line with the PM will further bolster their important critical implications. Sociological and linguistic research, similarly, need to feature a firmer political-economic grounding from studies like the PM. This will help give an increased critical edge by connecting how those media structures affect the discourse and practice of journalists.

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