Book Review

Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media

By Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky; New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, 413 pp., $14.50.

With the increased efficiency of mass communication technology there has been enhanced sophistication in its varied utilization. Correspondingly, a few fresher perspectives of mass media analysis have also appeared in recent years.

Wiebe's (1975) *The Segmented Society* offered a sociological interpretation of mass media contents which, according to him, aggravated the growing isolation of individuals from their social organizations. Williams (1982) wrote of serious dangers of the concentrated control of powerful media. In the same year, Berger (1982) dealt with the three types of media analysis techniques from the perspectives of a) structural-functionalist; b) semiological; and c) Marxist. Berger sounded rather casual about the misuse of media by certain individuals or groups. To him it seemed just a matter of varying perspectives to find faults with each other's media systems in the tradition of inter-ideological rivalry among researchers subscribing to the three different schools of thought.

Lowery and DeFleur (1983, 1988) identified the major milestone in the evolution of communication research. In this process, they discovered several instances of misuse of mass media and of media research for commercial and political purposes. But their disapproval of such practices in the American society was relatively mild and subdued. Martin's and Chaudhary's (1983) work seems to be the first comprehensive comparative investigation into mass media systems currently operating in the world. They have compared and contrasted modes of control, goals and roles of media in the Western, Communist, and the Third World nations. In relative terms, Martin and Chaudhary are right in asserting that in the Western world "press freedom belongs primarily to the individual and secondarily to private groups." However, one needs to look deeper to be able to measure the extent to which the individual controls the Western media. It is this research concern that should lead us to a fuller discussion of the book under review here.

Looking into the political economy of information in the global context, Mowlana (1988) justifies the "fear and frustration of Third World nations." He quotes Schiller (1981) to prove his point that the so-called 'free flow' of information does not exist, for "There are 'selectors and controllers' who shift and shape the messages that circulate in society."

Herman and Chomsky have taken this concern to its deeper levels and have greatly succeeded in explaining the myth of "free media" in the United States – a misperception that Martin and Chaudhary have bought into. This exhaustively documented book consists of seven chapters covering 308 pages followed by 105 pages of three appendices, end notes, and the index. The first chapter contains an explanation of their 'propaganda model.' In the next five chapters they have applied this framework to elaborate on how the large business interests of the nation supported by government functionaries and the elite in and outside of media corporations have manipulated the information: in creating "worthy" and "unworthy" victims (chapter 2), in legitimizing and discrediting Third World elections (chapter 3), in disseminating the "free-market disinformation" as objectively reported "news" (chapter 4), in distorting facts about Indochina wars of Vietnam (chapter 5), and of Laos and Cambodia (Chapter 6). In the final chapter (7) they have drawn conclusions by referring back to various assumptions of their propaganda model. The three appendices respectively illustrate: 1) the role of U.S. official observers in Third World elections; b) a case study of media bias in reporting international news; and c) the type of data generated by so-called "independent" research organizations such as "Freedom House." The nine tables can be thematically divided into sub-groups of three each showing: a) financial data on concentrated power of media corporate ownership; b) the pattern of selecting "experts" on terrorism and selective attention lent to "worthy" and "unworthy" victims of state-sponsored terrorism and to defense issues; and c) the criteria of determining fairness and unfairness of elections in Third World nations.

The book clearly shows how people's perception of the fairness and objectivity of the U.S. media is at odds with reality. The most common but fallacious impression within the nation and overseas, according to the authors, is that the U.S. media are "cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous" in search of truth. But in reality, "the underlying consensus largely structures all facets of the news." The market place and economics of publishing or broadcasting, dependent on advertising dollars, dictate almost totally the tune and tone of the media. There is little investigative zeal on the part of most media correspondents or reporters except to the extent that they dare not go against the grain of sponsors, the government, or powerful political action committees and other groups, The impact of these forces is not restricted to merely the agenda setting role, but spans the entire gamut of the political economy of media, a through z.

Herman's and Chomsky's propaganda model contends that it is quite easy for the casual observer of the media to miss the limited nature of free and candid critique of the tight control over the media of corporate America, of the state bureaucracy, and of the dominant elite. This is so because of our conventional expectation about media fairness, which has turned into

a perception and into our conviction that our media are free from any monopolistic influences. The 24 media giants and their personnel have internalized the bottom line philosophy of profitability of the mass media business. Isolated cases of dissent can easily be internalized, marginalized, and/or completely shut off.

The propaganda model spelled out at the very outset of the book explains how this goal of the power behind the media has been accomplished. The essential ingredients of the model are the five interactive and symbiotic filters through which media messages have to pass: a) all pervasive complex patterns of media ownership by profit-oriented forces; b) the inevitable advertising license; c) media survival dependent on specific news sources that in case of dissent can starve the media of news; d) "flak" from these powers and their client groups; and e) anti-communism used as a control mechanism. A portion from the last chapter (conclusions) captures the essential thesis of the book:

> Given the imperatives of corporate organization and the working 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. The media are indeed free, for those who adopt the principles required for their "societal purpose."

Herman and Chomsky have already established themselves worldwide as authentic voices of moderation and fairness through their earlier works. The volume under review clearly reinforces this well-deserved impression. The fact that the U.S. media are not free or objective is not at all revealing to anyone familiar with international affairs. The misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the Western media in general and in the U.S. media in particular leaves little doubt in an honest mind about the obvious difference between perception and reality. However, the real strength of the book lies in comprehensive data and the profusely documented examples it offers. The Muslim reader may wish Herman and Chomsky would also choose more examples to illustrate how the U.S. media have kowtowed to pressures inimical to Islam on various occasions by design or by ignorance. The authors have tried to defend themselves against the "conservative" charge of "conspiracy theory" which states that the liberal elites and politicians habitually accuse the military-industrial complex of involvement in the control of media and of the government decision-making process. Instead, they assert that they have adopted the free-market analysis perspective. The data furnished in the

book amply bear them out. However, this may not be true across the board. The free-market analysis perspective tends to absolve of individual responsibility those media personnel who ought to know much better in case they choose to cover issues related to Islam and Muslims.

References

Berger, A. *Media Analysis Techniques*. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1982).

Lowery, S. and DeFleur, M. *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*. (New York: Longman, 1987).

Martin, L. and Chaudhary, A. *Comparative Mass Media Sytstems*. (White Plains, NY: Longman, Inc., 1983), p. 23.

Mowlana, H. *Global Information and World Communication*. (NY: Longman, 1988), p. 105.

Schiller, I. Quoted in *Global Information and World Communication* by H. Mowlana. (NY: Longman, 1988).

Wiebe, R. *The Segmented Society—An Introduction to the Meaning of America*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 7.

Williams, F. *The Communication Revolution*. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1982), pp. 1985-199.

Dilnawaz A. Siddiqui
Professor of Communication
Clarion Univ. of Penn.
Clarion, PA