

Too polemical or too critical? Chomsky on the study of the news media and US foreign policy

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Abstract. Noam Chomsky argues that, while the US news media are adversarial towards the US government on foreign policy, institutional filters operate to ensure that the criticisms made generally stay within narrow bounds set by the US political elite. Chomsky's research in this area is largely ignored even by academics who agree with this conclusion. The institutional tendency to filter out anti-elite perspectives applies not only to the news media but also to academia. Consequently, Chomsky's work is marginalised due to its emphasis on corporate power, principled opposition to US foreign policy and the role of academia in buttressing elite power.

Over the last forty years, Noam Chomsky's views on US foreign policy and the role of the US news media in manufacturing consent for it have earned him a minority following among the public, journalists and academics within and beyond the United States. However, sometimes the comments on his actual or alleged views are vitriolic. For example, following Chomsky's posting on the internet of his assessment of the meaning of the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington,¹ Mackrubin T. Owens, Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island stated that:

it is not an exaggeration to say that the terrorists who planned and executed the attacks of 11 September were merely expressing in more refined form the same anti-Americanism that has been a staple of the American university for three decades. The ravings of Osama Bin Laden and those of Noam Chomsky are interchangeable.²

Often the criticism is of views that he does not actually hold. For example, he is routinely labelled a conspiracy theorist despite the fact that he explicitly rejects that mode of analysis.³ The inapplicability of that label will become apparent below. It

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¹ Noam Chomsky, 'On the Bombings', no date. <<http://www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm>>

² Quoted in Nick Cohen, 'Why It is Right to be Anti-American', *The New Statesman*, 14 January 2002, p. 10.

³ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. xii. See also the edited interviews in Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel (eds.), *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 348–51.

also tends to be assumed that his view is that the news media have a right-wing bias and are non-adversarial.⁴ His view is actually that it is nothing to do with right- or left-wing bias: instead, there tends to be a liberal and adversarial bias in the media which serves the crucial function of setting the boundary of critical thought, with the truth about US foreign policy actually being located outside of that boundary. The more that the media appear liberal and adversarial, the better they will function in setting the boundaries of the thinkable. While misinterpretation of anyone's work can occur, the misinterpretations of Chomsky's work show a systematic pattern of being driven by the ideological frame of reference of those doing the misinterpreting. Even when misinterpretations are pointed out, that frame of reference can make it impossible for the interlocutor to grasp what Chomsky is saying.

Most commonly, Chomsky is not denounced, misinterpreted or engaged with. He is simply ignored. In this article we illustrate this in relation to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's work published in 1988 on the media and US foreign policy titled *Manufacturing Consent*.⁵ It is important to note at the outset that this article is not about the rights or wrongs of either Chomsky's media-foreign policy analysis or his broader critique of US foreign policy. Rather the article critiques the marginalisation of a legitimate research agenda that deserves scholarly attention and debate. Chomsky's analysis of the media-foreign policy relationship represents a central plank of his broader critique of power in Western society and the way in which key institutions, such as the media, reinforce elite interests in society. Whilst the work is co-authored with a major communications scholar, Chomsky's views on the US media, as expressed in *Manufacturing Consent*, are a regular feature of his work: he often critiques the US media in his written texts and has been the subject of television documentaries and interviews on this subject. However, *Manufacturing Consent* represents his formal statement on US media-elite relations. It contains a well-developed theory of media-elite relations and a large quantity of empirical case-study testing. Also the media-foreign policy relationship is a subject area that has commanded significant attention from political communications scholars. As such Chomsky's media-foreign policy analysis provides a specific and clearly defined reference point against which to assess responses to his work.

In this article we show that *Manufacturing Consent* has been ignored by leading US academics working on the relationship between the media and US foreign policy. We argue that it cannot be the case that this work has been ignored by them because they disagree with the general thrust of its analysis of media-political elite relations. Their understanding of news media and its relationship to US foreign policy is in many ways the same as that of Herman and Chomsky. The standard liberal myth of the news media in the West – that it is independent of elite interests and provides the people with the information necessary to ensure that they can hold elites and in particular governments to democratic account – is rejected widely by academics who study the news media and US foreign policy, although this self-image is routine amongst most journalists. In contrast, the most common and empirically substantiated perspective is that, with respect to coverage of US foreign policy, on balance,

⁴ For this misinterpretation of Chomsky, see Andrew Marr's comments in his televised BBC interview with Chomsky, *The Big Idea*, British Broadcasting Corporation, February 1996. Unofficial transcript at <<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/interviews/9602-big-idea.html>>

⁵ Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

the US media serve elite interests and undermine democracy. The media do this by portraying the world in a way that tends to shape the perspective of those entering the political elite, generate public consent for or at least acquiescence to US foreign policy and make it difficult for the public to have access to information necessary to challenge the interests of the elite. This is seen to operate less through censorship than through a recruitment process that selects and rewards those who see the world in a way congenial and unchallenging to those elite interests. Uncongenial facts and framings usually do not have to be censored because they are mostly not even perceived to exist. Herman and Chomsky point out that the title *Manufacturing Consent* is actually a quote from mainstream author Walter Lippmann who saw this relationship as natural and proper.⁶

Having outlined the general issues, our article now proceeds in the following steps to explain the marginalisation of the work of Herman and Chomsky and why it matters. First, we outline Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model. Second, we demonstrate its overlap with that of two influential critical analyses of the relationship between the media and US foreign policy by Lance Bennett and Daniel Hallin. Bennett provides an analysis of the everyday operation of journalism while Hallin considers what might be an exception to that pattern. Third, we show that, subsequently, eight significant studies in the same field and written from a similar perspective draw on Bennett and Hallin but not Herman and Chomsky. Fourth, we consider but reject a personal explanation of this marginalisation and offer instead an institutional explanation. We argue that the model used by US academia to explain the media's subservience to the perspective of the US political elite is broadly applicable to the operation of US academia itself. It has internalised a myth of objective academia while remaining silent on the role of the media in serving not merely political elite interests but also corporate elite interests in the shaping of coverage of US foreign policy. Furthermore, it has failed to provide space for questioning the legitimacy of US foreign policy. In what is an unusual but necessary move, we show that our own previous work suffered from many of the flaws we have identified in the work of others. Finally, through a consideration of Chomsky's critique, we discuss what is necessary to remedy those flaws.

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky set out their propaganda model. It explains why the agenda and framing of news reports on US foreign policy rarely deviate from those set by US corporate and political elites. Five filters function to shape news media output, which we label in turn the corporate, advertising, sourcing, flak and ideological filter. First, the 'size, ownership and profit orientation of mass media' and their shared 'common interests . . . with other major corporations, banks, and government' creates a clash of interest between the media's supposed role as a watchdog of the elite and the interests of that elite.⁷ Conse-

⁶ Ibid., p. xi; Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1921); Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 16.

⁷ Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, pp. 3, 14.

quently, news stories that run contrary to those vested interests are, on balance, less likely to surface than those consistent with the world view of major corporate conglomerates. Second, media reliance on advertising revenue introduces a further constraining link between the news media and the interests of commerce. This reliance shapes media output in order to appeal to affluent audiences, in whom the advertisers are most interested. It also limits the amount of critical and controversial programming because advertisers generally want ‘to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the “buying mood”’.⁸ Hence, money does not only talk: it also silences. Third, journalists rely overwhelmingly on elite sources when constructing the news. The need to supply a steady and rapid flow of ‘important’ news stories combined with the vast public relations apparatus of government and powerful interests more broadly means that journalists tend to become heavily reliant on public officials and corporate representatives when defining and framing the news agenda. Fourth, whenever controversial material is actually aired it generates a disproportionate degree of ‘flak’ from individuals connected with powerful interests including ‘corporate community sponsored . . . institutions’⁹ such as the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Accuracy in Media (AIM) and government ‘spin doctors’.¹⁰ Such criticism serves to caution editors and journalists against putting out news stories that are ‘too’ controversial. Finally, Herman and Chomsky highlight the importance of an ideology of ‘anti-communism as a control mechanism’ that provided journalists, at least during the Cold War, with a ready made template with which to ‘understand’ global events, and provided the political elite with a powerful rhetorical tool with which to criticise as unpatriotic anyone who questioned US foreign policy.¹¹ Whilst there may be grounds for questioning the specific content of this filter following the collapse of most Communist states and the internal transformation in the direction of capitalism of many of those that remain, alternative ideological mechanisms, such as the current ‘war on terrorism’ have broadly the same effect upon news output. Moreover, Herman and Chomsky make clear in the second edition of *Manufacturing Consent* that ‘anti-communism’ was part of a broader agenda of free market rhetoric, US economic access and massive state subsidies to private corporations.¹² It involved a much more general opposition to any challenge to elite interests and US economic penetration of any state be it of the left or right. Hence this ideological filter continues to be relevant to US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.

The marginalisation of Herman and Chomsky

As we indicated earlier, the propaganda model shares many similarities with the influential analyses of the media and US foreign policy by Bennett and Hallin.¹³ We

⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹² Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 2001, pp. vii-viii.

¹³ Daniel C. Hallin, *The ‘Uncensored War’: The Media and Vietnam* (London: University of California Press, 1986); Lance W. Bennett, ‘Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States’, *Journal of Communication*, 40:2 (1990), pp.103–25.

now map out those similarities and then examine the divergent attitudes in subsequent scholarship to these studies. Bennett uses the label 'indexing norm' to refer to the journalistic routine of relying upon political elites when defining and framing the news agenda. He argues that:

the presence of an 'indexing norm' shared at all levels of the news industry would keep the news compatible with the shifting political and economic interests of the state while enabling managers and directors to think and communicate in a relatively benign vocabulary of press responsibility and balanced journalism.¹⁴

He concentrates on what is effectively the sourcing filter of the propaganda model in maintaining that journalists fall back on the vast volume of public relations material disseminated by government in order to generate a steady and rapid supply of stories.¹⁵ According to Bennett, the indexing hypothesis 'constitutes a quick and easy guide for editors and reporters to use in deciding how to cover a story. It is a rule of thumb that can be defended against questions from uneasy corporate managers and concerned citizens alike'.¹⁶ In applying the indexing hypothesis to media coverage of US policy on Nicaragua during the 1980s, when Congress investigated covert Central Intelligence Agency operations against that country's Sandinista government, Bennett finds that news coverage failed to present criticisms of official viewpoints.¹⁷ He concludes:

the media have helped create a political world that is, culturally speaking, upside-down. It is a world in which governments are able to define their own publics and where 'democracy' becomes whatever the government ends up doing.¹⁸

The belief is widespread that US media coverage during the Vietnam War departed from the picture painted by Bennett and was oppositional to the US political elite during the war. However, Hallin's central finding in *The 'Uncensored War'* is that media coverage initially reflected the consensus among the US political elite and then reflected the debates within it when it was divided over whether or not the war could be won at a cost it was prepared to pay. Hence the event probably most cited as a case of news media influence on government actually turns out to be a case of political elites becoming divided over policy with critical news coverage merely being a reflection of this. Hallin concludes, consistent with Herman and Chomsky, that the US media rarely produce coverage deviating from the range of views expressed in Washington.

The deference of US journalists to the US political elite is seen by Hallin to have been driven by two factors. The first was the ideology of the Cold War (that is, the ideological filter of the propaganda model). The second was the notion of 'objective' journalism (which is treated by Herman and Chomsky as a product of the operation of the five filters of the propaganda model).¹⁹ According to Hallin, the 'ideological system' and 'myth' of 'objective' journalism developed as a way of legitimising the

¹⁴ Bennett, 'Press-State Relations', p. 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 2.

news media in the face of ever increasing concentration of the media industry.²⁰ When there existed a large number of newspapers, partisan and adversarial news could be justified because of the plurality of viewpoints expressed in a supposed free market of ideas. With the increasingly concentrated media industry, the number of independent newspapers declined and so did the plurality of viewpoints expressed. In order to defend themselves against charges of political bias, journalists adopted the concept of objective journalism whereby:

the journalist's basic task is to 'present facts', to tell what happened, not to pass judgement on it. Opinion should be clearly separated from the presentation of news . . . News coverage of any political controversy should be impartial, representing without favour the positions of all the contending parties . . .²¹

According to Hallin, the unintended consequence of 'objective' journalism was that, because journalists were meant to simply gather the political 'facts' from which to construct the news, those with political authority 'were guaranteed access to all the major media – and protected against "irresponsible" attack – by virtue of their position, not their particular party or politics'.²² The result was a tightening of the link between journalists and the state and increased power for government officials to influence the news through both agenda setting and framing of issues. 'Objective' journalism, in short, led to a loss of a critical edge on the part of journalists.

An examination of eight significant academic works on the media and US foreign policy shows that they only cite Hallin and/or Bennett, but not Herman and Chomsky, despite offering arguments and conclusions that overlap heavily with those of Herman and Chomsky.²³ For example, Jonathan Mermin's 1999 work on US media deference to official policy regarding post-Vietnam US interventions; John Zaller and Dennis Chui's research on US press coverage of foreign crises between 1945 and 1991; Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus's 1995 study of US intervention in Somalia; the 1996 work of Scott Althaus *et al.* on the US media and the 1985–86 Libya crisis; Mikhail Alexseev and Bennett's 1995 work on press-state relations in the US, UK and Russia; and the work of Philip Powlick and Andrew Katz on US public opinion, media coverage and elite debate, all attempt to either

²⁰ Hallin, *The 'Uncensored War'*, pp. 63–70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²³ The eight works selected as 'significant' are research-based analyses of the media and US foreign policy by academics published either as books by major publishers or articles in major journals. The works are Mikhail A. Alexseev and W. Lance Bennett, 'For Whom the Gates Open – News Reporting and Government Source Patterns in the United States, Great Britain, and Russia', *Political Communication*, 12:4 (1995), pp. 395–412; Scott L. Althaus, Jill A. Edy, Robert M. Entman and Patricia Phalen, 'Revising the Indexing Hypothesis: Officials, Media, and the Libya Crisis', *Political Communication*, 13:4 (1996), pp. 407–21; W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (eds.), *Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus, 'Humanitarian Crises and US Foreign Policy', *Political Communication*, 12 (1995), pp. 413–29; Jonathan Mermin, *Debating War and Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Philip J. Powlick and Andrew Z. Katz, 'Defining the American Public Opinion Foreign Policy Nexus', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42 (1998), pp. 29–61; Gadi Wolfsfeld, *The Media and Political Conflict: News From the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John Zaller and Dennis Chui, 'Government's Little Helper: US Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1991', *Political Communication*, 13 (1996), pp. 385–405.

draw upon or refine Bennett's indexing hypothesis. More importantly, whilst some of the studies attempt to show greater media autonomy from government than suggested by Bennett (1990), all demonstrate the general tendency of news coverage to fit within the boundaries of elite debate. For example, Zaller and Chiu argue that 'the single most important rule was that reporters, as Lance Bennett has maintained, tended to "index" their coverage to reflect the range of views that exists within the government'²⁴ whilst Powlick and Katz state that media coverage of foreign policy is 'usually demonstrated by elite debate' and that 'typically, the media present positions articulated by government officials'.²⁵ Despite the similarity between these claims and those of Herman and Chomsky, and the parallels between Bennett (1990) and Chomsky and Herman (1988), none of the works mention *Manufacturing Consent* once.

The studies by Mermin and by Wolfsfeld and the edited collection *Taken by Storm* on media and the 1991 Gulf War are even more striking for their failure to cite *Manufacturing Consent*. Starting with Mermin's 1999 work on post-Vietnam US interventions, he concludes:

In their coverage of US intervention in the post-Vietnam era, the *New York Times*, *World News Tonight*, and the *MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour* have made no independent contribution (except at the margins) to foreign policy debate in the United States. The spectrum of debate in Washington, instead, has determined the spectrum of debate in the news.²⁶

In constructing his argument he makes extensive reference to the 'powerful incentives – pertaining to the need to conserve time, money, and credibility – that encourage reporters to base their stories on the statements of official sources',²⁷ the sourcing filter of the propaganda model. Also Mermin contrasts Bennett's focus on Nicaragua and Hallin's focus on Vietnam with his own comparison of eight cases of US military intervention: *Manufacturing Consent* provides extensive comparative case studies not only of US military interventions but also US policy towards elections and human rights violations abroad and yet Mermin makes no reference to this work. Wolfsfeld's *Media and Political Conflict* offers a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between media and elites and non-elites.²⁸ Whilst the study is concerned with identifying the precise conditions under which non-elites can secure favourable media coverage the study works with the assumption that political elites hold, all things being equal, considerable power over the mass media. He writes:

The political process is more likely to have an influence on the news media than the news media are on the political process. The political process has a major impact on the press because political power can usually be translated into power over the news media, because the political culture of a society has a major influence on how the news media cover conflicts, because the news media are much more likely to react to political events than to initiate them . . . and because political decisions have a major influence on who owns the media and how they operate.²⁹

²⁴ Zaller and Chui, 'Government's Little Helper', p. 385.

²⁵ Powlick and Katz, 'Defining the American Public Opinion Foreign Policy Nexus', p. 29.

²⁶ Mermin, *Debating War and Peace*, p. 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁸ For an overview of this work, see Robinson, 'Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics', *European Journal of Communication*, 16:4 (2001), pp. 538–41.

²⁹ Wolfsfeld, *Media and Political Conflict*, p. 3.

Again, despite the consistency between Wolfsfeld's starting assumption regarding political elites' influence over the media with *Manufacturing Consent*, no mention is made of the work of Herman and Chomsky. Finally, Bennett and Paletz's edited collection *Taken by Storm*, in which only one chapter references *Manufacturing Consent* whilst four reference Hallin (1986) and five reference Bennett (1990), is replete with chapters highlighting the failures of media coverage to offer substantive criticism or investigation of official policy during the 1991 Gulf War. In the concluding chapter Paletz writes with respect to media coverage during the war:

Insufficient dedication to the freedom of the press, fear of provoking governmental outrage [the flak filter of the propaganda model], shared frames of reference with governing elites [the ideological filter of the propaganda model], and the pursuit of sales and ratings [the advertising filter of the propaganda model] are among the factors that can help explain the acquiescence to government curbs, no matter how reluctant, of media executives.³⁰

Paletz also goes on to note that 'These explanations all transcend the specific context of the war and apply generally to the media-foreign policy relationship.'³¹

A few of the scholars surveyed have criticised the propaganda model in various respects, such as claiming (but without providing any supporting evidence) that it is simplistic or deterministic.³² Herman and Chomsky make it clear that they claim neither that the propaganda model accounts 'for every detail of such a complex matter as the working of the national mass media'³³ nor that the system is 'all-powerful' in terms of influencing public opinion.³⁴ They also make clear that, especially during periods of elite dissensus, non-elites can secure victories in terms of influencing the media agenda.³⁵ Rather, the model provides an initial identification of the key forces that function to shape news output. As such, the claims put forward in the propaganda model are, in terms of much scholarship on the media and politics, basically uncontroversial, even among the scholars criticising it. For example, Golding and Murdoch, in discussing the work of Herman and Chomsky, acknowledge that 'government and business elites do have privileged access to the news; large advertisers do operate as a latter-day licensing authority . . . and media proprietors can determine the editorial line . . . of the papers and broadcast stations they own'.³⁶ Also Hallin agrees that 'there is plenty of evidence that these [filters] do indeed limit the openness of the media.'³⁷ While stating he did not share 'the same analysis as Herman and Chomsky', Hallin agreed that he was in 'the same camp, politically and also analytically in the sense that [he] belong[ed] to the broad current of critical revisionism . . . which rejects the idea that the media are a neutral "fourth estate" and sees them as part of a system of power'.³⁸ The few, unsubstantiated

³⁰ Paletz, 'Just Deserts' in *Taken by Storm*, p. 284.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 13, and Peter Golding and Graham Murdoch, 'Culture, Communications and Political Economy' in *Mass Media and Society* (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 11–30. For a rebuttal of the various criticisms, see Edward Herman, 'The Propaganda Model: A Retrospective', *Journalism Studies*, 1:1 (2000), pp. 101–12.

³³ Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 304.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³⁵ Herman, 'Propaganda Model', pp. 103–4.

³⁶ Golding, Murdoch, 'Culture, Communications and Political Economy', p. 15.

³⁷ Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, p. 13.

³⁸ Correspondence, Hallin to Robinson, 12 July 2002.

criticisms of the propaganda model which have been offered do not indicate disagreement with the basic elements of the model or the conclusions about the role of the US media in relation to US foreign policy reached by Herman and Chomsky. Hence it is crucial to note that the refusal to engage seriously with the propaganda model cannot be explained by the criticisms those surveyed have offered of it, even if those criticisms were persuasive. Considering the similarities in analysis, the obvious question arises: why are Herman and Chomsky marginalised?

Explaining the marginalisation of Herman and Chomsky

Perhaps some of the authors we discuss are unaware of the existence of Herman and Chomsky's book, despite the fact that it has almost certainly vastly outsold that of Hallin.³⁹ Perhaps editors and colleagues have discouraged them from engaging with it or even citing it. Perhaps they know the ferocious hostility that can be directed at Chomsky and worry about being treated the same way. Perhaps they see his output as polemical and not really academic. Perhaps they only pay attention to scholars on the same conference circuit or who contribute to the same journals. From various quarters at various times we have heard all of these reasons. Mainstream explanations of the marginalisation of Herman and Chomsky, to the extent that they exist at all, either involve the sort of unsupported assertions about their analysis discussed above or are anecdotal and at a personal level. Over a number of years we have experienced, *via* reviewer comments, editorial direction and personal correspondence, the difficulty of taking seriously Chomsky's work in particular. We have even experienced (and refused to comply with) explicit requests to remove all references to his work from manuscripts: these have even been made by those who say that they agree with Chomsky but were concerned to protect us from the costs of being associated with him. On one occasion, it was suggested that, even though a manuscript written by one of us indicated concurrence with Chomsky's analysis on a particular issue, references to Chomsky should remain in the manuscript only when disagreement with Chomsky was being registered. The point was made that an argument would be dismissed merely for having Chomsky's name attached to it, whereas if it had a mainstream big name as the source, it would be applauded for its great wisdom.

The most common argument is that Chomsky has a polemical style, not in the sense that all scholarship is polemical (that is, aimed at implicit or explicit refutation of a particular position) but in a pejorative sense (that is, making an argument in a way which disregards the rules of scholarship). The irony is that this claim is itself polemical because evidence beyond the odd isolated quote is not provided. A particular phrase or claim is latched onto (such as the use of the phrase 'propaganda model' rather than, say, the supposedly more neutral 'indexing norm') and serves as an excuse not to engage with any of Chomsky's enormous output. For a long time, we both assumed that the assertions about Chomsky's work being polemical were

³⁹ One indication is that, in July 2002, *Manufacturing Consent* had an impressive Amazon sales ranking of 2,541 whereas the ranking of *The 'Uncensored War'* was only 131,713.

true, and we did not ‘waste our time’ reading his work. Since then, we have been unable to uncover a single academic study which demonstrates this claim.⁴⁰ Even if polemic is not entirely absent from his work, whose is? More directly relevant to this article, *Manufacturing Consent* adheres to familiar scholarly standards throughout. Far from Chomsky’s polemical style being the reason for the marginalisation of this study, the whole issue is a trivial flak-driven myth that serves the non-trivial ideological function of preventing people from reading his work and thinking about his arguments. It is one of the strengths of the propaganda model that precisely this situation is predicted and accounted for by the flak filter. Because his negative normative judgements on the exercise of elite power are so out of line with the mainstream position, it seems to be presumed that those judgements are inherently polemical whereas positive normative judgements on the exercise of elite power are treated as true.

The point is that institutions work to exclude anti-elite analysis through the various filters of the propaganda model. US academia is very strongly disciplined by the operation of the filters outlined in the propaganda model, although, of course, there are significant differences in the specifics of how they operate. US universities have for a long time been integrated into the US corporate-government nexus (the corporate filter), and this integration is deepening. This manifests itself in many ways: business people are on the board of trustees of most US universities; one of the main functions of US universities is to produce graduates who are useful to the state and to business; US university research is heavily dependent on funding from the state, corporations and foundations which have their origins in corporate profit; and there is a revolving door of personnel between the universities, corporations and the state.⁴¹ While the advertising filter is less relevant as it is not nearly so important in terms of directly bringing in money, it does still count in US universities. As part of the payoff for funding academic research, corporations receive on-campus advertising, and this visibility helps provide a reminder of whose hand should not be bitten. The sourcing filter will not matter to those US academics whose data are gathered from academic or news publications. However, it will be extremely important to those who conduct elite interviews to gather data: they will not want access to those sources to be cut off. As the universities are so heavily geared towards the needs of the US elite (in other words, as other filters are so effective), direct disciplining of them *via* the flak filter is not usually necessary. Nevertheless, US universities are frequently represented by organisations such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) as unpatriotic hotbeds of extreme opposition to the US government.⁴² Finally, the filter of anti-communism defined broadly or other ideological filters such as the idea of objective academia and patriotism play an important role. US universities were extensively engaged in assisting in the ‘fight against

⁴⁰ For various non-academic critiques of Chomsky’s work as polemical, see the Leftwatch website <http://www.leftwatch.com/FAQ/People/noam_chomsky.html>

⁴¹ Noam Chomsky, ‘The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis’, ch. 4 of his *Reasons of State* (London: Fontana, 1973); Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997). See also notes 59 and 65.

⁴² ACTA was founded by Lynne Cheney, married to Vice President Richard Cheney, and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman is among those associated with it. Patrick Healey, ‘On Campus Conservatives Denounce Dissent’, *The Boston Globe*, 13 November 2001. <<http://www.boston.com/globe>>; American Council of Trustees and Alumni <<http://www.goacta.org/>>

Communism' during the Cold War and continue to mostly operate within a US elite ideological framework.⁴³ The net result of these filters is that an ideological boundary operates within academia so as to minimise fundamental criticisms of elite power. Of the authors surveyed here, Bennett and Hallin operate at the margins of acceptability and as such are readily cited as we have seen. Indeed, Bennett felt that he was 'just inside and Chomsky just outside of' the 'range of academic acceptability'.⁴⁴ Chomsky's analysis falls outside this boundary and, consequently, remains marginalised. Awareness of such an ideological boundary operating within academia was also alluded to by John Zaller. He acknowledged the importance of ideology in creating an academic environment in which 'most American social scientists are moderate/centrist in their personal views, which makes us reluctant to structure our arguments in terms of a book as non-centrist as *Manufacturing Consent* seems to be'.⁴⁵ The argument that anti-elite analysis has been filtered out of much of US academic research on the media and US foreign policy is given further credence by the heavily circumscribed nature of the analysis offered by it. This manifests itself in three related ways, which we examine below.

The first manifestation of the truncated agenda of the mainstream is its lack of interest in the implications for news coverage of the concept at the heart of corporate capitalism, namely, profit, and the primary means of securing it, namely, advertising. Hallin mentions the notion of 'corporate capitalism' and portrays journalists as being integrated into it, but does not comment further.⁴⁶ Mermin makes the following statement:

One powerful interest that has a major stake in U.S. foreign policy and does have access to the news is business. But business, as a rule, has found U.S. foreign policy to be quite consistent with its interests. In the Cold War, Washington supported anti-Communists against Communists – real and imagined – the anti-Communists being the side more interested in economic engagement with the United States in terms favorable to American business. In the post-Cold War era, a major organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy has been to secure investment opportunities, market access, and oil for American business. The objectives of U.S. foreign policy therefore continue to match the interests of American business.⁴⁷

Mermin makes these observations in the context of an explanation of why journalists will not find business to be a source of fundamentally (as opposed to tactically) critical comment on US foreign policy. However he only briefly considers, in order to reject out of hand,⁴⁸ the question begged by his analysis as to whether the location of the US news media within major corporate conglomerates and their dependence on advertising revenue have affected media output on US foreign policy (the corporate and advertising filters of the propaganda model). In contrast, these issues form central parts of the analysis of Herman and Chomsky. This is signalled in the subtitle of *Manufacturing Consent*, which is *The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

⁴³ See notes 41, 59 and 65.

⁴⁴ Correspondence Bennett to Robinson, 12 July 2002.

⁴⁵ Correspondence Zaller to Robinson, 30 July 2002.

⁴⁶ Hallin, *The 'Uncensored War'*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ Mermin, *Debating War and Peace*, pp. 28–9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–150.

The second dimension of the narrowly drawn nature of mainstream analysis is that it fails to give serious consideration to fundamental, principled opposition to US foreign policy or the role of the media in marginalising such opposition. Herman and Chomsky document extensively and denounce US foreign policy for ‘support for terrorist states’ and ‘murderous aggression’ in Central America and South-East Asia; for having ‘actually subverted or approved the subversion of democracy’ in Latin America and for slaughtering ‘hundreds of thousands of Cambodians . . . in the course of a major war crime’.⁴⁹ The closest any of the authors comes to this is Hallin. He points out that some in the United States came to see the US war in Vietnam ‘as an aggressive war motivated by power, comparable to the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia’. He notes that ‘during the Vietnam War issues of this sort were simply not on the news agenda. Never, for example, did I hear an American utter the word *imperialism* on television’.⁵⁰ However, he mentions this perspective only in one brief passage, and indicates that his own comparatively mild view is that the war was not winnable at acceptable cost, the United States did not have any national interest at stake, and the people of Vietnam were worse off as a result.⁵¹ A similarly sanguine conclusion is reached by Hallin when he concludes that the bad old days of US media coverage of Vietnam have been replaced with a supposedly more open debate on Vietnam and on post-Cold War US foreign policy in Central America.⁵² Elaborating upon this claim in his more recent work Hallin argues that:

there was a real political contest over the framing of the Central America story. This is not a case that can be easily assimilated to a model of the media that see them essentially as a tool of a unified ruling elite (Herman and Chomsky’s ‘propaganda model’ is close to this view).⁵³

Yet this is despite Hallin’s analysis regarding Central America appearing consistent with that of Herman and Chomsky when he writes:

When we look at the broad trends in the development of the story, moreover, it is clear (1) that these were shaped primarily by the terms of political debate in Washington, and (2) that the administration was able more often than not to prevail in the battle to determine the dominant frame of television coverage.⁵⁴

Moreover, as Herman points out, ‘Hallin mentions a “nascent alternative perspective” in reporting on El Salvador – a “human rights” framework – that “never caught hold”’.⁵⁵ This human rights framework would have offered the basis of a more substantive critique of the fundamental legitimacy of US foreign policy in Central America and yet the failure of US media to adopt such a framework is largely ignored and left unexplained by Hallin’s analysis. Hence, whilst Herman and Chomsky are able to develop a thoroughgoing critique of the role of the US media in US foreign policy, Hallin’s analysis remains circumscribed despite its empirical consistency with *Manufacturing Consent*.

⁴⁹ Herman, Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, pp. xiii, xv.

⁵⁰ Hallin, *The ‘Uncensored War’*, pp. 207–8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵² Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, pp. 58–86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Herman, ‘Propaganda Model’, p. 106.

As far as journalists' reliance on official sources is concerned, Bennett does not see it as problematic *per se*. He claims that this is consistent with the press 'acting in a democratically responsible fashion by favouring the views of public officials – who are, after all, representatives of the people'.⁵⁶ He takes the normative position that 'indexing' is problematic only when:

the range of official debate on a given topic excludes or 'marginalizes' stable majority opinion in society, and . . . official actions raise doubts about political propriety. In these 'exceptional' circumstances, it is reasonable for the press to foreground other social voices . . . in news stories and editorials as checks against unrepresentative or otherwise irresponsible governments.⁵⁷

Bennett reflects a classic mainstream normative position: government (and more broadly elite) manufacture of consent is only a problem in exceptional, corrupt circumstances. Bennett defended his analysis by arguing that he had set a low standard for the press watchdog role, that is, expecting an adversarial press when government was corrupt or ignored public opinion, and that finding the press still deferred to elites even when these circumstances prevailed highlighted the inadequacy of the US media in terms of fulfilling its democratic function.⁵⁸ In doing so, however, Bennett shifts intellectual enquiry away from a critique (as offered by Herman and Chomsky) of media subservience to political elites that occurs most of the time, and onto exceptional circumstances. As such, his work becomes more acceptable to the mainstream who perceive media deference to elites as generally acceptable.

The third area that US mainstream academics fail to consider seriously is their own relationship to elite power.⁵⁹ They concede readily – indeed document extensively – the subordination of US journalism to US foreign policy elites. Yet they do not consider the possibility that the propaganda model (or, to be more precise, a version modified to take into account the differences between academia and the media) could apply to academia. Nor do they provide an account of how their sector of US academia has insulated itself successfully from the forces that influence US journalism. According to Mermin: 'The job of the academic is to observe and comment on events from a vantage point independent of government and politics'.⁶⁰ His recommendation that, '[f]or a perspective independent of government, journalists could interview foreign-policy experts at universities', indicates that he thinks that academics do fulfil that role.⁶¹ This is basically the same ideology of objectivity that Hallin has shown to be unfounded in the case of journalists. Mermin concludes that US academics are more willing than journalists to examine not merely the 'execution and outcome of government policies and the political implications for the president,

⁵⁶ Bennett, 'Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States', p. 103.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Correspondence, Bennett to Robinson, 12 July 2002.

⁵⁹ Chomsky has from the outset been engaged in a broader critique of US intellectual culture. His classic piece on this subject was published in 1967, and this issue has been a prominent part of his output ever since. See Chomsky, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February 1967 <http://monkeyfist.com/ChomskyArchive/essays/roi_html> reproduced as a chapter in his book *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1969). See also the items in notes 41 and 65.

⁶⁰ Mermin, *Debating War and Peace*, p. 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

but also . . . the wisdom and justification of the decisions that set those policies'.⁶² However, the critical comments he refers to in his study came from only a minority of academics and more importantly appear to have generally excluded challenges to the assumption that US foreign policy is fundamentally benign or legitimate.

The fact that academics can fail to grasp what Herman and Chomsky have actually written due to this narrowing of perspective can be seen in our own previous attempts at engaging with their work. A paper by Herring on the war in Bosnia explicitly sought to apply the perspective of Herman and Chomsky.⁶³ However, it said nothing about corporate power or about the relationship between academia and elite power. Nor did Robinson's study on the CNN effect and intervention during humanitarian crisis.⁶⁴ Although Herring's study involved a normative critique of British government policy towards Bosnia, that of Robinson did not have such an engagement with normative issues. It is quite sobering to realise the extent to which we both missed key elements of Herman and Chomsky's work while believing that we were taking it seriously. Gaining a better understanding of how this could occur and what needs to be done is the focus of our conclusion.

Conclusion: beyond the marginalisation of Herman and Chomsky

In this article we have demonstrated both the overlap of the analysis of Herman and Chomsky with that of critical academics who study the news media and US foreign policy and the marginalisation of the work of Herman and Chomsky by those critical academics. Our explanation involves applying to critical academia broadly the same institutional model which critical academia sees as providing an explanation of media subservience to US elite perspectives on US foreign policy. What is sauce for the journalistic goose is sauce for the academic gander. As predicted by the propaganda model, this is not a line of thinking that has developed even within critical US academia. Just as journalists have mostly internalised the liberal myth of the objective media, so such academics have mostly internalised the liberal myth of objective academia. Herman and Chomsky's view is not read, understood and then rejected: it is simply made incomprehensible or invisible by ideology due to their conception of an integrated political and corporate elite; of the subordination of academia as well as the media to that elite; and of that elite and that subordination as being fundamentally illegitimate due to their hostility to the interests of ordinary people within and beyond the United States. The normative and activist position of Herman and Chomsky is beyond the bounds of that sanctioned by the US elite. They condemn media and academic subservience to elite interests, they work to expose it to the mass public, and they argue that it is the duty of academics to assist

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 57–8, 65, 85.

⁶³ Eric Herring, 'An Uneven Killing Field: The Manufacture of Consent for the Arms Embargo on Bosnia-Herzegovnia', in Malcolm D. Evans (ed.), *Aspects of Statehood and Institutionalism in Contemporary Europe* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1997), pp. 159–82.

⁶⁴ Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002).

those who are organising to end that subservience. This does mean that there is no space whatsoever for scholarship which critiques corporate power, opposes much of US foreign policy on grounds of principle or is predicated on challenging the liberal myth of objective academia. As can be seen in *New Political Science*, the journal of the American Political Science Association's *Caucus for a New Political Science*, neo-Marxist scholars in particular work from this perspective, and Chomsky is a Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Herman an Emeritus Professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Chomsky challenges what he calls the dominant 'commissar culture' of academia more broadly rather than simply of scholars of the news media and US foreign policy. For Chomsky, academics in capitalist societies tend to be ideological managers who – usually unwittingly – shield the elite of which they are a part from serious scrutiny by diverting attention from, or generating ideological rationales for, their actions.⁶⁵ Those with power will try to keep it, and those with power in capitalist societies are primarily political elites and corporate conglomerates. Existing institutions – including the universities and governments as well as the media – function mainly to protect the interests of society's elite. This does not require conspiratorial coordination, simply rational pursuit of perceived self-interest. In protecting those interests, many millions of people are killed through repressive violence and denial of the means necessary for survival despite the fact that the world has more than enough resources to meet the basic needs of all. Through the social sciences and humanities and related careers such as journalism, people often learn to be obedient and then to produce obedience in others. This is rewarded with inclusion and advancement deeper into the elite. The greater the internalisation of the elite perspective, the more that obedience will feel like freedom and lack of constraint.⁶⁶ On the whole, social science research gravitates towards innocuous work or directly anti-democratic work, that is, research which assists elite control of society.⁶⁷ In a comment that applies to some of our own earlier work as well the work of others surveyed in this article, 'part of the genius . . . of the higher education system is that it can get people to sell out even while they think they're doing exactly the right thing'.⁶⁸ The academics surveyed in this article are very committed to what they see as critical work. However, they operate without questioning or even acknowledging the existence of elite power or their own role in buttressing it, never mind assisting those who are organising efforts to challenge it. Such academics are neutralised and serve to mark the boundary of legitimate

⁶⁵ In addition to the items in notes 41 and 59, see Mitchell, Schoeffel, *Understanding Power*, ch. 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 247–8. For a brilliant exploration of how all forms of professional training (including academic training) inculcate not only skills but also ideological discipline, and also how professionals can survive professional training with their values intact, see Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) and Schmidt's website <<http://disciplined-minds.com/>>

⁶⁷ Mitchell, Schoeffel, *Understanding Power*, p. 239.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242. Although Chomsky discusses explicit efforts at censorship, his main concern is with a tendency towards internalisation of an elite perspective which makes conscious censorship or even self-censorship unnecessary. For a survey of claims of censorship across the political spectrum in US academic institutions in relation to commenting on the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, see John K. Wilson, *The State of Academic Freedom, 2001–2002: A Report* (2001) <<http://www.collegefreedom.org/report2002.htm>>

critique. For example, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, amongst academics we can expect vast amounts of support for enquiry into terrorist threats to the United States and relatively little for enquiry into US support for terrorism. Chomsky's work facilitates the consideration of these important issues which most academics neglect.

It is not that academics are uncritical: that is the opposite of Chomsky's position. Like journalists, it is vitally important that academics are critical because that criticism makes it look as if there is a serious debate. However, the boundaries of the debate are drawn in such a way that more fundamental challenges to corporate as well as political elites are rarely considered and rejected but made invisible or made to seem completely out of touch with reality. Chomsky focuses primarily on the repression promoted by the United States, although he also writes about repression by its official enemies. This is often treated by his critics such as Owens quoted at the beginning of this article as particularly damning, and proof that he is not interested in opposing repression but in indulging anti-American self-flagellation. However, his position is based on what he sees as moral truisms which have been obscured by indoctrination, namely, that people have responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of their actions and that they should concentrate their efforts where they will help the most people. On the whole, that is likely to be within their own state, and this is especially the case with the United States which he sees as a relatively open society.⁶⁹ Chomsky interprets the marginalisation of his work within academia as reassuring evidence that he is indeed challenging elite power while acknowledging that work aimed at producing more political space for analyses which contribute to effective challenges to elite power is valuable. His central (and hence least addressed) point is that being an academic while doing at best nothing to assist those who are opposing the exploitation of the ordinary people who pay your wages is morally reprehensible and yet is made normal and acceptable by the class structure of society.⁷⁰ Chomsky gets immense numbers of invitations to speak at universities and sells many books, and so one might conclude from this that he is not marginalised. However, we have shown that he is marginalised by the academic specialists in his area. More importantly, in the end this is not about Chomsky, but about the overall marginalisation of the perspective which he represents. Analysis of Chomsky's marginalisation by academia is worthwhile only to the extent that it contributes to academia facing up to its responsibility to acknowledge and end its active and passive participation in supporting elite interests.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 286–8.

⁷⁰ In Mitchell, Schoeffel, *Understanding Power*, pp. 351–5.