

What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream

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Russ Kick | editor

**The Disinformation Guide to
Media Distortion,
Historical Whitewashes
and Cultural Myths**

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Noam Chomsky

From a talk at Z Media Institute, June 1997.

Part of the reason I write about the media is that I am interested in the whole intellectual culture, and the part of it that is easiest to study is the media.

It comes out every day. You can do a systematic investigation. You can compare yesterday's version to today's version. There is a lot of evidence about what's played up and what isn't and the way things are structured.

My impression is that the media aren't very different from scholarship or from, say, journals of intellectual opinion. There are some extra constraints, but it's not radically different. They interact, which is why people go up and back quite easily among them.

If you want to understand the media, or any other institution, you begin by asking questions about the internal institutional structure. And you ask about their setting in the broader society. How do they relate to other systems of power and authority? If you're lucky, there is an internal record from leading people that tells you what they are up to. That doesn't mean the public relations handouts, but what they say to each other about what they are up to. There is quite a lot of interesting documentation.

Those are major sources of information about the nature of the media. You want to study them the way, say, a scientist would study some complex molecule. You take a look at the structure and then make some hypothesis based on the structure as to what the media product is likely to look like. Then you investigate the media product and see how well it conforms to the hypotheses.

Virtually all work in media analysis is this last part—trying to study carefully just what the media product is and whether it conforms to obvious assumptions about the nature and structure of the media.

Well, what do you find? First of all, you find that there are different media which do different things. For example, entertainment/Hollywood, soap operas, and so on, or even most of the newspapers in the country (the overwhelming majority of them) are directed to a mass audience, not to inform them but to divert them.

There is another sector of the media, the elite media, sometimes called the agenda-setting media because they are the ones with

the big resources; they set the framework in which everyone else operates. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a few others. Their audience is mostly privileged people.

The people who read the *New York Times* are mostly wealthy or part of what is sometimes called the political class. Many are actually involved in the systems of decision-making and control in an ongoing fashion, basically as managers of one sort or another. They can be political managers, business managers (like corporate executives and the like), doctrinal managers (like many people in the schools and universities), or other journalists who are involved in organizing the way people think and look at things.

The elite media set a framework within which others operate. For some years I used to monitor the Associated Press. It grinds out a constant flow of news. In the mid-afternoon there was a break every

The real mass media are basically trying to divert people.

day with a "Notice to Editors: Tomorrow's *New York Times* is going to have the following stories on the front page." The point of that is, if you're an editor of a newspaper in Dayton, Ohio, and you don't have the resources to figure out what the news is, or you don't want to think about it anyway, this tells you what the news is. These are the stories for the quarter-page that you are going to devote to something other than local affairs or diverting your audience. These are the stories that you put there because that's what the *New York Times* tells us is what you're supposed to care about tomorrow. If you are an editor of a local newspaper you pretty much have to do that, because you don't have much else in the way of resources. If you get out of line and produce stories that the elite press doesn't like, you're likely to hear about it pretty soon. What happened recently at *San Jose Mercury News* (i.e. Gary Webb's "Dark Alliance" series about CIA complicity in the drug trade) is a dramatic example of this. So there are a lot of ways in which power plays can drive you right back into line if you move out. If you try to break the mold, you're not going to last long. That framework works pretty well, and it is understandable that it is a reflection of obvious power structures.

The real mass media are basically trying to divert people. "Let them do something else, but don't bother us (us being the people who run

the show). Let them get interested in professional sports, for example. Let everybody be crazed about professional sports or sex scandals or the personalities and their problems or something like that. Anything, as long as it isn't serious. Of course, the serious stuff is for the big guys. 'We' take care of that."

There are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who are a pain in the neck and think independently.

What are the elite media, the agenda-setting ones? The *New York Times* and CBS, for example. Well, first of all, they are major, very profitable, corporations.

Furthermore, most of them are either linked to, or outright owned by, much bigger corporations, like General Electric, Westinghouse, and so on. They are way up at the top of the power structure of the private economy, which is a tyrannical structure. Corporations are basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above. If you don't like what they are doing, you get out. The major media are part of that system.

What about their institutional setting? Well, that's more or less the same. What they interact with and relate to is other major power centers: the government, other corporations, the universities. Because the media function in significant ways as a doctrinal system, they interact closely with the universities. Say you are a reporter writing a story on Southeast Asia or Africa, or something like that. You're supposed to go over to the university next door and find an expert who will tell you what to write, or else go to one of the foundations, like Brookings Institute or American Enterprise Institute. They will give you the preferred version of what is happening. These outside institutions are very similar to the media.

The universities, for example, are not independent institutions. There are independent people scattered around in them (and the sciences in particular couldn't survive otherwise), but that is true of the media as well. And it's generally true of corporations. It's even true of fascist states, for that matter, to a certain extent. But the institution itself is parasitic. It's dependent on outside sources of support, and those sources of support, such as private wealth, big corporations with grants, and the government (which is so closely interlinked with corporate power that you can barely distinguish them)—they are essentially the system that the universities are in the middle of.

People within them, who don't adjust to that structure, who don't accept it and internalize it (you can't really work

with it unless you internalize it, and believe it)—people who don't do that are likely to be weeded out along the way, starting from kindergarten, all the way up. There are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who are a pain in the neck and think independently.

Those of you who have been through college know that the educational system is highly geared to rewarding conformity and obedience; if you don't do that, you are a troublemaker. So, it is kind of a filtering device which ends up with people who really, honestly (they aren't lying) internalize the framework of belief and attitudes of the surrounding power system in the society. The elite institutions like, say, Harvard and Princeton and the small upscale colleges, for example, are very much geared to socialization. If you go through a place like Harvard, a good deal of what goes on is a kind of socialization: teaching how to behave like a member of the upper classes, how to think the right thoughts, and so on.

I'm sure you've read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which he wrote in the mid-1940s. It was a satire on the Soviet Union, a totalitarian state. It was a big hit. Everybody loved it. Turns out he wrote an introduction to *Animal Farm* which wasn't published. It only appeared 30 years later. Someone found it in his papers. The introduction to *Animal Farm* was about "Literary Censorship in England," and what

it says is that obviously this book is ridiculing the Soviet Union and its totalitarian structure, but free England is not all that different. We don't have the KGB on our neck, but the end

If you go through a place like Harvard, a good deal of what goes on is a kind of socialization: teaching how to behave like a member of the upper classes, how to think the right thoughts, and so on.

result comes out pretty much the same. People who have independent ideas or who think the wrong kind of thoughts are cut out.

He talks a little, only two sentences, about the institutional structure. He asks, why does this happen? Well, one, because the press is owned by wealthy men who only want certain things to reach the public. His second observation is that when you go through the elite education system, when you go through the proper schools (Oxford, and so on), you learn that there are certain things it's not proper to say and there are certain thoughts that are not proper to have. That is the socialization role of elite institutions, and if you don't adapt to that, you're usually out. Those two sentences more or less tell the story.

When you critique the media and you say, look, here is what Anthony Lewis or somebody else is writing, and you show that it happens to be distorted in a way that is highly supportive of power systems, they get very angry. They say, quite correctly, "Nobody

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ever tells me what to write. I write anything I like. All this business about pressures and constraints is nonsense because I'm never under any pressure." Which is completely true, but the point is that they wouldn't be there unless they had already demonstrated that nobody has to tell them what to write because they are going to keep to the rules. If they had started off at the Metro desk and had pursued the wrong kind of stories, they never would have made it to the positions where they can now say anything they like.

The same is largely true of university faculty in the more ideological disciplines. They have been through the socialization system. Okay, you look at the structure of that whole system. What do you expect the news to be like? Well, it's not very obscure. Take the *New York Times*. It's a corporation and sells a product. The product is audiences. They don't make money when you buy the newspaper. They are happy to put it on the World Wide Web for free. They actually lose money when you buy the newspaper. The audience is the product. For the elite media, the product is privileged people, just like the people who are writing the newspapers, high-level decision-making people in society. Like other businesses, they sell their product to a market, and the market is, of course, advertisers (that is, other businesses). Whether it is television or newspapers, or whatever else, they are selling audiences. Corporations sell audiences to other corporations. In the case of the elite media, it's big businesses.

Well, what do you expect to happen? What would you predict about the nature of the media product, given that set of circumstances? What would be the null hypothesis, the kind of conjecture that you'd make assuming nothing further?

The obvious assumption is that the product of the media, what appears, what doesn't appear, the way it is slanted, will reflect the interest of the buyers and sellers, the institutions, and the power systems that are around them. If that wouldn't happen, it would be kind of a miracle.

Okay, then comes the hard work. You ask, does it work the way you predict?

Well, you can judge for yourselves. There's lots of material on this obvious hypothesis, which has been subjected to the hardest tests anybody can think of, and still stands up remarkably well. You virtually never find anything in the social sciences that so strongly supports any conclusion, which is not a big surprise, because it would be miraculous if it didn't hold up given the way the forces are operating.

The next thing you discover is that this whole topic is completely taboo. If you go to the media department at the Kennedy School of Government or Stanford, or somewhere else, and you study journalism and communications or academic political science, and so on, these questions are not likely to appear. That is, the hypothesis that anyone would come across without even knowing anything that is scarcely expressed, and the evidence bearing on it, scarcely dis-

cussed. There are some exceptions, as usual in a complex and somewhat chaotic world, but it is rather generally true. Well, you predict that, too.

If you look at the institutional structure, you would say, yeah, sure, that's likely to happen because why should these guys want to be exposed? Why should they allow critical analysis of what they are up to? The answer is, there is no reason why they should allow that and, in fact, they don't.

Again, it is not purposeful censorship. It is just that you don't make it to those positions if you haven't internalized the values and doctrines. That includes what is called "the left" as well as the right. In fact, in mainstream discussion the *New York Times* has been called "the establishment left." You're unlikely to make it through to the top unless you have been adequately socialized and trained so that there are some thoughts you just don't have, because if you did have them, you wouldn't be there. So you have a second order of prediction which is that the first order of prediction is not allowed into the discussion—again, with a scattering of exceptions, important ones.

The last thing to look at is the doctrinal framework in which this proceeds. Do people at high levels in the information system, including the media and advertising and academic political science and so on, do these people have a picture of what ought to happen when they are writing for each other, not when they are making graduation speeches? When you make a commencement speech, it's pretty words and stuff. But when they are writing for one another, what do these people say?

There are several categories to look at. One is the public relations industry, you know, the main business propaganda industry. So what are the leaders of the PR industry saying internally? Second place to look is at what are called public intellectuals, big thinkers, people who write the op-eds and that sort of thing. The people who write impressive books about the nature of democracy and that sort of business. What do they say? The third place to look is the academic sector, particularly that part that has been concerned with communications and information, much of which has been a branch of political science for many years.

So, look at these categories and see what leading figures write about these matters. The basic line (I'm partly quoting) is that the general population are "ignorant and meddling outsiders." We have to keep them out of the public arena because they are too stupid, and if they get involved they will just make trouble. Their job is to be "spectators," not "participants." They are allowed to vote every once in a while, pick out one of us smart guys. But then they are supposed to go home and do something else like watch football or whatever it may be. But the "ignorant and meddling outsiders" have to be observers, not participants. The participants are what are called the "responsible men" and, of course, the writer is always one of them. You never ask the question, why am I a "responsible man"

and somebody else, say Eugene Debs, is in jail? The answer is pretty obvious. It's because you are obedient and subordinate to power and that other person may be independent, and so on.

But you don't ask, of course. So there are the smart guys who are supposed to run the show and the rest of them are supposed to be out, and we should not succumb to (I'm quoting from an academic article) "democratic dogmatism about men being the best judges of their own interest." They are not. They are terrible judges of their own interests so we have to do it for them for their own benefit.

Actually, it is very similar to Leninism. We do things for you, and we are doing it in the interest of everyone, and so on. I suspect that's part of the reason why it's been so easy historically for people to shift up and back from being sort of enthusiastic Stalinists to being big supporters of US power. People switch very quickly from one position to the other, and my suspicion is that it's because basically it is the same position. You're not making much of a switch. You're just making a different estimate of where power lies. One point you think it's here, another point you think it's there. You take the same position.

The first World War was the first time that highly organized state propaganda institutions were developed.

How did all this evolve? It has an interesting history. A lot of it comes out of the first World War, which is a big turning point. It changed the position of the United States in the world considerably. In the eighteenth century the US was already the richest place in the world. The quality of life, health, and longevity was not achieved by the upper classes in Britain until the early twentieth century, let alone anybody else in the world. The US was extraordinarily wealthy, with huge advantages, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had by far the biggest economy in the world. But it was not a big player on the world scene. US power extended to the Caribbean Islands, parts of the Pacific, but not much farther.

During the first World War, the relations changed. And they changed more dramatically during the second World War. After the second World War the US more or less took over the world. But after the first World War there was already a change, and the US shifted from being a debtor to a creditor nation. It wasn't a huge actor in the international arena, like Britain, but it became a substantial force in the world for the first time. That was one change, but there were other changes.

The first World War was the first time that highly organized state propaganda institutions were developed. The British had a Ministry of Information, and they really needed it because they had to get the US into the war or else they were in bad trouble. The Ministry of Information was mainly geared to sending propaganda, including fabrications about "Hun" atrocities, and so on. They were targeting American intellectuals on the reasonable assumption that these are

the people who are most gullible and most likely to believe propaganda. They are also the ones that disseminate it through their own system. So it was mostly geared to American intellectuals, and it worked very well. The British Ministry of Information documents (a lot have been released) show their goal was, as they put it, to control the thought of the entire world—which was a minor goal—but mainly the US. They didn't care much what people thought in India. This Ministry of Information was extremely successful in deluding leading American intellectuals, and was very proud of that. Properly so, it saved their lives. They would probably have lost the first World War otherwise.

In the US there was a counterpart. Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1916 on an anti-war platform. The US was a very pacifist country. It has always been. People don't want to go fight foreign wars. The country was very much opposed to the first World War, and Wilson was, in fact, elected on an anti-war position. "Peace without victory" was the slogan. But he decided to go to war. So the question was, how do you get a pacifist population to become raving anti-German lunatics so they want to go kill all the Germans? That requires propaganda. So they set up the first and really only major state propaganda agency in US history. The Committee on Public Information, it was called (nice Orwellian title); it was also called the Creel Commission. The guy who ran it was named Creel.

The task of this commission was to propagandize the population into jingoist hysteria. It worked incredibly well. Within a few months the US was able to go to war.

A lot of people were impressed by these achievements. One person impressed, and this had some implications for the future, was Hitler. He concluded, with some justification, that Germany lost the first World War because it lost the propaganda battle. They could not begin to compete with British and American propaganda, which absolutely overwhelmed them. He pledged that next time around they'll have their own propaganda system, which they did during the second World War.

More important for us, the American business community was also very impressed with the propaganda effort. They had a problem at that time. The country was becoming formally more democratic. A lot more people were able to vote and that sort of thing. The country was becoming wealthier and more people could participate and a lot of new immigrants were coming in, and so on. So what do you do? It's going to be harder to run things as a private club.

Therefore, obviously, you have to control what people think. There had been public relations specialists, but there was never a public relations industry. There was a guy hired to make Rockefeller's image look prettier and that sort of thing. But the huge public relations industry, which is a US invention and a monstrous industry, came out of the first World War. The leading figures were people in

the Creel Commission. In fact, the main one, Edward Bernays, comes right out of the Creel Commission. He has a book that came out a few years afterwards called *Propaganda*, which became kind of a manual for the rising Public Relations industry, in which he was a prominent figure. The term “propaganda,” incidentally, did not have negative connotations in those days.

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It was during the second World War that the term became taboo because it was connected with Germany and all those bad things. But in this period, the term “propaganda” just meant information or something like that.

So he wrote a book called *Propaganda* in the late 1920s. He explains that he is applying the lessons of the first World War. The propaganda system of the first World War and this commission that he was part of showed, he says, that it is possible to “regiment the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments their bodies.” These new techniques of regimentation of minds, he said, had to be used by the “intelligent minorities” in order to make sure that the slob stay on the right course. We can do it now because we have these new techniques.

This was an important manual of the public relations industry. Bernays was a kind of guru. He was an authentic Roosevelt/Kennedy liberal. He also engineered the public relations effort behind the US-backed coup which overthrew the democratic government of Guatemala.

His major coup, the one that really propelled him into fame in the late 1920s, was getting women to smoke. Women didn’t smoke in those days, and he ran huge campaigns for Chesterfield. You know all the techniques—models and movie stars with cigarettes coming out of their mouths, symbolizing the free, liberated modern woman. He got enormous praise for that. So he became a leading figure of the industry, and his book was an important manual.

Another member of the Creel Commission was Walter Lippmann, the most respected figure in American journalism for about half a century (I mean serious American journalism, serious think pieces). He also wrote what are called progressive essays on democracy, regarded as progressive back in the 1920s. He was, again, applying the lessons of propaganda very explicitly. He says there is a new art in democracy called “manufacture of consent.” That is his phrase. Edward Herman and I borrowed it for our book, but it comes from Lippmann. So, he says, there is this new art in the practice of democracy, “manufacture of consent.” By manufacturing consent, you can overcome the fact that formally a lot of people

have the right to vote. We can make it irrelevant because we can manufacture consent and make sure that their choices and attitudes will be structured in such a way that they will do what we tell them, even if they have a formal way to participate. So we’ll have a real democracy. It will work properly. That’s applying the lessons of the propaganda agency.

Academic social science and political science come out of the same

kind of thinking. One of the founders of the field of communications in academic political science is Harold Lasswell. One of his first achievements was a study of propaganda. Writing in an *Encyclopedia of Social Science* he says, very frankly, the things I was quoting before about not succumbing to “democratic dogmatism.” That comes from academic political science (Lasswell and others).

Again, drawing the lessons from the war-time experience, political parties drew the same lessons, especially the conservative party in England. Their documents from the period, just being released, show they also recognized the achievements of the British Ministry of Information. They recognized that the country was getting more democratized and it wouldn’t be a private men’s club. So the conclusion was, as they put it, politics has to become political warfare, applying the mechanisms of propaganda that worked so brilliantly during the first World War towards controlling people’s thoughts. That’s the doctrinal side, and it coincides with the institutional structure.

It strengthens the predictions about the way the thing should work. And the predictions are well confirmed. But these conclusions, also, are not supposed to be discussed. This is all now part of mainstream literature, but it is only for people on the inside. When you go to college, you don’t read the classics about how to control people’s minds.

Just like you don’t read what James Madison said during the constitutional convention about how the main goal of the new system has to be “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” and has to be designed so that it achieves that end. This is the founding of the constitutional system, but it is scarcely studied. You can’t even find it in the academic scholarship unless you look hard.

That is roughly the picture, as I see it, of the way the system is institutionally, the doctrines that lie behind it, the way it comes out. There is another part directed to the “ignorant and meddling outsiders.” That is mainly using diversion of one kind or another. From that, I think, you can predict what you would expect to find.

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