

How the Media Distort Reality - Filtering Out the “Important Stuff”

Part 11 of the author's 'Elephants in the room' series

By [Rod Driver](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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“The sinister fact about literary censorship in England is that it is largely voluntary. Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban” (George Orwell(1))

If our media were trying to cover world events each day honestly, then the headlines would repeatedly say things like:

- “US and Britain commit more war crimes in the Middle East”
- “Thousands persecuted by tyrants supported by US and Britain”

This does not happen because our current media are not trying to give us an honest explanation of what is really happening in the world. This does not mean that the media is necessarily telling lies (although it frequently does). It is mostly presenting distorted versions of events. This is usually known as the Propaganda Model of the media, which is analysed at length in a famous book called *Manufacturing Consent*, by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, first published in 1988.

The book explains that the beliefs of journalists, the ownership of the media by governments or big corporations, advertising, and the sources of information for news stories, all create a system which filters out topics and opinions that are considered ‘undesirable’.(2) That is, topics or opinions that challenge powerful interests, such as governments or big corporations. In particular, the media are uncritical of British and US war crimes, and they are not sufficiently critical of the profit-driven economic system. The main reasons for this are discussed below. These are sometimes called the five filters.

1) Conflicts of Interest: Ownership by Corporations and Governments

The media in the US and Britain is mostly controlled by a small number of big corporations,(3) with the exception of the BBC, which is controlled by the government. As with all corporations, the power rests with a few people at the top. Journalists are just employees who can be hired and fired. Putting forward radical or controversial views is likely to annoy people in power. Corporations do not want journalists who are troublemakers or whistleblowers. Presenters and journalists quickly realise that media owners will not tolerate certain types of critical stories. Insiders in the US media have admitted that they back away from controversial stories that might offend their audience. Those who are very critical of big business and government foreign policy will not make it to the anchor position on mainstream news programs and will find it difficult to get a job with the major newspapers.(4) They may even be fired. A famous example of this was when the US MSNBC

presenter Phil Donahue was critical of the Iraq war in 2003 and was quickly fired. MSNBC is owned by General Electric, who are one of the US's biggest weapons companies. They did not want anti-war voices on the channel.(5)

2) Advertising - Do Not Bite The Hand That Feeds You

The bulk of the funding for most newspapers and television channels comes from advertising by major corporations. A number of these, such as BP and Morgan Stanley, have stated that they will not advertise with publications that they consider 'objectionable', (6) which really means any that question their right to make unlimited profits, or that question the way they do business. Companies that sell weapons do not want stories that show the horror of war; tobacco companies do not want stories about children getting addicted to cigarettes in Malawi. They want the media to focus on stories that make their readers and viewers receptive to advertising. Favorable news stories, known in the industry as puff pieces, can be bought by advertisers. In many local papers, the editorial mostly fills the space between advertisements. When discussing the qualities required of journalists, one senior newspaper executive stated:

"what you want are people who can execute your strategy...to create editorial to support maximizing revenues from display advertising".(7)

There is a conflict of interest if the primary goal of the media, as with other businesses, is to make profits, and the main source of revenue is the advertising. Under these circumstances, the media will not present the most critical stories. Ultimately, ratings and corporate profit are more important than honest news.

3) Sourcing - Do Not Bite The Hand That Feeds You (again)

Journalism has always relied on official sources of information, such as government spokespeople, and corporate press releases. In fact, this is what makes up the majority of news today. The media cannot risk being 'shut out' by either the government or corporations, so they rarely do anything to seriously upset them. Many journalists now just write what those with power want them to write. One British journalist even said that politics and journalism are no longer separate. Most mainstream journalists just want to be spoon-fed information by their sources.(8) Stories often turn out to be word-for-word copies of press releases from governments or corporations. Some video footage is actually just another PR tool, provided by corporations so TV stations can fill their news programs cheaply.(9) It is estimated that as much as 80% of mainstream US news comes from government, corporate or public relations sources.(10) Many 'experts' who appear on news programs are supplied by big business or the government, so they will tend to present the establishment view of their subject.

4) Flak

There is a related issue that powerful people or organisations can give a newspaper a hard time if they do not like what is written. This is known as 'flak'. It can be phone calls or letters, or, particularly in Britain, the threat of legal action, which can be enough to deter the media from pursuing a story. When the BBC ran a story that was critical of the reasons given for the Iraq war (this was known as the 'dodgy dossier'), the government gave them flak and senior BBC people lost their jobs.(11) The CBS presenter Dan Rather has admitted that they

dropped a story about George Bush's national service being in a 'safe' unit, due to flak from the government.(12) Media criticism can therefore be kept within certain boundaries.

5) Ideology

The final filter is ideology – what do journalists believe. For many years between 1945 and 1989, the dominant ideology was anti-communism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this has been replaced by two dominant ideologies – anti-terrorism and capitalism.(13) This means that journalists are reluctant to criticise anything that the government claims is about anti-terrorism, whether it be repressive laws at home, or wars abroad. Journalists have also come to believe that there is no alternative to the existing economic or financial system, despite the evidence showing clearly since the 2008 financial crisis that the existing system is highly unstable and creates poor outcomes for many people.

The Five Filters Lead to Censorship and Self-Censorship

The former commissioner of the US regulator, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Nicholas Johnson, said that there are four stages that journalists typically go through in their career:

“In the early stage, you're a young crusader and you write an exposé story about the powers that be, and you bring it to your editor and the editor says: “No, kill it. We can't touch that. Too hot.”

Stage two: You get an idea for the story, but you don't write it and you check with the editor first and he says: “No, won't fly. No, I think the old man won't like it. Don't do that, he has a lot of friends in there and that might get messy.

Stage three: You get an idea for the story and you yourself dismiss it as silly.

Stage four: You no longer get the idea for that kind of an exposé story.”(14)

The writer, Michael Parenti, suggested that there is also a stage five:

“You then appear on panels, with media critics like me, and you get very angry and indignant when we say that there are biases in the media and you're not as free and independent as you think.”(15)

The filtering system does not completely eliminate all critical views on all subjects. There are a handful of mainstream journalists who sometimes manage some limited criticism of the economic system, but their presence actually leads readers and viewers to incorrectly assume that the media is better than it really is. Occasionally, an insider will criticise the media itself, but they tend to suggest that the mainstream media is reasonable, by focussing on the following narrow argument:

As the sales figures for most newspapers decline, the budget for serious journalism decreases. Fewer journalists racing to meet tight deadlines, without the time or resources to investigate properly, means that it is simply easier for journalists to regurgitate information that has been supplied to them in the form of press releases from governments, corporations and PR companies.(16)

This argument is true, but the mainstream media has always presented a highly distorted version of events, even when they were well-funded and well-staffed. There is a small number of former mainstream media journalists who are more critical and now write independently. In Britain this includes John Pilger,(17) Matt Kennard,(18) Nafeez Ahmed(19) and Jonathan Cook.(20) They have all described various forms of censorship during their mainstream careers.

Ideology is extremely powerful

One of the authors of Manufacturing Consent, Noam Chomsky, once pointed out in a famous interview(21) with BBC presenter Andrew Marr that this filtering system does not require official censorship, or even deliberate self-censorship by journalists. The recruitment and promotion policies of media organisations guarantee that only people with the 'correct' opinions make it to the highest levels. This even applies on some university journalism courses. The investigative journalist, Matt Kennard, has explained how he had a bad reputation at Columbia Journalism School because he dared to ask critical questions of one of America's worst war criminals, Henry Kissinger.(22)

The idea that journalists and politicians share similar views is clear from the revolving door, where senior people in government go to work at newspapers, and vice versa. There is a long history of this in both Britain and the US.(23) In Britain, recent examples would be the former Chancellor, George Osborne, becoming the editor of the Evening Standard, and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, having previously edited The Spectator. (24)

Chomsky has also pointed out that, on the whole, academics do not have the first four filters limiting their work, yet the output of mainstream academics is almost as poor as that of the media on topics such as economics, finance, politics, international relations, and terrorism studies, with critical academics being a small minority. Academic bias is mostly caused by ideology. For this reason, Chomsky has suggested that the most important of the media filters is ideology.(25)

Groupthink and The Memory Hole

In later posts we will look at psychological traits that contribute to the issues discussed throughout these posts. One of those traits is worth mentioning here. It is groupthink. Most people in the media are surrounded by other people repeating the mainstream view, and they rarely get to hear alternative views. This tends to make their views even more extreme. It was recognised long ago that "a lie repeated often enough becomes the accepted truth".(26) Journalists hear the distortions most often and therefore end up believing many of them. Once journalists have written these things then they have a vested interest in defending their previous points of view. It becomes more and more difficult for them to say 'much of what I have written has been wrong'. In order to justify their support for wars, they repeat the statements of politicians about humanitarian intentions, or weapons of mass destruction, or the threat of terrorism, believing that this constitutes evidence of 'good intentions' by those politicians, when in fact it is mostly propaganda. There is no honest way to justify 'bombing whole countries back to the stone age,'(27) as the assaults on Iraq and Libya have been described, yet that is what they try to do.

The media also have what is described as 'the memory hole.' This is a reference to the George Orwell novel '1984'. The Memory Hole was "a slot into which government officials deposit politically inconvenient documents for destruction".(28) These days it is used to

refer to situations where journalists seem to forget many of the criminal or unethical acts that their government has carried out. There have been plenty of government investigations detailing the criminal activities of US agencies like the CIA,(29) but you would not get that impression from reading current analysis of government activities. Documentation regarding Britain's past atrocities is also readily available but conveniently forgotten.

It's Even Worse Than You Think

It was revealed by the Telegraph newspaper that the British Security Agency, MI5, had vetted BBC appointments for many years.(30) The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and media insiders(31) have admitted that the CIA employed many agents in senior positions in most important US news organisations. The media claim that these links no longer exist, but journalists continue to come forward occasionally to explain that they do exist, and that intelligence agencies still plant stories in the press.(32) A combination of bribes, such as access to important sources, the threat of being fired, and the five filters discussed above, is enough to keep most journalists in line.

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This article was first posted at medium.com/elephantsintheroom

Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the eleventh in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

Notes

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