

# Manufacturing Consent for World War III

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

“When President Bush used an October 17 [2007] White House press conference to threaten that the escalating US confrontation with Iran posed a danger of ‘World War III’ his remark was passed over in silence by most of the media. Those that did report it seemed, for the most part, to accept the White House claim that the president was engaging in hyperbole and merely making a ‘rhetorical point.’” [Bill Van Auken \(2007\)](#).

The key role the mainstream media plays in manufacturing public consent for elite decision makers has a long and inglorious history that has wreaked havoc on progressive aspirations for the development a truly democratic global polity. While the antidemocratic implications of *Manufacturing Consent* were first popularized in the late 1980s by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (1988) classic book of the same title, the methods of manufacturing public consent were honed much earlier by communications researchers participating in the seminal (Rockefeller Foundation funded) Communications Group, and many of the founding fathers of mass communication research.[1] Given the high level of involvement of mass communications researchers in refining the means by which to manufacture consent, it is little wonder that recent studies provide ample evidence illustrating the US government’s ability to exploit the system-supportive tendencies of the mainstream media to justify overt wars and cover-up covert wars,[2] distract attention from their [support \(throughout the Cold War\) of right-wing terrorist armies](#) in every European country,[3] legitimize controversial ‘humanitarian’ interventions,[4] [play down genocides in which their government is implicated](#), and manufacture public consent for economic sanctions that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children.[5] More recent events (post 9/11) also demonstrate how a relentless propaganda campaign waged through the American media was able to persuade a significant proportion of the domestic population that the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq was both necessary and justified.[6]

Thus considering the historical willingness of the US media to propound antidemocratic elite propaganda, it is entirely predicable that the media would play an integral role in manufacturing the next perceived threat to international stability, that is, the Iranian ‘threat’. As [Marjorie Cohn \(2007\)](#) notes: “It’s *déjà vu*. This time the Bush gang wants war with Iran. Following a carefully orchestrated strategy, they have ratcheted up the ‘threat’ from Iran, designed to mislead us into a new war four years after they misled us into Iraq.” [John Pilger \(2007\)](#) adds that this ‘threat’ is “entirely manufactured, aided and abetted by familiar, compliant media language that refers to Iran’s ‘nuclear ambitions’, just as the vocabulary of Saddam’s non-existent WMD arsenal became common usage.”

It is then unfortunate to note that international attention is now firmly fixated on the Iranian ‘threat.’ Furthermore, given the success of the Bush administration’s most recent propaganda offensives, which have led to the destruction and ongoing occupation of both

Afghanistan and Iraq, there is little reason to doubt that the American government does not have similar plans for Iran. In an earlier study I [documented](#) how the ostensibly democratic US-based National Endowment of Democracy has funnelled money to Iranian groups and media projects in an attempt to overthrow the Iranian government from within. However, in an attempt to counter the US government's ongoing propaganda initiatives, this article will review how the mass media is manufacturing public consent for yet another illegal war by examining the work of radical mass media critics.

### **Mediating the Path to World War III**

*"...we got a leader in Iran who has announced that he wants to destroy [Israel](#). So I've told people that if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon." [President Bush, October 17, 2007](#).*

(For a useful commentary on this statement, see [Cuban Missile Crisis Redux](#))

Judging by the ongoing discussions in both the mainstream and alternative (progressive) media, it is apparent that, one way or the other, the US (and its coalition of willing cronies) has its sights firmly set on bringing regime change to [Iran](#). So far, for the most part, the alternative media has focused on the nuclear threat posed by the Middle East's most dangerous lawbreaker, Israel. The mainstream media, however, has persistently and erroneously portrayed Iran as the 'real' nuclear threat. Even Britain's so-called liberal media is demonstrating its ability to manufacture consent for elite interests, with the BBC recently devoting an entire (Israeli-made) documentary to the issue of the Iranian problem, [ironically titled \*Will Israel bomb Iran?\*](#) This is not really surprising, as the governments guilty of involvement are heavily reliant on the mainstream media's willingness to legitimize their 'war on terror', which in turn, could turn out to be the catalyst for an illegal and catastrophic foreign intervention in Iran (and thereby a [catalyst for a global war](#)).

In a manner which is eerily reminiscent of the mainstream media's focus on Saddam Hussein's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, [Dmitriy Sedov \(2007\)](#) notes that in Iran's case the media similarly "never stop[s] debating the issue of the 'Iranian atomic bomb'". Indeed [John Pilger \(2007\)](#) points out that "[w]e are being led towards perhaps the most serious crisis in modern history as the Bush-Cheney-Blair 'long war' edges closer to Iran for no reason other than that nation's independence from rapacious America." However, as Pilger notes, despite the proximity of this crisis:

*"...there is a surreal silence, save for the noise of 'news' in which our powerful broadcasters gesture cryptically at the obvious but dare not make sense of it, lest the one-way moral screen erected between us and the consequences of an imperial foreign policy collapse and the truth be revealed."*

This phenomenon was well documented by [Edward S. Herman \(2006\)](#), who as early as March last year wrote:

*"Today's big news is the possibility that Iran, the Little Satan, might some day acquire a nuclear weapon: the administration says so, the media say so, and now three times as many people regard Iran as the U.S.'s greatest menace than four months ago and 47 percent of the public agrees that Iran should be bombed if needed to prevent its acquiring any nuclear weapon capability."*

In [August 2007](#), [Noam Chomsky](#) pointed out that “[w]ithout irony, the Bush administration and the media charge that Iran is ‘meddling’ in Iraq”. Unfortunately:

“...Washington’s propaganda framework is reflexively accepted, apparently without notice, in US and other Western commentary and reporting, apart from the marginal fringe of what is called ‘the loony left.’ What is considered ‘criticism’ is skepticism as to whether all of Washington’s charges about Iranian aggression in Iraq are true. It might be an interesting research project to see how closely the propaganda of Russia, Nazi Germany, and other aggressors and occupiers matched the standards of today’s liberal press and commentators.

...

“The rhetoric about Iran has escalated to the point where both political parties and practically the whole US press accept it as legitimate and, in fact, honorable, that ‘all options are on the table,’ to quote Hillary Clinton and everybody else, possibly even nuclear weapons. ‘All options on the table’ means that Washington threatens war.”

### **War, Propaganda, the Corporate Media, and the BBC?**

[Herman \(2006\)](#) outlines *Twelve Principles of Propaganda Used in Setting the Stage for War* in Iran, which in summary (without his accompanying evidence) are (1) that the US “has the legal and moral right” to lead the international community in stopping Iran’s nuclear program, (2) that countries targeted by US foreign policy elites should not be allowed the right to defend themselves, (3) to exaggerate the dangers posed by Iran’s eventual development of nuclear weapons, (4) to engage in “unrelenting demonization” of the said target, (5) to exclude any discussion of US relations with countries more deserving of the “demon status” that has been ascribed to Iran ([also see](#) here), (6) to underplay/ignore historical actions/relationships with Iran “that might show both hypocrisy and the fraudulence of the claimed threat”, (7) to underplay/ignore recent US actions that “might appear incompatible with its harsh stand opposing Iran’s pursuing any nuclear program” (8) that the US does not [need to apply](#) the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to its own actions, but can still “alter the terms of the NPT as it applies to its target”, (9) that “if the target cannot prove a negative, the severity of the threat to U.S. ‘national security’ requires that Iran be bombed and that there be a change in regime to one that can be trusted (like that of the Shah of Iran, or Sharon, or Musharraf)”, (10) to manipulate the “mechanisms of international regulation linked to the UN to serve the war and goal of regime change” – for a detailed treatment of this subject, see [Herman and David Peterson \(2007\)](#) (11) to maintain that the need to deal with the “Iran threat is based on a universal worry, and does not reflect U.S. power and the attempts to appease that power”, and (12) to dismiss any other hidden geostrategic interests that the U.S. may be pursuing in the Middle East. (Of course, as part and parcel of these propaganda principles the media also routinely engage in [distributing](#) outright [disinformation](#).) Just a few months after Herman’s prescient analysis, [Herman and Peterson \(2006\)](#) concluded that:

“...the mainstream media have followed the party line on the Iran ‘crisis’ and failed almost without exception to note the problems and deal with matters raised in the alternative frames. Remarkably, despite their acknowledged massive failures as news organizations and de facto propaganda service for the Bush administration in the lead up to the Iraq invasion, with the administration refocusing on the new dire threat from Iran it took the mainstream media no time whatsoever to fall into party-line formation-from which they

have not deviated.”

Like many media scholars who study the US media system, the noticeable contrast between the US media environment and other slightly more democratic media outlets overseas leads [Herman \(2006\)](#) to highlight the existence of dissenting voices in the British media: thus he notes that “[t]he ‘Drumbeat sounds familiar’ to Simon Tisdall in the London Guardian (March 7, 2006), but not to the [servants of power](#) in the U.S. media.”[7] However, even though some parts of the British media – like the Guardian and BBC – are often rated highly by American media analysts for their progressive credentials, some British-based researchers actually surmise that these so-called Left-orientated media outlets still serve to [manufacture public consent](#) for elite interests by setting distinct boundaries on the limits of acceptable dissent (see <http://www.medialens.org>).[8] On this point, Medialens writers [David Edwards and David Cromwell \(2007\)](#) suggest that: “There are glimmers of conscience in the [British] liberal press where journalists just cannot help but notice the echoes of 2002-2003 ahead of the Iraq catastrophe”, but Edwards and Cromwell still conclude that “the key point is that the liberal media are fully participating in the demonisation of Iran”.

As early as January 2005, Medialens drew attention to the [BBC’s role](#) in the propaganda offensive against Iran, while by February 2006, Medialens led off a [follow-up article](#) by noting that Timothy Garton Ash writing in the ‘liberal’ broadsheet the *Guardian* wrote: “Now we face the next big test of the west: after Iraq, Iran.” Furthermore, just a few months later Medialens demonstrated how the [BBC had distorted an Amnesty International press release](#) in their ongoing efforts to demonise Iran, and concluded their article by asking the following poignant questions:

“Why did the BBC decide to focus so prominently and heavily on Iran – a country under serious threat of attack by the United States and perhaps Britain? Why would the BBC choose to isolate and highlight the sins of an official enemy, thereby boosting the government’s propaganda campaign? Is this innocent, or are more cynical forces at work here?”

([Click here](#) to read more about this case and to read the BBC’s response to Medialens.)

Of course a group like Medialens which has limited resources can only ever hope to document a smaller proportion of the British (‘liberal’) media’s servility to power, but nonetheless they have produced another two media-alerts this year concerning British media coverage of Iranian affairs, these being [Iran in Iraq: The Art of Instant Forgetting](#) (see [related FAIR article](#)), and [Pentagon Propaganda Occupies the Guardian’s Frontpage](#) (also see their [follow-up article](#)). For another recent discussion of the warmongering role of the British ‘liberal’ media, see [Britain’s Channel Four Propaganda Machine Now Churning for Iran War](#), which describes the grilling that Channel Four presenter, [Jon Snow](#), gave to President Ahmadinejad in September 2007.

Similarly, British-based Media Workers Against the War (MWAU) have highlighted the [BBC’s role in building the case for a war on Iran](#), and have even held protests outside of their broadcasting studios. In June 2006, [MWAU noted](#) that BBC Radio Four’s flagship current affairs programme, *Today*, “paid lip service of [sic] ‘balance’ while presenting the debate over Iran in such a way as to legitimise a US military response”. Again, this news should not be overly surprising, as earlier academic studies have already concluded that the BBC had “displayed the most pro-war agenda of any [British] broadcaster” in the lead-up to Iraq’s destruction.[9]

In another [MWAW \(2007\)](#) report, this time pertaining to the media coverage of the recent so-called 'hostage' crisis, a *journalist from the Financial Times described how his newspaper purposely chose to use the word detainees not hostages to describe the 15 British navy personnel recently held in Iran for 13 days. Crucially this thoughtful journalist was most concerned about how the broadsheets switched from using the word "detainees/captives" to "hostages" "after George W. Bush demanded on March 31 that 'The Iranians must give back the hostages'".* Again this revelation should not be surprising to any scholars familiar with the vital role the so-called liberal media plays in supporting illegal foreign interventions.[10] So it should be expected that [Anthony DiMaggio's \(2007\)](#) examination of the media coverage of the detainment crisis (in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*) led him to conclude that as Herman and Chomsky's "propaganda model suggests, American reporters have faithfully taken to the role of an unofficial propaganda arm for the state".

### **More News on the March Towards War**

More recently [DiMaggio \(2007\)](#), in another excellent article, has demonstrated how the *Washington Post* exhibited "a pattern of deception, one-sidedness, and manipulation" in its (mis)reporting on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons. In his review of "over 230 Post news stories, 31 editorials, and 58 op-eds from 2003 through 2007" he demonstrated:

"...that assertions suggesting Iran may or is developing nuclear weapons appeared twice as often as claims or assertions that Iran is not or may not be developing such weapons. The paper's op-eds and editorials are even more slanted, as 90% of editorials and 93% of op-eds suggest Iran is developing nuclear weapons, as opposed to 0% of editorials and 16% of op-eds suggesting Iran may not be developing such weapons. Belligerent rhetoric is also used far more often in regards to the Iranian 'threat' (of which there is no evidence of to date) than to the far larger U.S. and Israeli military threat to Iran (which has been announced vocally and shamelessly over and over throughout the American and Israeli press). Belligerent terms are applied twice as often in regards to Iranian development of nuclear weapons. Such terms, portray Iran as a 'threat,' and discuss the 'fear' invoked by a potentially nuclear armed Iran, as well as the 'danger' of such a development - as contrasted with similar references to a U.S. 'threat,' to the 'fear' of a U.S. or Israeli attack, or the 'danger' both countries pose to Iran."

DiMaggio's research also determined that while the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was mentioned in the majority of the *Washington Post's* editorials (and 29% of the time in its op-eds), "the IAEA's actual conclusion that there is 'no evidence' Iran is developing nuclear weapons" is reported in just one editorial and one op-ed. He goes on to note that:

"References to the fact that it was the U.S. itself that originally supported Iranian uranium enrichment show up in just 1% of the *Post's* news stories, and in just 3% of all op-eds, and none of the paper's editorials. The same goes for admissions that the United States is undertaking a similar project of enriching its own uranium for use in a new generation of American nuclear weapons (the major distinction, however, is that the U.S. openly admits to its project, while Iran has admitted to no such program). The very activity that U.S. leaders are condemning Iran for secretly pursuing is arrogantly advocated and pursued by the United States (the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons on civilians), although one wouldn't know any of this from looking at the coverage."

With the release of the IAEA's [most recent](#) (nine page report) released in mid-November, [Farideh Farhi \(2007\)](#) discussed the "interestingly partial way various news organizations and governments end up interpreting or representing the report to audiences they are sure will not read the reports themselves." Farhi critiques the misreporting of the *New York Times*, *Associated Press*, and the *Washington Post*, and concludes his piece by noting that a BBC piece titled *Mixed UN Nuclear Report for Iran* although with some shortcomings was at least able to give "a relatively accurate description of the issues involved." In fact, as the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMI) illustrated in May 2007, there are at least "[twenty reasons](#) to oppose sanctions and military intervention in Iran", and:

"Contrary to the myth created by the western media, it is not Iran, but the US and its European allies which are defying the overwhelming majority of the international community, in that, they have resisted the call to enter into direct, immediate and comprehensive negotiations with Iran without any pre-conditions."

A couple of months later, in [July 2007, CASMI](#) went on to criticise the *Financial Times* over the publication of an article that made "unfounded allegations about Iranian government's complicity with Al-Qaeda launching terrorist operations in Iraq, using Iranian territory." (The article in question was titled [Al-Qaeda linked to operations from Iran.](#))

Finally, in September 2007, when [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited](#) the US to address the United Nations General Assembly, the corporate media was on form again, ready to leap at any opportunity to vigorously thump the drum for war: indeed media analyst [Deepa Kumar \(2007\)](#) described the treatment of Ahmadinejad's visit to New York as "xenophobic and hysterical".[11] Ironically, in sharp contrast to the harsh treat Ahmadinejad's visit provoked from the US media, [Edward S. Herman \(2007\)](#) reminds us that:

"In February 1955, the Shah of Iran was a guest at Columbia [University] receiving an honorary Doctor of Laws degree and he, like Musharraf, was greeted deferentially by Grayson Kirk and gave a well-received speech featuring an accolade to the U.S. 'policy of peace backed by strength.' The *New York Times* also noted that the Shah was 'impressed by the desire of Americans for a secure and enduring peace' ('Shah Praises U.S. For Peace Policy,' *NYT*, February 5, 1955). This was, of course, just a few months after the United States had overthrown the elected government of Guatemala via a proxy army and had installed a regime of permanent terror."

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In the case of the mainstream media's recent coverage of Iranian issues it is perhaps uncontroversial to suggest that the media are conforming to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's (1988) [Propaganda Model](#) by demonstrating their willingness to manufacture of mass consent for elite interests. Of course, this democratic deficit of the mainstream media is particularly noticeable to any regular readers/viewers of the alternative press, as the latter's stories are almost unrecognizable when contrasted with their mainstream counterparts. That said, like the mainstream media's coverage of Iranian issues, the alternative media has concentrated almost all of its energy into analysing the ongoing (and potential nuclear) military operations in the Middle East.[12] This is problematic because military threats and interventions (both overt and covert) are only one among many instruments available to the imperial architects of US foreign policy to promote regime change in Iran. As discussed earlier, a relative newcomer to the armoury of foreign policy

elites is the [use of democracy itself as a tool of foreign policy](#), a tool which is arguably one of the most potent weapons in the war of ideas waged by policy elites against progressive activists. Nevertheless despite the minimal coverage of such ‘democratic’ tactics, World War III still lurks on the horizon, and as [Jean Bricmont \(2007\)](#) summarised this September:

“All the ideological signposts for attacking Iran are in place. The country has been thoroughly demonized because it is not nice to women, to gays, or to Jews. That in itself is enough to neutralize a large part of the American ‘left’. The issue of course is not whether Iran is nice or not – according to our views – but whether there is any legal reason to attack it, and there is none; but the dominant ideology of human rights has legitimized, specifically in the left, the right of [intervention on humanitarian grounds](#) anywhere, at any time, and that ideology has succeeded in totally sidetracking the minor issue of international law.”

To work to defeat the propaganda war (not to mention the military war) on Iran, it is essential that citizens around the world develop the know-how to see through the propaganda veil that has been cast over Iranian affairs. For example, to counter the influence of best-selling authors like [neoconservative-linked](#) Azar Nafisi – (in)famous for writing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* – concerned citizens would do well to help publicise more honest books dealing with Iranian affairs like Fatemeh Keshavarz’s (2007) recent book *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*. ([See interview with the author here](#), and also read [Hamid Dabashi’s \(2006\)](#) important critique of Nafisi’s work). However, at the end of the day it is vital that all people, with even a passing interest in the foreign affairs of their elected governments, work to create a media that can support democratic principles, not undermine them. This can be done in a number of ways but of course providing financial support for independent media outlets is a must. This is because as [Robert McChesney](#) (1997) points out: “regardless of what a progressive group’s first issue of importance is, its second issue should be media and communication, because so long as the media are in corporate hands, the task of social change will be vastly more difficult, if not impossible, across the board.”[13]

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## Endnotes

[1] Barker, M.J. (Submitted) ‘The Liberal Foundations of Media Reform? Creating Sustainable Funding Opportunities for Radical Media Reform’, *Global Media Journal*.

[2] Herman, E. S. and N. Chomsky (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books; Keeble, R. (1997) *Secret State, Silent Press: New Militarism, the Gulf and the Modern Image of Warfare*. Bedfordshire, U.K.: John Libbey Media Faculty of Media University of Luton; Molwana, H., G. Gerbner and H. I. Schiller (1992) *Triumph of the Image: The Media’s War in the Persian Gulf : A Global Perspective*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

[3] Also see [Danielle Ganser’s](#) online articles [Secret Warfare: Operation Gladio and NATO’s Stay-Behind Army](#), and [Terrorism in Western Europe: An Approach to NATO’s Secret Stay-Behind Armies](#).

[4] Hammond, P. and E. S. Herman (2000) *Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis*. London: Pluto Press; Robinson, P. (2000) ‘The Policy-Media Interaction Model:

Measuring Media Power During Humanitarian Crisis', *Journal of Peace Research*, 37(5): 613-633.

[5] Herring, E. (2004) 'Power, Propaganda and Indifference: An Explanation of the Maintenance of Economic Sanctions on Iraq Despite Their Human Cost', pp. 34-56 in T. Y. Ismael & W. W. Haddad (eds) *Iraq: The Human Cost of History*. London: Pluto Press.

[6] Friel, H. and R. A. Falk (2004) *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy*. London: Verso; Kumar, D. (2006) 'Media, War, and Propaganda: Strategies of Information Management During the 2003 Iraq War', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 3(1): 48-69; Miller, D. (2004) *Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq*. London: Pluto.

[7] Writing for the US-based mediawatchdog FAIR, Norman Solomon has been busily documenting the US media propaganda war against Iran, see [Nuclear Fundamentalism and the Iran Story](#) (5/5/05), [The Iran Crisis: "Diplomacy" as a Launch Pad for Missiles](#) (2/6/06), [Media Tall Tales for the Next War](#) (9/26/06). Also see FAIR's [Buying the Bush Line on Iran Nukes: Despite uncertainty, U.S. journalists take sides](#) (September/October 2005), [Won't Get Fooled Again? NYT, networks offer scant skepticism on Iran claims](#) (2/2/07), and [NYT Breaks Own Anonymity Rules: Paper pushes Iran threat with one-sided array of unnamed officials](#) (2/16/07).

[8] McKiggan, M. 2005. *Climate Change and the Mass Media: A Critical Analysis*. Unpublished MSc thesis, Southampton University.

[9] Cited in Pilger, J. (2003) '[The BBC and Iraq: Myth and Reality](#)', *New Statesman*, December 4, 2003; Wells, M. (2003) '[Study Deals a Blow to Claims of Anti-War Bias in BBC News](#)', *The Guardian*, July 4, 2003.

[10] Edwards, D. and D. Cromwell (2006) *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media*. London: Pluto Press; Friel, H. and R. A. Falk (2004) *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy*. London: Verso; Klaehn, J. (2005) *Filtering the News: Essays on Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

[11] It is also [not so surprising](#) that amongst the protestors (which the media called a "large anti-Iran protest movement") based outside of Columbia University during Ahmadinejad's visit "[were in fact anti-war protestors demanding an end to US threats directed against Iran.](#)"

[12] Some progressive commentators like [Gabriel Kolko \(2007\)](#) argue that a war with Iran is unlikely.

[13] McChesney, R. W. (1997) *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy*. New York: Seven Stories Press, p.71.

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