



Machinations of Media: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model in Umberto Eco's *Numero Zero*

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Abstract

Modern mediascapes are often detached from reality. Newspapers simulate facts and serve the interests of the powerful. The propaganda model of media, proposed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, offers a framework for analysing how, even in liberal democracies, the media are structured to support those in power. The dominant elite indirectly controls the media through market forces, which operate via five filters shaping news content. Umberto Eco's final novel, *Numero Zero*, centres on a fictional newspaper project called *Domani*. This article analyses the newspaper project using the propaganda model framework. Juxtaposing the filters of the propaganda model with *Domani*'s operational principles and practices reveals the manipulations and the manufacturing of news.

Keywords: Propaganda Model, newspaper, media, truth, umberto eco, Noam Chomsky

Introduction

Literature is not merely confined to the ivory towers of imagination. It also serves an emancipatory function, as it mirrors, critiques, and offers solutions to social problems. Umberto Eco (1932-2106) is renowned not just as a literary theorist and author, but also as a public intellectual with a clear stance on social questions, as evidenced by the corpus of his essays. Although his mastery of postmodern fiction is celebrated for theory-aware novels set in medieval times, it also provides striking social commentaries on contemporary society. Among his fictional works, *Numero Zero*, his last book, stands out for its unusual contemporaneity and brevity for a novel

by Eco. Centred around the inception of a fictional newspaper, this novel offers insights into the media industry. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model of mass communication provides an adequate theoretical framework for analysing the literary artefact and eliciting the underlying social commentary for our times.

Numero Zero: Newspaper of Tomorrow and Reality of Present

Numero Zero, published in 2015, is set in post-war Italy marred by scandals, power struggles, and political instability. Colonna is a failed writer hired as part of a team to create pilot issues for a new daily



named Domani, which means tomorrow. Simeï, the team leader, sets up the newspaper for a business mogul named Commendatore Vimercato. He never genuinely planned to launch the newspaper, a fact only Simeï and Colonna knew. However, he intended to use it as leverage to blackmail the other elites and secure his place among the higher echelons of power. As the cynical editorial team fabricates stories and rehearses media strategies, Braggadocio, one of the journalists, devises a conspiracy theory. He argues that it was Mussolini's double who was executed in 1945, and the post-war muddled Italian polity was orchestrated for Mussolini's return. Finally, the conspiracy theory takes the life of Braggadocio, the newspaper project shuts down, and everybody flees.

The narrative centrepiece is the newspaper project called Domani. As the title suggests, the idea was to publish news, giving the impression that it predicts the future and demonstrates the potential of news in power-broking.

Propaganda Model: Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky proposed the propaganda model of media to analyse how mass media function as a tool to propagandise and establish the values of the elites. This theoretical framework is presented in their 1988 book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. In dictatorial countries, utilising media as a propaganda tool is very apparent in the form of bureaucratic high-handedness and official censorship. In contrast, in democratic politics, it is commonly believed that media propaganda does not exist. Because democracy postulates that "the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived" (Herman and Chomsky lix). However, in reality, even in democracies, the media serve the dominant elite or government interests covertly by attuning to the pressures of market forces.

The propaganda model states that the raw information or news reaches the audience after passing through five successive filters that are: a) ownership of the medium, b) advertising, c) sources, d) flak, and e) Ideology. These filters interact and

reinforce one another to effectively "fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place" (Herman and Chomsky 2). These filters are so naturalised that even the media news people are unaware of their subjective sieving of information and are enchanted into believing that the media sector, indeed, works objectively.

The propaganda model, though conceived in the context of modern America, has global validity. It proves its applicability in the analysis of the mediascape of other parts of the world, such as Britain (Mullen 2018; Rai 2019), Africa (Franklin and Love 1998), Asian countries like Pakistan (Mustafa 2004) and India (Ram 2011). The theoretical framework retains its validity not only across space but also over time, as Christian Fuchs (2018) utilises it in analysing the digital landscape of our era, characterised by the internet, social media, and Big Data.

Applying the same theoretical framework to the operation of the daily newspaper project, Domani, in *Numero Zero* would expose the propaganda model in action. However, the filtering of news to meet the demands of dominant structures "is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy" (Herman and Chomsky xi). In the case of Domani, the selection of an editorial team headed by Simeï, who internalises and embodies the values of the dominant structures and consequently determines what is newsworthy, activates the filters of the propaganda model.

Filter I: Ownership

Ownership is the first filter affecting news choices. A media outlet with extensive reach demands a significant investment, thereby restricting ownership to a select few wealthy individuals. Subsequently, profit outweighs service as the aim of such media mansions. The pressure of market forces has led to "loosening of rules limiting media concentration, cross-ownership, and control by non-media companies" (Herman and Chomsky 8). Additionally, another aspect of the growing commercialisation and corporatisation of media is the move towards



an administrative structure overseen by a board of directors. In essence, the market forces manifested through increased investment and organisational restructuring would prioritise profit-making for the media.

The owner of Domani, Commendatore Vimercate, is a business magnate. He owns many hotels along the Adriatic coast, manages numerous pensioner homes, and controls TV channels and around twenty publications, including magazines. The portrayal of Vimercate aligns with the modern ownership described by the propaganda model. Setting up a newspaper, even if it is experimental, requires a considerable investment, and it is his immense wealth, acquired from ownership of media and non-media firms, that establishes Domani. As a businessman, Commendatore's aim is not the service of truth, but rather the greater return for his investment in the form of entry into higher echelons of power and money. The ownership filter, operating through Simeï's editorial policy, is evident when the news about air pollution and the write-up on fake Orders of Knights were discarded. Meanwhile, the editor insisted on an article criticising a magistrate who troubles the owner. When he was asked, "You're saying we have to check whether or not the Commendatore is going to like each article?" his reply was definitive: "Of course," "He's our majority shareholder, as they say" (Eco64).

Nevertheless, later, when Maia sarcastically asks about the owner's interest in the insinuating articles, Simeï dismisses the question, saying, "We're not accountable to the proprietor for any of our journalistic policies," and "The Commendatore has never sought to influence me in any way" (Eco116). This incident echoes the media's attempt to maintain the facade of ethical standards even when the filter of ownership clearly compromises the entire journalistic process.

Filter II: Advertising

The market demand for increased investment would compel media outlets to view advertising as a significant source of revenue. Because of advertising revenue, newspapers could be sold at a price below their actual cost, thereby making them competitively

priced to gain market share. Consequently, the media will have to cater to the political interests and prejudices of the advertisers. In place of the final buyer's choice, advertisers' choice influences editorial decisions (Herman and Chomsky 14). This requisite eventually becomes a filter in the selection of news.

Perhaps the filter that finds the least resonance in the novel is advertisement. Since the newspaper was in pilot issues and later shut down abruptly, the advertising filter that normally operates during regular publication is largely absent, apart from some direction by Simeï to leave space for adverts. However, this also highlights the importance placed on advertising income.

Filter III: Sources

"The media needs a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news" (Herman and Chomsky 18). This is expensive, so the media focuses on central nodes of activity, such as city halls and police stations. Another tactic for obtaining news is to rely on official government and corporate sources, which would bestow presumptively credible information. Moreover, the presumed credibility of such information eliminates the need for further investigations to verify its accuracy, unlike unofficial sources, which must be further verified.

This creates a symbiotic relationship where the media gains affordable, accessible news, and powerful sources have their viewpoints disseminated widely. Power structures, as the primary sources, become the primary definers of the news, since they create it and hold the power to interpret its meaning. In an age of expertism, the sources also provide 'experts' who validate the official viewpoint and discard the dissidents. The coalescence of all these tactics makes the media a conduit for official propaganda, not by overt coercion, but by serving as the most economical and presumptively credible source for news organisations.

The media's dependency on sources due to the cost of research is reiterated when Simeï dismissed Lucidi's idea of background files on prominent personalities, stating that research is costly. Cambria, a member of the Domani editorial team, gathers news



from police stations and casualty wards, which offer coverage of crimes and arrests at a lower cost than investigative journalism.

Filter IV: Flak

Flak refers to adverse reactions to a piece of news, such as letters, grievances, and legal suits. If the media provokes a large-scale flak, it could incur losses in the form of self-defence expenses and the loss of reputable advertisers. The dominant elite can also organise Flak through think-tanks to serve as a form of deterrent control. Therefore, controversial news that may provoke flak is preferably dismissed.

Maia's suggestion of an investigative piece on the hotel used by the Mafia for money laundering is vetoed. The reason is that it might invite flak from the officials, as the police will be offended for pointing out their failure, and the mafia, as they want revenge for exposing them (Eco 66). The fear of flak acts as a deterrent control, also in restraining from covering the assassination of anti-Mafia judge Falcone (Eco 130). Additionally, the editorial team is trained to address criticism in the form of reader letters using the denial technique (Eco 52-53).

Filter V: Ideology

The ideological filter in the initial Propaganda Model was Anticommunism. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was replaced by the ideology of liberal capitalism and the free market's efficiency (Herman and Chomsky xvii).

Ideology functions both as a cohesive and control mechanism, mobilising the public against a common adversary. It is beneficial for explaining and justifying stances that would otherwise be questionable. Additionally, ideology can be used to brand dissidents as anti-elements, discredit their arguments, and marginalise them from public debate. Herman and Chomsky note, "when anti-Communist fervour is aroused, the demand for serious evidence in support of claims of 'communist' abuses is suspended, and charlatans can thrive as evidential sources" (30). Thus, the dominant ideology, shaped by the times, filters the media to produce news that aligns with it and rejects opposing views.

The ideology of post-war Italy was liberal Christian democracy with a firm anti-communist

consensus. Simeï's toning down of the news against Salesians and the ensuing caution against fostering a negative outlook towards the Church are purely ideological in nature. (Eco 116). Another example of ideological bias in news selection is Simeï's acceptance of the news about a miracle, albeit under a pretext (Eco 166-167).

Defeated Dissonances

The manipulation of news through filters is not met without resistance. There will be people within the media ecosystem who recognise the manipulative nature of these filters and, in their better conscience. Whistleblowers and citizen journalism are becoming buzzwords these days. The novel is also not absent of such voices of resistance. Colonna exemplifies a man of ideals, while Maia seeks better journalistic principles. Yet, the story reveals that even journalists with strong integrity often cannot resist these filtering systems. Their personal ethics and honesty often give way to financial temptation, as with Colonna, or are mocked and silenced, like Maia. Over time, market forces either lure or suppress dissenting voices, reducing them to a numb silence. Hence, countering these media manipulations from within becomes nearly impossible.

Conclusion

Herman and Chomsky's analysis of the media's subservience to the dominant elite, even in today's liberal democracies, led them to develop a propaganda model of how the media operates. The model posits that raw information, before becoming news, passes through five filters, shaped by market forces to ensure the interests of the power structures. Umberto Eco's novel *Numero Zero* revolves around Domani, a newspaper in the pilot phase. An analysis of this newspaper's functioning provides a literary specimen of the propaganda model. Unravelling the filters of manufactured news lucidly, the novel fulfils the noblest calls of literature, to critique the power. In the contemporary world of Digital natives who are more accustomed to virtual reality than social realities and artificial intelligence than critical consciousness, literature can serve as a liberative pedagogy only through such critical readings.



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