

Yellow Journalism in the 21st Century?

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A little more than a century ago, as political unrest brewed between America and Spain over Spain's brutally repressive actions to suppress the Cuban fight for independence, two American media giants seized the opportunity to stoke the fires of public sentiment in effort to be the first to boost circulation of their newspaper over one million readers ("Spanish-American"). During the 1890's, these two newspaper moguls, Joseph Pulitzer, owner of the *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst, the infamous owner of the *New York Journal*, in their efforts to outdo each other created what historians now point to as the first "media war." The competition was fierce and neither man was beneath coloring, or even fabricating, news to increase profits. It has been written that Hearst became so anxious for a Spanish-American war to break out to boost circulation (Schiffman) that when Frederick Remington, one of his illustrators, cabled him from Cuba that there was little to report on, Hearst allegedly cabled back, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war" ("Spanish-American"). The sensationalistic journalism of the time, designed to propel America toward a news-making war with Spain, came to be known as yellow journalism. Although PR-conscious news media corporations no longer so blatantly seek to boost profits by such dubious means, there does seem to remain a more discreet self-serving undercurrent visible in modern media coverage. Of course in a perfect world, news media outlets would exist to selflessly serve the public, delivering important, unbiased news to the public. But that is not reality. News media corporations are in reality profit seeking companies, concerned with maintaining a healthy bottom line. And to maintain a healthy bottom line, corporations must create a market, figure out what the public wants to consume, and maintain good relations with their sources to ensure a constant supply to meet public demand. In this paper, I will specifically explore the AOL Time Warner company Cable News Network (CNN) and address the ways in which its nature as a profit-seeking company could potentially color its coverage of the march to war with Iraq.

Created in 1980, CNN was the first 24-hour television news station. The year they went on air, R.E. (Ted) Turner said, "We sign on June 1, and barring satellite problems in the future, we won't be signing-off until the world ends" ("CNN Celebrates"). CNN is thus constantly in need of 24-hour news stories that will keep viewers tuned in for as long and as much as possible. Detractors initially claimed it wasn't possible—that the cost of producing news around the clock was too great for an all-news network to ever turn a profit. But then came the Gulf War and CNN had its ratings coup. Viewership spiked fourfold and so did CNN's advertising rates—reportedly rising from \$4,000-\$5,000 for a thirty second ad to more than \$20,000 (Schiffman).

Not surprisingly, now that another Gulf War looms as a possibility, CNN seems to be virtually chomping at the bit for, as they have already marketed it, a "Showdown: Iraq." The gears of the CNN production machine in fact seem to already be in motion and it would be my guess that within minutes of the first bomb dropping, the theme music, catchy titles, and expert analysts will be rolled out. Roger Ebert once wrote about the brilliant spoof *Wag the Dog*, "It is getting harder and harder for satire to stay ahead of reality" (Ebert). Of course *Wag the Dog* is about a slightly different subject—diverting attention from a messy political scandal by means of a fake war rather than pushing public opinion in favor of a war that will boost ratings, yet at heart the theme is essentially similar—using news media to manipulate public opinion. Ebert in fact wrote some interesting observations about just how closely the movie echoes real life at times, commenting: It's creepy how this material is absurd and convincing at the same time. Levinson[...]deconstructs the media blitz that accompanies any modern international crisis. Even when a conflict is real and necessary (the Gulf War, for example), the packaging of them is invariably shallow and unquestioning; like sportswriters, war correspondents abandon any pretense of objectivity and detachment, and cheerfully root for our side.

This degree to which the news media often serves to promote what is essentially propaganda was studied in-depth in Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*. In this landmark work of media criticism, Herman and Chomsky construct a model which defines the essential elements or "filters" which affect the news media, grouping them as:

1. the size, concentrated ownership, wealth, and profit-seeking nature of the major mass-media firms;
2. advertising as essential to media firms' profit and success;
3. the necessity for media firms to maintain good relations with government and other sources on which they rely for constant and reliable streams of "credible" information;
4. negative "flak" as a means of controlling mass media;
5. and "anticommunism" as a national religion (Chomsky 2).

Viewing CNN through these filters, an image of a mass-media corporation, at the very least capable of producing propaganda, emerges.

I. The Size, Concentrated Ownership, Wealth, and Profit-Seeking Nature of Mass Media Firms

CNN is owned by Turner Broadcasting, which in turn is one of the companies owned by the media conglomerate AOL Time Warner. Although AOL Time Warner's stocks have been in somewhat of a free-fall of late, they are still a massively wealthy corporation with a market value last listed at nearly 114 billion dollars ("AOL"). They control vast holding in the news and entertainment industry including New Line Cinema, Warner Brothers, Castle Rock Entertainment, Time Magazine, Sports Illustrated, People Magazine, Instyle, Entertainment Weekly, Fortune Magazine, Money Magazine, Home Box Office (HBO), CNN, and many, many more ("Companies"). And CNN, just like all of the other companies within AOL Time Warner, is expected to be a money-maker. Although one executive producer at CNN claimed in an article published last year on CNN.com that, "For years CNN did not look at ratings," he readily admitted that, "Now the ratings are dissected, as are the ratings of CNN's competitors, as everyone in the cable business tries to determine how to make money from fractions of a percent of the viewership" (Redisch).

Further muddying the waters is the fact that not only does AOL Time Warner own many of the major entertainment and news media outlets, but they also own major viaducts of mass media distribution including America Online internet service, Time Warner Cable and Road Runner Cable which are major television and internet cable providers. This leads to a situation in which, if they so desire, not only can AOL Time Warner use their news media outlets for propagandistic purposes, but can also control many of the major "alternative" news sources, limiting dissent, as well as control major means by which information is conveyed in mass to the public. In addition to this, they have at their disposal vast resources in which to cross promote their separate companies.

II. Advertising as Essential to Mass-Media Firms Profit and Success

While addressing this controlling "filter," *Manufacturing Consent* focuses mainly on the necessity imposed on mass media firms to not offend or incriminate their advertisers, there is also another role which advertising plays which affects perhaps more clearly the tone of news coverage as war looms as a possibility in the future—simply the need to maintain high ratings which attract advertisers and facilitate higher advertising fees. This can affect the tone of news broadcasts as news directors must not only take

in to consideration what actually constitutes “news,” but must also take into consideration what will bring the highest ratings; and as the last Gulf War and the attacks of September 11 proved, nothing increases viewership like a time of national crisis. And this is what the essence of “yellow journalism” is—not presenting the news in an unbiased manner, but rather spinning and reworking it to make it as dramatic and urgent as possible in an effort to boost demand and consumption.

III. The Necessity for Mass-Media Firms to Maintain Good Relations with Government and Other Sources on which They Rely for Constant and Reliable Streams of “Credible” Information

In order to maintain and grow their business and to attract and retain advertisers, it is necessary for CNN to have a steady source of fuel for their 24-hour news machine. While conservatives have long griped about the media’s “liberal bias,” close studies paint a different picture. Ina Howard reports in her article, “On Party, Gender, Race and Class, TV News Looks to the Most Powerful Groups” that a study of the three major networks’ evening news programs revealed the following: Instead of a liberal bias, the study found, source selection favored the elite interests that the corporate owners of these shows depend on for advertising revenue, regulatory support and access to information. Network news demonstrated a clear tendency to showcase the opinions of the most powerful political and economic actors, while giving limited access to those voices that would be most likely to challenge them.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Howard theorized that mass-media firms would at times censor themselves if it would maintain a beneficial relationship with “credible” sources such as government figures (Chomsky 18). These sources have the attractive benefit of being widely recognizable and considered trustworthy by the general public making them valuable as a marketable commodity. In addition to this, these powerful sources often have a specific message they want conveyed from their point of view and so go to great lengths to secure their position as “credible” sources. Among other things, they schedule press conferences for times convenient for news deadlines and provide news media members with facilities in which to gather for press conferences. Chomsky and Herman point out that because of this, “mutual dependency, the powerful can use personal relationships, threats and rewards to further influence and coerce the media” (22). Taking a skeptical viewpoint, it stands to reason that all three entities—business, government, and news media—could stand to gain from another gulf war: businesses from war contracts, government from achieving political agendas, and news media corporations from boosted ratings. That may seem a bit cynical, yet Chomsky and Herman point to several historical examples in which militaristic propaganda campaigns served the interests of the elite. They point to the Red scare of 1919-20 which served to suppress union organizing efforts in the steel and other industries, as well as the Truman-McCarthy Red scare which helped to cement the Cold War and the permanent wartime economy. They also point to the media’s intense focus on the persecution of Soviet dissidents, enemy killings in Cambodia and on the Bulgarian Connection which helped to “weaken the Vietnam syndrome, justify a huge arms buildup and a more aggressive, foreign policy, and divert attention from the upward redistribution of income that was the heart of Reagan’s domestic economic program” (32).

IV. Negative “Flak” as a Means of Controlling Mass Media

In Plato’s *Republic* the famous parable of the cave describes a situation in which prisoners sit chained since childhood so that they can only stare straight ahead at the wall at the end of the cave. A long way behind them a bright fire burns and in between their backs and the fire is a road with a short wall built beside it. As passers by walk down the road, they carry artifacts along with them which stick up over the wall. The light from the fire causes the artifacts’ shadows to be cast on the wall of the cave in front of the prisoners. As the prisoners see the shadows pass along the cave’s wall before them, they assume that the shadow is the only thing that exists in reality and assume that the voices of the passers by they hear are the voices of the shadows. When one of the prisoners breaks free and sees reality as it is, he goes back to

tell the other prisoners. But they won't listen. They would rather kill him and have things be the way they are comfortable believing, than listen to him (Plato 240-243). In applying this parable to the news media, mass-media firms can be viewed as the passers by who have the power to shape the perceptions of the prisoners. They project illusions of reality but do not strive to encourage the viewers to see the light. Rather they pacify them and give them what they want. Perhaps they choose the images to project, perhaps another powerful source chooses them, but the point is that it is the media that facilitates the projection and shapes the prisoners' perceptions. Yet even with all this power in the hands of mass media firms, it is ultimately the prisoners who dictate what they will and will not tolerate.

A recent example of this can be seen in the "patriotism" much of the viewing public and advertiser's who sought to market to them, expected and even demanded from the news networks after September 11th. Journalist Eric Deggans referred to the experience as running into Chomsky's theoretical bounds of "thinkable thought." Deggans reported the intense negative flak received by his office as well as the offices of WFLA and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies when he reported WFLA news director Forest Carr's decision that the anchors at his station should not wear red, white and blue lapel ribbons while reporting in the days after the September 11 attacks in interest of objectivity. Unfortunately, the public reaction to this only serves to underscore the point that the viewing public is often more concerned with the veneer than the substance, being more than happy to play the dog to the mass news media's tail. As Deggans reports, Bill Maher, host of Politically Incorrect, similarly ran into the bounds of "thinkable thought" allowed by the public when he asserted on his show on September 17, 2001, that, while what the terrorists had done was horrific, the term "cowardly" was an inaccurate description of them. The statement that really set off the tempest, however, was that he went on to say that "cowardly" was a descriptive word more accurately applicable to the U.S. military tactic of launching missiles on enemies from a safe distance. Not only did he receive wide public censure for his remarks but major sponsors such as FedEx and Sears withdrew sponsorship from his show and seventeen TV stations nationwide dropped his show altogether. Perhaps the most alarming flak came from the government itself in a statement from White House spokesperson, Ari Fleischer who said, "There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is." As Deggans points out, "It was a sobering sight: a U.S. government official suggesting there are times when a member of the media shouldn't criticize the government and implying that attempts to punish Maher for his words are justified" (Deggans).

V. "Anticommunism" as a National Religion Manufacturing

Consent was published in 1988 and I think it would be a fair update to change "Anticommunism" to "Antiterrorism" as a national religion. Chomsky and Herman write:

This ideology [of anticommunism] helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism. [...] If the triumph of communism is the worst imaginable result, the support of fascism abroad is justified as a lesser evil. 29

This concept can clearly be accurately applied to the current climate of antiterrorism as a near religion in news media tone and coverage. This has affected not only the coverage, or serious lack thereof, of such civil liberties outrages as the holding of Jose Padilla without the benefit of a lawyer, but also leads to criticism by the media of those who dare to dissent. This can be well seen in a transcript from a recent segment of the CNN weeknight show *CNN Connie Chung Tonight* in which Janeane Garofalo and Mike Farrell appeared to speak in support and defense of a letter to President Bush which had been signed by various celebrities as well as other notable figures urging against a unilateral unprovoked attack against

Iraq. What does not come across in the transcript is the nerve that Ms. Garofalo seemed to touch when suggesting to Connie Chung that perhaps ratings was a motivating factor behind CNN's lack of coverage of the ant-war movement. Connie Chung scoffed as if that was absolutely unthinkable and immediately attacked Ms. Garofalo's patriotism:

CHUNG: Yes, thank you, Mike. We'll start with you [directed to Ms. Garofalo]. You are against, according to the letter, a preemptive strike. Now, if the inspectors find a material breach, would you support war?

JANEANE GAROFALO, ACTRESS: That's a tough, very difficult question to answer, because I think one needs to wait and see if they find something. I'd hate to — you are going to profile that family with their three kids. I would hate to see them get injured in a war against Iraq. Wait a minute, and I also want to take issue about — with what you said about a couple of hundred of people attending these peace rallies. I don't believe that. And I think the mainstream media has been guilty of under...

CHUNG: Do you think we're misreporting that, actually, that we're saying that there are a couple hundred when there aren't?

GAROFALO: I think the mainstream media has been guilty of under-reporting a vast and growing peace movement. I've been attending some peace rallies for months and months now. And every time you read about them in the paper, it under-reports how many people. I'm not accusing you on this point. I'm saying I'm skeptical about (CROSSTALK)

CHUNG: Are you saying we're actually counting these people and misrepresenting how many people are there?

GAROFALO: No, I'm saying you are probably actually undercounting these people. And, again, we are getting off point for that. But I do believe, in the mainstream media, what you said, the drums of war are beating. I don't really know why there this kind of anxious rush to war. It seems as if — this is just me as a citizen, not an actor. And, again, I wish people would forget that actors are signing something. There's diplomats and military personnel on this letter to the president, and people from all walks of life, Howard Zinn, and many wonderful people. I don't understand the rush to war that puts Americans in further danger. It's going to put Israel and Palestine in more escalated danger. I just don't — I feel the mainstream media has decided it's real ratings coup to be excited about war. That's me as a citizen talking. You are skeptical.

CHUNG: All right, but you just said something earlier that I just want to address before I go to Mike Farrell. And that is, you talked about this family with three children who are all soldiers. But the reality is, don't you feel a bit of responsibility in the sense of being supportive of them?

GAROFALO: Yes, I do. How is me wanting to keep Americans safe and wanting to keep them safe unsupportive? That's another bizarre tactic of trying to get people not to speak out. You accuse them...

CHUNG: All right, Mike Farrell.

GAROFALO: OK. Yes, Mike Farrell, go ("Interview")

This dialogue serves to illustrate not only the degree to which CNN seems to have adopted a biased tone on the march to war with Iraq, but also demonstrates the use of the media tactic of silencing opposition by questioning dissenters' patriotism.

Chomsky and Herman write in summary of their propaganda model, "A propaganda approach to media coverage suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests"(Chomsky 35). Perhaps it is unfair to assume that news media firms such as CNN would allow their news coverage to be affected by self-serving interests. One could argue that the people in position to make the decisions as to what is covered and the tone in which it is presented have families too and would not make decisions that would negatively affect the public. But don't tobacco company's CEO's and industry workers have families too? One must also remember news media's somewhat checkered past. In an online textual companion to the PBS documentary *Crucible of an Empire: The Spanish-American War*, an interesting observation is drawn. "Although it may be an exaggeration to claim that Hearst and the other yellow journalists started the war, it is fair to say that the press fueled the public's passion for war. Without sensational headlines and stories about Cuban affairs, the mood for Cuban intervention may have been very different" ("Yellow Journalism"). Though CNN perhaps can not be accused of practicing yellow journalism to the degree it has been in the past, they seem at the very least to be guilty of using sensational headlines and tone to push public sentiment in the direction of war.

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