

Approaching media bias: C-SPAN viewed through the propaganda model

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ABSTRACT

To provide an avenue for further participant experiential analysis within mass media organizations, this study investigates how my participant observation, a ten week internship at C-SPAN, interacts with literature written by well-established academics in the field of mass communications. In *Manufactured Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's present their Propaganda Model, a conceptual model in political economy that states how propaganda, including systemic biases, function in mass media. The model seeks to explain how populations are manipulated and how consent for economic, social and political policies is "manufactured" in the public mind due to this propaganda. The theory posits that the way in which news is structured creates an inherent conflict of interest which acts as propaganda for undemocratic forces. This study examines how media bias can potentially play a role at C-SPAN by applying Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model to findings and observations made throughout my internship. My research asks how the Propaganda Model and its five filters for media bias provide insight, or not, into C-SPAN, with an emphasis on its flagship programs: the Washington Journal, Newsmakers and The Communicators. This study finds that C-SPAN's organizational structure and method of funding reflect two of five filters Herman and Chomsky present in *Manufactured Consent*, and consequently, suggests that an avenue for media bias does potentially exist.

Keywords: C-SPAN, Propaganda Model, mass media, media bias

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Professor Head's research interests include the history of religious conflict and coexistence since the year 1000, popular politics in early modern Europe, and early modern world history. He's published a biography of Georg Jenatsch, an early 17th century pastor, soldier and politician; and is co-author on the Cambridge Concise History of Switzerland.

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As a fourth-year undergraduate majoring in Political Science, Luan (Philip) Truong met his faculty mentor, Professor Randolph Head, when he participated in the University of California Washington Program (UCDC) in Fall 2012. Through his eleven weeks in Washington, DC, interning at C-SPAN for the Washington Journal in combination with his Individual Internship in Political Science (POSC 198-I) course instructed by Assistant Professor Yuhki Tajima, Philip came upon this idea for research. In addition to his academics, Philip has contributed to the community by spearheading Delta Chi's First Annual Cup Cake Wars raising \$1,084.19 for the Jimmy Valvano Foundation for Cancer Research, while serving on Executive Board for his fraternity. In the future, Philip plans to study abroad at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic and following graduation hopes to pursue his Master's Degree in International Business. Philip would like to personally thank Professor Randolph Head for his ongoing support, mentorship and guidance throughout the research process.

A copy of this paper in its entirety can be found online at

www.ugr.ucr.edu in Volume VII.

Introduction

As trusted academics in the field, at the University of Pennsylvania and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky have had a major impact in this field. Their *Manufactured Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* serves as a major piece of academic literature this experimental analysis study will be based upon. Another major focus of this study revolves around three main areas within the media: advertising bias, corporation bias and gate-keeping bias. Media bias stands as a major topic of great discussion across many academic fields. The bias journalists and news producers inherently produce within mass media organizations typically occurs through the selection of events and stories that are reported, and how they are covered. Stefano Mario Rivolta of the Universiteit Van Amsterdam mentions three forms of media bias: gate-keeping bias, coverage bias and statement bias (Rivolta 2011). The most commonly discussed forms of bias occur when the media support or attack a particular political party, or ideology, but other common forms of bias include: advertising bias, corporation bias, mainstream bias, sensationalism and conclusion.

Created in 1979 by Brian Lamb as a private, nonprofit organization, Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network provides media coverage of federal government proceedings and other public affairs programming through its three television channels: C-SPAN, C-SPAN2 and C-SPAN3, a radio station and online websites providing “streaming media” and archives of C-SPAN programs. C-SPAN’s channels are currently available to more than 100 million cable and satellite households within the United States. C-SPAN’s motto: *Created as a Public Service, Funded by the Cable Industry* provides insight into its funding and ownership structure. C-SPAN’s mission consists of the following: television coverage of public affairs for the public through a non-biased, non-sensational media coverage approach. My participant observation research focuses on three key shows presented on C-SPAN’s main network: *the Washington Journal*, a daily live program that provides a forum for the leading journalists and

public policy makers to discuss key events, *Newsmakers*, a weekly Sunday interview program with the people making the news and the journalists who cover them, and *The Communicators*, a weekly series featuring a half-hour interview with the people who shape our digital future.

The other portion of this study focuses largely on my active participation while at C-SPAN. In participant observation, the observer takes on the role given to him/her by others and records his observations. For the purposes of this study, participant observation is defined as the type of data collection method used. Participant observation is organized into five different categories based on the level of involvement: non-participatory, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation, and complete participation (DeWalt & DeWalt 1998). Rather than sitting back and observing the environment, active participants take on the role of those in the environment, inherently, doing as they do, embracing skills and customs for the sake of complete comprehension. In doing so, they become full members of the group. As the programming intern for the Washington Journal spending considerable time at the office, it is no coincidence that the office culture of C-SPAN was reflected through my demeanor. Most interns adopt customs like dressing in business attire, taking the metro to work and reading the newspaper every morning. For these above reasons, my experience will be designated not as complete participation but a step below as an active participant.

Upon arrival to the internship site, the Executive Producer assigned all interns to the office four days a week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. The total time spent at the site was approximately two hundred and seventy hours. At the conclusion of the internship, a small stipend was given. Rather than provide graphics and sound bites for the daily segments this study focuses on C-SPAN itself, its organizational structure and the structure of each of its major programs. The following questions were asked: Who is/are responsible for setting each program’s overarching weekly/monthly agenda? Who is/are responsible for

selecting the agenda, and how is the process broken down? How does that affect which guest(s) are invited onto each show? And lastly a broader question: How do the answers above affect C-SPAN's distribution of information to the public?

Methods

To provide an avenue for further participant experiential analysis within mass media organizations, this study investigates how my participant observation at C-SPAN connects with literature written by well-established and proven academics in the mass media field. The following section provides an academic summary of Herman and Chomsky's arguments presented in *Manufactured Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Next is an introduction to Herman and Chomsky's major pieces of evidence: their case studies on Cambodia and East Timor. In the next section are my own findings from C-SPAN, presenting in specific detail the organizational structure of C-SPAN and its corresponding show segments: the Washington Journal, Newsmakers and The Communicators. Various interviews with the two major subjects are also included along with bi-weekly observations of the organization itself. The subsequent section analyzes Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model with my in-field data recording and observations while at C-SPAN. Finally, the conclusion summarizes this study's findings and considers the implications of further research and experiential-participant study on additional media organizations.

Academic Summary

In *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Herman and Chomsky supply a systematic "propaganda model" to explain the behavior of the corporate news media within the United States.

According to Herman and Chomsky, a group of five "filters" account for the reason behind the dominant U.S. media customarily serving as propagandists designed for elite interests. In their essence, these filters synergistically "emphasize institutional memory, limited debate and media content

emphasizing the interests of those in control." (Pilgrim 2013) Only stories furthering the controlling and "ruling class" interests will proceed through the five filters unimpeded and obtain media attention. The model also considers how the media can carefully function when even examination of the evidence would indicate the nature of multiple outrageous stories given attention by the press. Two major case studies come to mind: the media's decision in the late 1970s to not publish material on the killings occurring in both Cambodia and East Timor.

Ownership of the media, which is concentrated in the hands of a few dozen of the largest for-profit corporations in the world, stands as the first filter in influencing media content. From an outsider's standpoint, one can assume that each corporation's need for profit influences the news operations and overall content of the media. Most corporations have a pool of investors and stockholders they need to make happy, since without their contribution, the corporation itself cannot exist. From an insider's standpoint, it is common to have a conflict of interest when "the media system upon which self-government rests is controlled by a handful of corporations and operated in their self-interest". Relating to the first filter of for-profit corporations is advertising, the second filter. Advertising for several of the major media corporations, like the New York Times and Washington Post, has in the past played a role and still today plays key part in the media corporation's income.

The next and third filter is sourcing, where "the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest" (pp. 14). Corporate and government sources provide the necessary substance upon which the news media deeply rely upon. It is not impossible that a bureaucracy, say for example the CIA, can attempt to manage information as a way of leverage to control these media organizations. Essentially, these bureaucracies can 'informationally' subsidize the media. As a result, the media must stay aware of the consequences of getting in the way of such a

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bureaucracy, as the subsidy can disappear. The higher, up in government or corporations, the source, the more credible, which ironically fits acceptable journalistic practices. On the other hand, information received from the everyday citizen is not credible, and not passable through this filter.

Introduced by Herman and Chomsky, the fourth filter identifies the expansion of right-wing corporate “flak” producers used to harass the mass media. They state that this “filter was developed extensively in the 1970s when major corporations and wealthy right-wingers became increasingly dissatisfied with political developments in the West and with media coverage” (Herman and Chomsky 1988). These “flak” producers apply pressure on the news media through instigation and measureless claims of leftist ideological hostility toward capitalism.

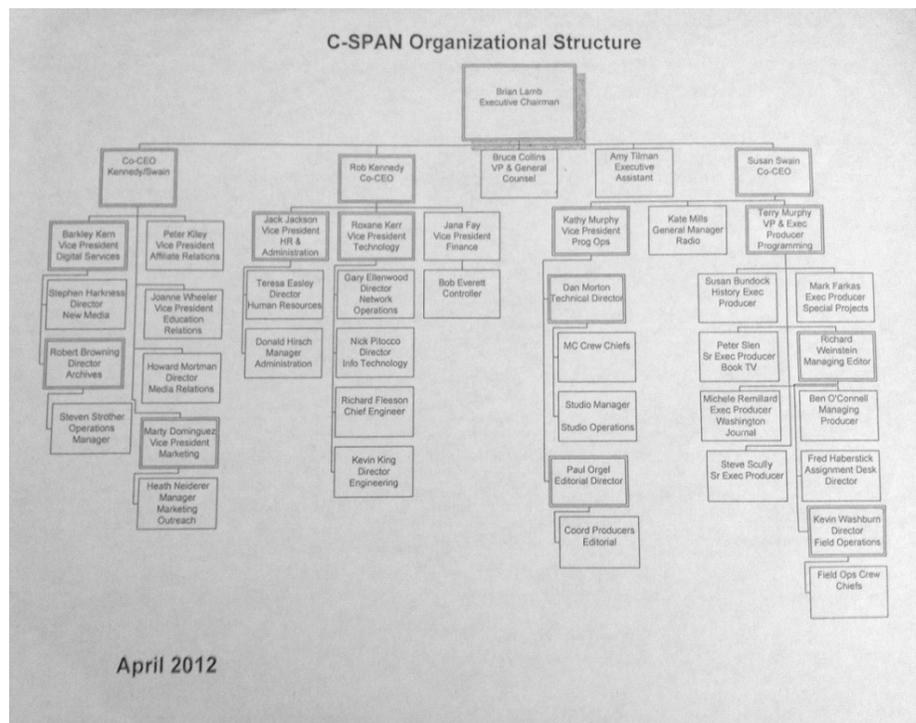
The last filter Herman and Chomsky explain is the systematic belief in anticommunism, which not so much today but more so in the 1970s stood as a critical piece of Western political thought. It also allows for the acceptance of the propaganda model to function as it does. Anticommunism has been deep-seated in acceptable practices of journalism in the U.S. since long before Cold War.

Findings

The National Cable Satellite Corporation – a registered 501(c) nonprofit organization, incorporated November 14, 1978, in the District of Columbia, owns C-SPAN. Overseen by a board of director consisting of twenty members ranging from the top cable and communication corporations throughout the United States, C-SPAN is run by Brian Lamb, the executive chairman. Along with Brian Lamb, five other individuals serve on the executive committee for C-

SPAN’s board of directors: Time Warner Cable Chairman and CEO, Comcast Cable Communications CEO, Cox Communication, Inc. President, Evans Telecommunications Co. Chairman and CEO, and Mediacom LLC Chairman and CEO. These directors are the top of the top when it comes to cable and communication. Between C-SPAN’s board of directors and its executive committee, the network has representatives from nine out of the ten largest cable companies. Furthermore, C-SPAN’s board of directors and executive committee consist of the CEOs of the largest cable corporations: Time Warner, Comcast and Cox. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), C-SPAN is awarded about 10 cents per subscriber from the cable industry. The article states that “the [U.S. cable] industry’s financial support for C-SPAN has always been voluntary... which makes it possible for the network to avoid dependence on government funding, which might compromise its objectivity or reputation for fairness” (Walden 2011).

Given to me by the Human Resources Specialist on my first day in office, C-SPAN’s organization structure under Brian Lamb, C-SPAN’s executive chairman, can be seen in the following image:



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The Washington Journal, Newsmakers and The Communicators fall under the jurisdiction of the VP & Executive Producer of Programming, who falls under the Co-CEO, Susan Swain. The Washington Journal team consists of ten to twelve individuals, a set of rotating hosts, an Executive Producer, Line Producers, Producers, Production assistants, and Guest assistant(s). The Executive Producer chairs daily WJ meetings, one at 10:30 am and another at 4:00pm, sets the shows main agenda, and delegates responsibilities to the rest of the team. The line producers manage the daily operations for the show, making sure each show runs smoothly while the producers gather information on each of the guests, organizes the talking points and making final contact with each guest for booking. The Production assistants create the rundown, the entire script for the show, sets the graphics and the Guest assistant welcomes the guests onto the set.

Running on C-SPAN from 7:00-10:00 am EST daily, the Washington Journal is carefully constructed of four forty-five minute show segments. Each segment provides C-SPAN's viewers with information from a Republican, Democrat, Independent or unaffiliated party. In order, to keep the information balanced, the show brings in one guest from each party for the segments. Viewer call-ins occur from 7:00-7:45 am, a democratic guest is brought in to speak from 7:45-8:30 am, a republican guest from 8:30-9:15 am and non-partisan informative guest is brought in from 9:15-10:00 am. As for Newsmakers and the Communicators show segments, both show's daily operations are much of the same as the Washington Journal. Although there stems one major difference from the Washington Journal, the production of the segments. Both segments, Newsmakers and the Communicators, fall under the responsibility of a single producer. This producer, under the supervision of the VP & Executive Producer of Programming which falls under supervision of the Co-CEO of C-SPAN, selects the guests for the both shows, formulates the talking points place and writes the questions of interest for the so-called "Newsmaker's" and "Communicator's".

While the Journal's telephone lines have always been open to the public, they have not always been separated by political party. A 2001 study by University of Maryland Professor, John Splaine, found that the Washington Journal fielded a disproportionate amount of calls from conservatives (Fesperman 2001). C-SPAN soon after started for the first time separating callers into three different lines, Democratic, Republican, and Independent rotating the show's callers to provide a fairer and more balanced political discussion. Another article presented by Steve Rendall, FAIR's (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) Senior Analyst, titled Failing at Its "No. 1 Goal": Lack of balance at C-SPAN's Washington Journal, "despite C-SPAN's stated goals, Extra!'s study found Washington Journal skewing rightward, favoring Republican and right-of-center interview subjects by considerable margins over Democratic and left-of-center guests. The study also found that women, people of color and public interest viewpoints were substantially underrepresented" (Rendall 2005). The above studies demonstrate that although C-SPAN, founded on its mission of providing balanced coverage, its programs are not unsusceptible to unbalanced coverage.

Analysis

Herman and Chomsky's first filter, ownership, mentions "the size and profit-seeking imperative of dominant media corporations are said to create a bias". They argue that because mainstream media outlets are currently either large corporations or part of conglomerates, the information presented to the public will be biased in respect to those interests. While differing in many aspects, each of these large media corporations C-SPAN included contains a Board of Directors who according to Carter McNamara of Authenticity Consulting LLC, function as "a group of people legally charged with the responsibility to govern a corporation". In applying C-SPAN's corporate governance structure to major media corporation, it is possible that similarities in ownership arise. In addition, because of the structure of governance in the United States, the U.S. cable industry potentially holds a certain amount of leverage over C-SPAN through funding. According

to C-SPAN's IRS 990 form, the highest paid individual "... other than officers, directors or trustees" was the VP & Executive Producer of Programming at a staggering \$183,125.00 (Guide Star 2004). C-SPAN is not dependent on government funding but the above connection gives an opportunity for the cable industry to keep C-SPAN, more specifically, its VP's and employees under control through funding.

As mentioned earlier, the National Cable Satellite Corporation, also known as C-SPAN, is overseen by major cable corporation executives through C-SPAN's board of directors. C-SPAN through its board is connected to a plethora of large cable corporations: Atlantic Broadband, National Cable TV Cooperative, Inc, Charter Communications, Comcast Cable Corporations, Cox Communications, Inc., and Time Warner Cable. Also briefly mentioned earlier financial support for C-SPAN is voluntary and based on the number of subscribers, approximately 10 cents per subscriber. While the above FCC article suggests that funding from the cable industry keeps the federal government from compromising its objectivity and reputation for fairness, nowhere does the article mention how dependence on the cable industry for funding would affect C-SPAN's objectivity and fairness in respect to its own industry.

Herman and Chomsky's third filter, sourcing, states that "the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest". Robert McChesney, American professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, argues that "Professional journalism relies heavily on official sources. Reporters have to talk to the PM's official spokesperson, the White House press secretary, the business association, the army general. What those people say is news. Their perspectives are automatically legitimate" (Cromwell 2002). A list of the most recent guests on Newsmakers and the Communicators, would qualify these shows as a meeting place where information is exchanged with journalists and official sources both present. These shows create a dialogue between carefully selected journalists and official sources by sitting them both down in the same room, on live television.

Conclusion

Herman and Chomsky provide a useful framework for assessing the work of C-SPAN, something that did not exist when they were writing. While the discussion above provides evidence for two the five filters Herman and Chomsky present in their Propaganda Model, the other three filters – advertisement, flak, and anti-communist ideology – do not necessarily play a part in C-SPAN and its three key shows: the Washington Journal, Newsmakers and the Communicators. Thus, owing to both structural and work-process issues, the Propaganda Model does not fit C-SPAN perfectly. Out of the five filters presented, two, ownership and sourcing, mesh together with the findings presented in Herman and Chomsky. This conclusion validates the usefulness of including participant-experience evidence in the case-study method which suggests that examining other contemporary media organizations with the Propaganda model, using further evidence, would be illuminating.

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