

***The Post* (Truth) World:
Reviving the “Propaganda Model Of News” For Our Digital Age**

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*If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed.
If you read the newspaper, you're misinformed.*
–Mark Twain, US humorist and anti-imperialist

Misleading news is worse than none at all.
–Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, *A Test Of The News*

“Freedom of the Press” is guaranteed only to those who own one.
– A.J. Liebling, US journalist

1) Introduction: *The Post* (Truth) World

Begin, appropriately enough, with Hollywood, and celebrated director Steven Spielberg's 2018 movie *The Post* – a “feel good” fictional film focusing on the *Washington Post*'s 1971 publishing of the Pentagon Papers.

Some context.

For decades, Spielberg has served as the feel-good Frank Capra of our time, polishing tarnished historical truths into shiny happy stories for commercial consumption on the world's silver screens. *The Post*, Spielberg's latest, represents post-truth Hollywood yarn spinning at its finest – a story of news, propaganda, censorship and journalism all wrapped up in a big red bow for audiences eager for a reminder of a time when our so-called “mainstream” (read: corporate commercial) US press occasionally “spoke truth to power.”

Calling *The Post* a mix of “biography, drama, and history,” the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) breathlessly summarizes *The Post*'s plot this way: “a cover-up that spanned four US presidents pushed the country's first female newspaper publisher and a hard-driving editor to join an unprecedented battle between the press and the government.” Sounds compelling, but given our post-truth age of news, propaganda, and (dis)information, Spielberg's *The Post* is worth a more critical look.

To wit. Clocking in at just under 2 hours, and featuring a Hollywood A game cast – top billing is Meryl Streep playing *Post* proto-feminist publisher Katharine Graham opposite Tom Hanks as likeably macho *Post* editor Ben Bradlee – Spielberg's *The Post* makes mythical mincemeat out of *The Washington Post*'s decision to publish US marine-turned

RAND analyst-turned government whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg's "Pentagon Papers," 7,000 "top secret" pages of classified information detailing US policymakers' cover up of the Vietnam War debacle.

Post pros? Spielberg is at his best in capturing the frenetic nature of the *Post* newsroom (*Better Call Saul*'s Bob Odenkirk as *Post* reporter Ben Bagdikian steals the show) in the act of bringing a controversial, politically charged national news story into public view in the oh-so-cumbersome Age of Analog. Witness Spielberg's lovingly filmed close ups of the setting of metal type, and his romance to mechanized lines of newspapers flying through giant industrial presses on their way to D.C. news stands. Spielberg also excels at individual (if fictional) character studies, capturing the *frisson* and friction between friends – Graham confronting JFK's Camelot in the form of D.C. party pal and "defense" secretary Robert McNamara (a charming but two-faced Bruce Greenwood) about the lies of Vietnam, and then challenging the corporate roosters gathered around her by daring to publish the Pentagon Papers against their collective masculine judgment – more a feminist battle cry than a critique of US foreign policy, in the hands of Spielberg (and a scene that prompted spontaneous clapping from Vermont filmgoers. #MeToo.)

However. Spielberg concludes *The Post* at the DNC's D.C. headquarters, in darkness, as a night cop discovers "burglars" prowling the building, thus giving a liberal Hollywood head-bashing to repulsive Republican Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the story that put the *Washington Post* on the map as a national-caliber investigative news journal – *All The Presidents' Men*, and all that. On the Vietnam question, in *The Post*, Spielberg sets up Nixon to take the fall, despite the decades-long machinations of the Deep State, and the bipartisan imperial nature of the Pentagon promoted and CIA-goosed US invasion of Vietnam, quietly begun by 1950s Republicans (Ike), ramped up in secret by 1960s Democrats (JFK sent in "advisors," and LBJ invented the Tonkin Gulf "false flag" and fed it to US news outlets to justify full scale US escalation), and ending in the 1970s with defeat and retreat under Nixon, after the deaths of 58,000 US soldiers, and three million Vietnamese men, women, and children. The country of Vietnam, having requested national sovereignty from the Great Powers for decades while under French occupation, again found itself under imperial attack by the US - military, industrial, chemical, and geoengineered – as part of a 10-plus year US occupation that laid waste to the entire country, courtesy of the Pentagon's 'Kill Anything That Moves" policy (see investigative journalist Nick Turse's 2013 book of the same name).¹

Back to reality. Passing off *The Post* as "biography and history" obscures much more than it reveals, and Spielberg's film functions as pop culture propaganda at a time when Americans need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of our century-plus history as a global Empire.

Here is but one *Post*-truth example: the CIA's "Operation Mockingbird" saw hundreds of "intelligence operatives" "seeded" into US news organizations to "steer" national news

stories in pro-US imperial directions – playing the U.S. “news” like a “Mighty Wurlitzer.”² Beginning in the 1950s, CIA ally Frank Wisner, and then CIA director Allen Dulles, recruited *Washington Post* publisher Phil Graham (Katherine’s husband) to run “Mockingbird” within the US news industry, bringing into the Deep State fold respected news men at CBS, the *New York Times*, TIME, LIFE and other national news outlets. These cozy Deep State/US news connections, solidified through personal relationships at the dinner dances and cocktail clubs that Spielberg lovingly depicts in *The Post*, help explain why US “news” outlets remained silent on critical questions of Empire, even championing an aggressive pro-war stance for the US in Vietnam, while ordinary Americans courageously took to the streets to demand civil rights, challenge the Vietnam war, and confront the imperial Beast (a “street heat” 1960s and 1970s reality Spielberg turns into brief but bizarre “La La Land” moments in *The Post*.)

And today? *The Washington Post*’s Graham family sold their newspaper for \$250 million in 2013 to the world’s richest man, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (now worth more than \$100 billion). Amazon’s Bezos now sits on Pentagon boards, enjoys a \$600 million cloud computing contract with the CIA, hoovers 1 out of every 2 US retail dollars out of our national retail economy, systematically guts working class wages, jobs, and small businesses from coast to coast, and (insiders say) orders *Washington Post* reporters to refrain from writing stories critical of, um, you guessed it – Amazon, as well as all of their advertisers. “Democracy Dies In Darkness” is the *Washington Post*’s new Bezos Era slogan. #NoJoke. Perhaps someday, Spielberg will make a sequel to *The Post*, his beautiful, thrilling, but simplistic propaganda piece – Hollywood disinformation about the US “news business” at its finest. And when he does, Spielberg can correct the historical record, and simply call it *Post Truth*.

1) What Is “News”? – A Simple Taxonomy

In considering questions of news, censorship, disinformation, and propaganda in what I call our 21st century “Digital Age of Disorientation,” Spielberg’s *The Post* is perhaps the finest example of what we might call “dis-infotainment” – powerful news-focused Hollywood-produced ahistorical propaganda, or mythology for the movie-going masses. Blowing up *The Post* in the bigger picture? Anyone who has explored the concept of “news” knows that the term has a rich and storied definitional history. Here is a useful starting place, Tony Harcup and Deidre O’Neill’s March 2016 article “What Is News? News Values Revisited (Again).” “Although there are exceptions to every rule,” they write, “We have found that news stories must generally satisfy one or more of the following requirements”:

- 1. *The Power Elite*: Stories concerning powerful individuals, **organizations** or institutions.
- 2. *Celebrity*: Stories concerning people who are already famous.

- 3. *Entertainment*: Stories concerning sex, show business, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.
- 4. *Surprise*: Stories that have an element of surprise and/or contrast.
- 5. *Bad news*: Stories with particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy.
- 6. *Good news*: Stories with particularly positive overtones, such as rescues and cures.
- 7. *Magnitude*: Stories that are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact.
- 8. *Relevance*: Stories about issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.
- 9. *Follow-up*: Stories about subjects already in the news.
- 10. *Newspaper agenda*: Stories that set or fit a news organization's own agenda.

This Top 10 list is useful, sort of, but let's sharpen our definition of "news we can use" to consider our role as citizens charged with navigating this "digital disorientation" here in the US - the richest and most powerful Empire the world has ever seen.

2) What Is "Fake News"? – A Simple Taxonomy

Let's next explore the many varieties of "fake news" – "false or counterfeit information published by news organizations," according to Merriam Webster - found in our 21st century US "news" culture. New book *Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in Post-Truth America* defines "fake news" as "purposefully false and provocative ... misinformation and literally untrue news stories," even as scholars recognize the ever-evolving politicized nature of the term "fake news" in an era when powerful corporate, media and state players push "fake news" terms for their own propagandistic purposes."³

Here's a bold claim: the biggest purveyor of "fake news" is the US "Deep State," the subterranean network of US government officials, intelligence agencies, and corporate commercial "news" outlets who often collaborate to "manufacture consent" (to borrow Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's phrase) for US imperial policies. Drilling deeper, most of what is defined as "news" in the United States news' scape is best classified in one of the following categories – a conceptual taxonomy, of sorts.

- 1. *Infotainment*: Any "one off" "news" story that promotes fluffy "kitty in the tree" narratives falls into this category. Momentary glimpses of celebrities, sports figures, entertainers, as well as "feel good" stories (often referred to as "human interest"

stories) or freakish “dog hit thrice by lightning” tales can all be classified as “infotainment.” These stories keep audiences watching, cultivate a “buyers mood,” and promote aspirational lifestyles and a culture of consumerism central to the ideological underpinnings of our US “news” culture.

- 2. “*Junk Food News*: “Infotainment” on serialized steroids, “junk food news” refers to ongoing “news” stories driven by “sensationalized, personalized, and homogenized inconsequential trivia,” often filling space that otherwise could be occupied by “real news.” Project Censored founder Carl Jensen coined the term in a 1983 edition of *Penthouse* magazine, and since 2001, Project Censored has since devoted a chapter of their annual *Censored* book of top 25 censored news stories to an exploration of the top 10 junk food news stories from the previous year (Phillips, 2001). Jensen developed a humorous taxonomy for different kinds of “junk food news” that included 1) brand name/celebrity gossip, 2) sexposes, 3) show biz stories, 4) “yo yo” news (daily ever-changing statistics like stock market numbers); 5) fads and fashion; 6) anniversaries; 7) sports and celebrity athletes; and 8) political campaign horse race “news” – which politician has raised the least or most money or is running ahead or behind in which state at any given moment.
- 3. “*News Abuse*:” Another term coined by Project Censored, “news abuse” refers to news stories that potentially have merit, but are presented by US corporate “news” outlets in a slanted or non-newsworthy manner. A classic example is the sensationalized and fabricated “Private Jessica Lynch” story as a stand in for more critical coverage of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. I could fill this chapter with dozens of other “news abuse” moments– see any annual *Censored* book for a laundry list of examples.
- 4. “*Deep State Disinformation*:” Refers to secretive “news” campaigns waged by the Deep State to “seed” US corporate print, radio and television news outlets with public relations propaganda designed to “manufacture consent” for particular policy outcomes. US wars of aggression are perhaps the most prominent examples of Deep State disinformation campaigns. Public relations firms like Hill and Knowlton provided “news” content to justify the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and prominent national journalists like *New York Times*’ Judith Miller provided front page (dis)information reporting on Iraq president Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, stories that turned out to be false, but in the moment helped provide the rationale for aggressive US war-making in the Middle East, Africa and Beyond.

As mentioned earlier, Deep State US intelligence services like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have cultivated cozy relationships with prominent US journalists and publishers since the beginning of the Cold War (remember “Operation Mockingbird”), and now, even prominent Democratic Party operatives maintain intimate ties with US

journalists, publishers, and news outlets, as revealed by 2016 documents published by WikiLeaks. The CIA's start-up funding of Google, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' recent purchase of *The Washington Post*, and Amazon's brokering of a \$600 million data-sharing deal with the CIA, are but three specific examples that provide further evidence of the intimate ties between new digital media corporations, US journalism outlets, and the Deep State.⁴

- 5. “*Click Bait:*” Broadly, this term refers to any web content that prioritizes the generating of click-through online advertising revenue over any effort to provide accurate, detailed, nuanced, or complex news content, usually through the deployment of eye-catching graphics or titillating headlines. Some of the most popular online “news” sites – *Huffington Post*, *Upworthy*, *Buzzfeed*, *Salon*, *Townhall*, and *Breitbart* – are driven by an obsession with providing profit-driven “clickbait” content.

3) Our US “Truth Emergency”

Tally up this “fake news” taxonomy, and US citizens are facing an unprecedented situation Project Censored refers to as our collective “Truth Emergency.” Writes Project Censored’s Peter Phillips:

There is a literal truth emergency in the United States, not only regarding distant wars, torture camps, and doctored intelligence, but also around issues that most intimately impact our lives at home. For example, few Americans know that there has been a thirty-five year decline in real wages for most workers in the country, while the top 10% now enjoy unparalleled wealth with strikingly low tax burdens. (Phillips and Kubiak in *Censored 2004*)

At our news journal *Vermont Independent*, we offer a comprehensive top 10 list of underreported news stories that are vital to informing citizens of the US of Empire “what is really going on,” which journalist George Seldes argues should be the #1 definitional goal of “news we can use.”⁵

In the spirit of “clickbait,” here is our brief “Top 10” “news we can use” list, drawn from our *Plan ‘V’ – Designing a 2nd Vermont Republic* pamphlet, available at www.vermontindependent.org:

- 1. The US financial sector’s debt-driven predatory capitalism, featuring a global economy driven by Wall Street, unaccountable moneyed institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO, and the “Deep State.”⁶
- 2. The Pentagon’s pursuit of a policy of “full spectrum dominance,” global arms sales, drone warfare, geoengineering, sequential energy wars, and aggressive creation of “failed states” in the greater Middle East.

- 3. The gutting of the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights in the name of “Homeland Security.”
- 4. Electoral Dysfunction—our votes as US citizens are no longer accurately counted.
- 5. A massive Orwellian surveillance apparatus—think Facebook meets Google meets the NSA—which spies on us all.
- 6. A bankrupt and oligopolistic two party Democratic/Republican political system that serves only the rich and powerful.
- 7. A mass media network controlled by for-profit multinational corporations that distracts and divides us.
- 8. A US neo-colonial “empire of bases” (as many as 1,000) that seeks to control the entire Planet and outer space, a space-age exercise in “imperial overreach.”
- 9. A collective inability to face the civilizational challenges that confront US—geoengineered climate change, peak oil, and the threat of nuclear Armageddon.
- 10. Catabolic collapse—the Mother of all Dilemmas—systemic breakdown of a complex civilization that has overextended itself, a problem that has ultimately possessed and consumed every Empire over the past 10,000 years of world history.⁷

All of these stories are dramatically underreported within US corporate mainstream “news” channels and outlets – to our collective detriment and ignorance. Without a basic factual “news”-driven understanding and an informational grounding in US imperial policies, we as US citizens cannot even begin to discuss and debate the vital issues of our time.

4) “Fake News” versus “Real News”

The term “Fake News” is a newly weaponized phrase for an old phenomenon – propaganda. In the face of fake news, let’s get real. Here is a simple definition. “Real news” stories are defined by *“information that is recent, relevant, reliable, historically framed, hegemonically hip, and multi-perspectival.”*

Let’s consider each of these six elements in turn.

- 1. “Recent” means that the news story in question has been recently introduced into the cultural conversation and is,

- 2. “*Relevant*” means “in play” across multiple platforms and in various arenas.
- 3. “*Reliable*” refers to clearly verifiable and explicitly named “go to” sources (as opposed to vague, unclear, or unnamed “government officials” or “sources claimed” language.)
- 4. “*Historical framing*” means that the news story is contextualized in some meaningful fashion, grounded in past precedents and events – it does not simply occupy what might be called “the amputated Now.”
- 5. “*Hegemonically hip*” means that the news story makes transparent the power relations inherent in any discussion surrounding political events, including the biases and subjectivities of the news source reporting the story – foregrounding the political economy of news on a story by story basis is a vital intellectual task.
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- 6. “*Multi-perspectival*” refers to the importance of news stories embedding multiple points of view within their narrative, not simply a binary “he said/she said” or Dems/ Reps sort of framing typically found in much of what passes for “news” today.

While these six ingredients can be considered as a simple guide for defining “real news,” when applying them as a framework for analyzing stories produced and distributed within our 21st century digital news culture, it quickly becomes apparent how few “real news” stories are produced by our “news industry” outlets across print, radio, television and the Internet. Despite the seemingly endless variety of news and information available to us, few so-called “news” stories meet all six of these criteria.

This leads to our next two questions.

Why is “real news” so hard to find in the US?

And, by extension, why are we journalists, news organizations, and citizens unable to produce and deploy more “real news”?

5) The “Propaganda Model of News” 1.0 – Analyzing the US “News Industry” in the Analog Age

To answer these questions, consider Edward Hermann and Noam Chomsky’s conceptual model known as the “propaganda model of news” (PMON). First published in their seminal 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, the PMON is perhaps the most conceptually sophisticated critique of the US news “industry” ever produced.

Begin with their overarching conceptual argument.

The US “news industry,” Chomsky and Herman argued in 1988, is a “guided market system,” with the guidance being provided by the government, the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives, and the assorted individuals and group who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives.” This “guided market system” creates daily storytelling opportunities within the “news industry” steered “by the government, the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives, and the assorted individuals and group who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives.”⁸

In other words, the PMON suggests that the “social purpose” of US “news” is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state,” Chomsky and Herman concluded. “The news media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises.”⁹

Chomsky and Herman ended their book with a warning from former *Washington Post* journalist-turned-media scholar Ben Bagdikian, who observed that the institutional biases of the “news” media revealed by the PMON “does not merely protect the corporate system. It robs the public of a chance to understand the real world.”¹⁰

Words worth pondering. We’ll come back to them shortly.

Manufacturing Consent was published in three editions: 1988, and then in 2002 with a new preface, and then again in 2008 with a new afterword. The book’s core structural argument relies on extensive analysis of *The New York Times*’ “news” coverage during the mid-1980s. Chomsky and Herman used their data to posit a list of five “filters” through which all raw information has to pass before being published by “respected” (read: corporate commercial) US mainstream “news” outlets. These five filters, best understood as emerging out of intimate Corporate/State economic and political networks, allow the US “news” media “to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity,” wrote Chomsky and Herman, and the US “news industry’s” collective “choices, emphases, and omissions can often be understood best...by analyzing them in such terms.”¹¹

Even in our 21st century’s highly charged political climate, many US “news” outlets claim to be unbiased, professional, and objective. After documenting systemic bias within the *New York Times*, Chomsky and Herman, by contrast, sounded a “reality check” for this deeply flawed view of the US “news industry.” “If the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace can see, hear, and think about, and can ‘manage’ public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns,” they argued in

Manufacturing Consent, “the standard view of how the system works [unbiased, professional, and objective] is at serious odds with reality.”¹²

In a moment, I will briefly review all five filters here, and then propose five additional filters for our digital age. Before doing so, let’s consider Edward Herman’s last published essay before his 2017 passing (see *Censored 2018*), in which he argues that their “Propaganda Model of News” (PMON) still holds up in the Digital Age, as well as providing updated scholarly and cultural contexts.¹³ His summary conclusions are worth quoting, with a few caveats from my corner.

“The unique feature of the PMON is that it offers a radical analysis and critique of the dominant, mainly commercial and advertising-based, mainstream media (MSM),” Herman wrote in 2017, “locating their regular behavior and performance in their elite-dominated corporate structures and relationships, not in journalists’ news-gathering practices or any supposed role as an independent watchdog serving the general public interest.”¹⁴

Two important observations here. Herman is quick to explain that individual journalists can still exercise some degree of professional autonomy within the “news industry.” And the term “radical” does NOT mean “wild eyed” or “trending off the deep end.” Rather, “radical” implies a structural analysis that “gets at the root causes of the thing in question,” in this case, our national “news industry” culture of fake news, censorship, propaganda, and disinformation.

So again, the PMON “is a radical analysis and critique that traces poor media performance to media structures and relationships,” explains Herman in *Censored 2018*, and these structures and relationships are not “correctable by exhortation or superficial reforms.”¹⁵

Always good to define our terms here.

Back to Herman in *Censored 2018*. Our PMON, he wrote a few months before his death, was “power-based, finding behavior and performance to originate from five sources related to institutional power.”

These five sources are 1) the ownership and profit orientation of the control group; 2) the impact of financial independence on advertising and advertisers; 3) the sourcing of news, with power accruing to dominant sources like the Pentagon, the State Department, or Apple’s headquarters, to which the media gravitate for credible and low-cost news; 4) flak, the negative feedback which is most important and influential when coming from agents of power; 5) ideology (i.e. – “anticommunism,”) which also derives from individuals and institutions with economic or political power.¹⁶

Three arguments for rethinking the five filters for our Digital Age. In his final *Censored 2018* swan song, Herman conflates two of the filters - NEWS MAKERS (i.e. the POTUS, the FLOTUS, the SCOTUS, and other highly visible “news worthy” individuals and institutions) with NEWS SHAPERS (PR firms, think tanks, foundations, and “experts” who “shape” news). 1) I think it vital to separate the two, and 2) I will save IDEOLOGY (filter #5 in their original book) for the very end of my analysis, as a sort of Umbrella filter that contains all others. Finally, I am slightly reordering the filters to make the PMON more accessible to students and citizens.¹⁷

Provocatively, Herman also notes a decided lack of interest in the PMON from the global scholarly community, referencing a twenty-year study of ten US and European media and communications journals in which scholars cite the PMON in only 79 of 3,053 articles (a 2.6 % reference rate), and within that tiny percentage, a majority of THOSE articles cite the PMON without any discussion. Furthermore, “much of the criticism [of the PMON] is extremely superficial and has failed to come to grips with its actual focus and claims,” Herman argues.¹⁸

The PMON, he makes clear, is NOT a “model of effects” or “a rigid or deterministic argument for conspiratorial elites consensually behaving badly, but rather a ‘broad framework for analysis.’” Channeling a sociological structure/agency model, Herman notes (once again) that the PMON analysis “also explained that journalists can do their work with complete integrity while still following party lines and ideologies imposed by the institutional structures within which they work.”¹⁹

6) The “Propaganda Model of News” 2.0 – Considering The “News Industry” in the Digital Age

And finally, in his last published essay before his passing, Herman argues for the PCOM’s continued relevance in our 21st century Digital Age. “The main structural change that has affected the mainstream media (MSM) has been the growth of the Internet, with a rapid concentration process there and a huge drain in advertising revenue from the legacy media to the leading firms providing search information access and social media i.e. Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Twitter,” explains Herman in *Censored 2018*. “Newspapers have been particularly hard hit, with a 60% drop in the workforce from 1990-2016, and a precipitous drop in advertising revenue from \$65.8 billion in 2000 to \$18 billion in 2014.”²⁰

He also explains that our new Lords of the Cloud are quickly building powerful Big Data-driven monopolies – Amazon owns the world of US retail, Google enjoys 88% market share in online searches and search advertising, and Facebook boasts 77% market share in mobile social media, to name but three examples. At day’s end, our civilizational shift from the Analog Age to the Digital Era means more of the same.²¹

Much more. “The propaganda model suggests that the ‘social purpose’ of the NEWS media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state, writes Herman in 2017. “The NEWS media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises.”²²

And finally, Herman channels media analyst Ben Bagdikian’s warning from *Manufacturing Consent*. The institutional bias of the private mass media ‘does not merely protect the corporate system. It robs the public of a chance to understand the real world.’²³ Again, words from three decades ago, still worth pondering.

Herman ends his *Censored 2018* essay with conviction:

The Propaganda Model is as strong and applicable as it was thirty years ago. The structural conditions have, if anything, given it more salience, with greater media concentration but still more competition for advertising revenue, enhanced power and reach of advertisers, and little if any diminution in the effects of the other three filters. What is more, the performance of the MSM in treating the run-up to the Iraq War, the conflict with Iran, and Russia’s alleged election “meddling” and “aggression” in Ukraine and Crimea offers case studies of biases as dramatic as those offered in the 1988 edition of *Manufacturing Consent*. The Propaganda Model lives on.²⁴

So, is Herman correct? Is the PMON still relevant for today’s Digital Age?

I say, YES, with three caveats, five more filters to refine the PMON and, a bit of conceptual reinvention.

Caveats first. The Digital Age is different than the Analog Age in many respects – more powerful and more pervasive, with amplified promise and peril. Herman is a bit too quick to equate the two. Second, the phrase “mass media.” found in the subtitle of 1988’s *Manufacturing Consent*, is somewhat misleading, as Chomsky and Herman focused on NEWS media (not television, or Hollywood films, or X), and framed their analysis around a single influential NEWS journal, *the New York Times*. Third, Herman shortens the PMON to the PM in his final essay. Again, we ought to remember we are highlighting “news” and the “news industry” in our analysis (not Hollywood’s fictional fabrications of the “news industry.”)

These caveats aside, Chomsky and Herman’s PMON, a radical scholarly critique of the “news industry” using a filter-based framework – remains the most powerful starting place for understanding our 21st century news culture. Let’s revive and refine the PMON

for our 21st century age, and take active steps to learn, understand, teach, and apply this PMON framework, as journalists, publishers, scholars, and citizens. In doing so, I propose adding to the PMON FIVE more filters. Below, I briefly sketch out each of our now TEN filters, provide a current example of each in play in our Digital Age's US "news industry" culture, and encourage all 21st century media teachers, communications scholars, citizens, and journalists to embrace and apply the PMON.

More about this in our conclusion. First, our TEN filters.

7) The Propaganda Model of News (PMON) 2.0 - New Filters For Our Digital Age

FILTER #1: ADVERTISING

With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides," Chomsky and Herman wrote in their original 1988 edition of *Manufacturing Consent*. "The *advertisers'* choices influence media prosperity and survival."²⁵

Agreed, and 21st century advertising is at once subtler and more pervasive in our Digital Age of Big Data, because more and more advertising is being micro-targeted at individual news consumers through sophisticated algorithmic coding managed by Google, Facebook, and other digital media corporations. Advertising is the lifeblood of our corporate commercial media culture, and the ceaseless "to be you gotta buy" consumer-happy promotion of goods, products, and services provides the majority of funding for US print, radio, television and Internet "news" media. Advertisers have tremendous power to shape stories that provide US our "news." "He who pays the piper calls the tune," as the old nursery rhyme goes.

Example: Pick ANY corporate commercial "news industry" media outlet and pay attention to their advertising base. With print media, like *the New York Times*, this is easy – just peruse the pages of the newspaper (remembering that online advertising is an ever-increasing and harder-to-spot reality.) "News industry" channels like the *New York Times* are as much in the business of delivering their audiences to advertisers as they are in the business of delivering actual news, if not more so.

Repeat this last sentence a few times.

FILTER #2: OWNERSHIP

The dominant media firms are quite large businesses," wrote Chomsky and Herman in 1988's *Manufacturing Consent*. "They are controlled by very wealthy people or by managers who are subject to large constraints by owners and other market profit-oriented

forces, and they are closely interlocked, and have important common interests with, other major corporations, banks, and government.²⁶

Agreed. In our 21st century Digital Age, many corporate commercial US “news” outlets are in turn owned by much larger corporate entities that have a vested interest in maintaining the US imperial status quo. As Ben Bagdikian’s extensive *Media Monopoly* research has chronicled, 90% of our media content – radio, movie, TV, web, magazine and newspaper outlets – are now ultimately owned by 6 transnational corporations with “little to tell but everything to sell,” in the words of communication scholar George Gerbner.

Example: Research which corporation own your favorite “news industry” channel. Take MSNBC. Formerly owned by General Electric (which manufactures light bulbs AND Pentagon weapons guidance systems for global deployment), MSNBC is now owned by Comcast, the US’s largest cable corporation. I wonder how closely MSNBC “news” has critically covered the national debate over “Net Neutrality,” given interests of parent company Comcast?

FILTER #3: NEWS MAKERS

“The media need a steady reliable flow of the raw material of news [and] they have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet,” wrote Chomsky and Herman in *Manufacturing Consent*. “Economics dictate that they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs, where important rumors and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held.”²⁷

Again, agreed. In our 21st century Digital Age, so much of our daily “news” is consumed by the most visible persons and organizations deemed “newsworthy” – the POTUS, the FLOTUS, and the SCOTUS, to name but three examples. Even a seemingly mundane “news” story – “President Obama rearranges his sock drawer with the family dog!” – often trumps more vital stories that go underreported. And speaking of Trump, the current POTUS’ individual tweets – 140-character micro blog messages squeezed off in the dead of night - now constitute front page news. This absurdity is a powerful example of the NEWS MAKER filter at work.

FILTER #4: NEWS SHAPERS

“The dominance of official sources is weakened by the existence of highly respectable unofficial sources that give dissident views with great authority,” wrote Chomsky and Herman in 1988. “This problem is alleviated by ‘co-opting the experts’ – putting them on the payroll as consultants, funding their research, and organizing think tanks that will hire them directly and help disseminate their messages.”²⁸

True enough. Former Democratic presidential candidate and Vermont pediatrician Howard Dean, who represented (he said) “the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party” when he ran an insurgent presidential campaign in 2004, now routinely appears on US television “news” programs to denounce progressive policies like “single payer health care.” Prestigious US think tanks, foundations, and public relations firms, meanwhile, are in the business of producing “research” designed to generate news and (dis)information for our voracious 24/7 Digital Age news cycle. For a variety of reasons, news organizations often find it easier to simply “source” their information from these NEWS SHAPER organizations rather than conduct their own independent investigative research.

FILTER #5: FLAK

“Flak’ refers to negative responses to a NEWS media statement or program,” wrote Chomsky and Herman in *Manufacturing Consent*. “It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches or bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, or punitive action.”²⁹

Yes. “Flak” or “negative criticism,” are attacks on individual journalists or news organizations who stray beyond the boundaries of the accepted news *status quo*. The past few decades are littered with the careers (and occasional corpses) of US journalists who got too close to power in their pursuit of a story they deemed the public had a right to know, but offended the wealthy and powerful.

Examples: NBC fired popular TV news personality Phil Donahue for his outspoken criticism of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and Pulitzer prize winning *New York Times* foreign affairs journalist Christopher Hedges chose to resign before he was fired by the newspaper for his outspoken criticism of the US invasion of Iraq. Numerous examples of “flak” abound.

Taken together, these five filters together comprised Hermann and Chomsky’s “propaganda model of news,” and is my starting place for expanding the PMON for our 21st century Digital Age.

8) PMON 2.0 – Expanding the Conceptual Model

To wit. Here are five additional filters, based on how news and (dis)information is produced, deployed and “shared” through 21st century digital networks. Again, “disorientation” seems a central hallmark of our Digital Age, given the mind boggling complexities surrounding the workings of our 21st century news industry” culture. These filters may help

render some order out of chaos.

FILTER 6: “DEEP STATE” DISINFORMATION

As mentioned earlier, the “Deep State” has for decades secretly partnered with “news” organizations and think tanks to “seed” stories into mainstream “news” channels designed to promote US imperial agendas, protect corporate interests, and advance the goals of what retired US general and departing Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower famously called the “military industrial complex” in his 1961 farewell address.

In our 21st century Digital Age, the concept of the “Deep State” is now cracking into mainstream cultural conversations in ways never seen before, and this phenomenon bodes well for independent news analysis and information access. An entire book could be written on the Deep State’s relationship with the US news media. Certainly, the DEEP STATE DISINFORMATION “filter” is difficult to spot, as it demands a deep critical knowledge of US history and politics, and the ability to see beyond media-manufactured false binaries – Red versus Blue, Democratic versus Republican, “liberal” versus “conservative, “for us or against us.”

Example: Research “Operation Mockingbird” for the origins of one influential Deep State sponsored disinformation operation. Today, the use of the term “fake news” disguises myriad disinformation campaigns, a phenomenon Edward Herman explored in a lengthy *Monthly Review* essay a few months before his passing, in which he focused his attention on anti-Russian propaganda deployed through US “news industry” outlets, Specifically, the “Russia hacked the 2016 election” meme.³⁰

“It has been amusing to watch the *New York Times* and other mainstream media outlets express their dismay over the rise and spread of ‘fake news,’ Herman writes in fall 2017. “These publications take it as an obvious truth that what they provide is straightforward, unbiased, fact-based reporting. They do offer such news, but they also provide a steady flow of their own varied forms of fake news, often by disseminating false or misleading information supplied to them by the national security state, other branches of government, and sites of corporate power.³¹

Herman also points to the role of information suppression, even outright censorship, as practiced by 21st century “pillars” of US journalism. “An important form of mainstream media fake news is that which is presented while suppressing information that calls the preferred news into question,” he explains. “Mainstream media fake news is especially

likely where a party line is quickly formed on a topic, with any deviations therefor immediately dismissed as naïve, unpatriotic, or simply wrong.”³²

Herman then historicizes this current phenomenon, providing a brief hundred-year history. “Fake news on Russia is a *Times* tradition that can be traced back at least as far as the 1917 revolution,” he explains. “The *Times* has taken the Russian hacking story as established fact, despite the absence of hard evidence.” Herman also connects the dots between the “Deep State” and the *New York Times* (an old story, as it turns out.) “While quoting the CIA’s admission that it had no hard evidence, relying instead on ‘circumstantial evidence’ and ‘capabilities,’ the *Times* was happy to describe these capabilities at great length and to imply that they proved something,” Herman concludes. “Editorials and news articles have worked uniformly on the false supposition that Russian hacking was proved, and that the Russians had given these data to WikiLeaks, also unproven.”³³

In sum, the “Russians hacked the 2016 Presidential Election” meme is perhaps the most powerful example of the DEEP STATE **DISINFORMATION** filter bubble at work in our current US “news industry” 24/7 cycle.

FILTER #7: ALGORITHMS

Contributing to our 21st century Digital Age, too, is the widespread use of proprietary corporately-controlled news and (dis)information platforms built on sophisticated ever-evolving computer code programs known as algorithms. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and other powerful global digital media corporations are constantly exploring new and novel ways to harvest consumer data and capture networked content for their true customers – advertisers and the third-party data harvesting companies who collect and share consumer information, often in secret our consent.

To wit, our 21st century “news industry” provides vital content within the algorithmic mix, revealing intimate details about users’ personal data and our connections with others. Becoming more aware of the ALGORITHM’s evolving power is vital. Take a single but powerful example: Google’s April 2016 decision to divert online readership traffic away from independent “left leaning” news sites like Truthout, Alternet, RT, WSWS, and Truthdig, all of which saw their monthly visitor rates drop precipitously in the following weeks and months.³⁴ Project Censored’s webmaster reported a similar drop.

“Google, Inc., isn’t just the world’s biggest purveyor of information; it is also the world’s biggest censor,” writes *USA News*’ Robert Epstein in response to Google’s algorithmic manipulations. “When Google’s employees or algorithms decide to block our access to

information about a news item, political candidate or business, opinions and votes can shift, reputations can be ruined and businesses can crash and burn.”³⁵

Examples of what we might call “algorithmic censorship” abound – look for increased debate about this phenomenon (or maybe not?) as more of our news moves online.

FILTER #8: FILTER BUBBLES

Best considered in conjunction with the ALGORITHM, the FILTER BUBBLE is a conceptual term coined by MoveOn and Upworthy co-founder Eli Pariser. Think of the ALGORITHM that is something Digital Media corporations do to us, often without us knowing, while the FILTER BUBBLE is something we do to ourselves. Each of us develops a “filter bubble” through repeated news and information searches online, as a combination of platform-specific algorithms and our own personal search choices construct a particular digital “reality” for each of us over time. If you and I search the exact same word or phrase on Google – “Russia Hack,” for example, we may get dramatically different search results, based on our aggregated personal search queries and decisions – our “digital search footprints,” if you will.

Understanding the presence of our own “filter bubble” and taking active steps to push our search for news and information beyond the routine, habitual, or even comfortable is a vital element of critical 21st century news consumption. Otherwise, we end up wrapping ourselves up in our own “news reality” that merely reflects our own individual tastes, choices, and consumption habits. By extension, our “trusted friends” (a popular phrase in the world of digital media marketing) simply become foils for networking back to us what we already think we know. Fighting the FILTER BUBBLE, like developing an awareness of ALGORITHMS, is vital news consumption and production.

FILTER #9: BEHAVIORAL MICROTARGETING

What if 21st century Digital Age corporations could partner with political campaign strategists to reach into the Web and use social media platforms to “massage” a citizenry’s thinking, influence voter choices on particular issues, or encourage voters to support a particular candidate? Cambridge Analytica, a U.K.-based consulting company, claims they can engage in this sort of “behavioral **micro-targeting**,” using an alleged (and astonishing) 5,000 pieces of individual data on each of 220 million American voters. We can’t know for sure, since their data is proprietary, but the use of “psychographic” data to manipulate **behavior** is sure to gain notoriety in

the years ahead, and must be considered as a primary filter in shaping behavior regarding our “news” habits, particularly as our civic and consumer spaces become ever more intertwined with our digital selves.

FILTER #10: SOCK PUPPETS

Finally, imagine if corporations or governments could create thousands of fake social media accounts to “pad” celebrity social media accounts (#FollowerFactory), or create, share, and promote or attack a particular candidate, campaign or ideological position? Already happening. SOCK PUPPETS is the filter naming these fake (often anonymous or stolen) social media accounts, which can be unleashed into digital and social media spaces via the ALGORITHM’s power and then used to spread messages, stories, and real or imagined claims (including so-called “fake news” stories) virally through various networks. Surely, being aware of the presence and use of sophisticated “sock puppets,” a powerful new digital filter in our brave new digital world of news and (dis)information in the 21st century, is of vital interest for all CMLE practitioners and independent journalists.

To conclude, “DEEP STATE” DISINFORMATION, ALGORITHMS, FILTER BUBBLES, BEHAVIORAL **MICRO-TARGETING**, and SOCK PUPPETS constitute five new and powerful emerging digital filters that shape our “news industry” culture. When combined with the five analog filters posited by Hermann and Chomsky in their “propaganda model of news” (PMON), we gain a deeper and more complex understanding of how news and (dis)information can be used to “manufacture consent” in our 21st century Digital Age, rather than promote dialogue, discussion, and informed debate about vital topics of interest.

5) Conclusion: Towards a Networked 4th Estate

FILTER #11: IDEOLOGY

To return to *Manufacturing Consent* one last time. Chomsky and Herman named “ideology” as their final filter, focusing on the pervasive “Anti-Communism” that permeated 20th century Cold War US news, information, and entertainment spaces.

“Communism as the ultimate evil has always been the spectre haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and economic status,” Chomsky and Herman wrote in 1988. “This ideology helps mold 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 or with radicalism.”³⁶

To understand how IDEOLOGY works in our 21st century Digital Age, recognize that the Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States collapsed in three short years – 1989 to 1991 – with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the (mostly) peaceful implosion of the Soviet Union. Absent “communism” as an existential threat to the US “way of life” (code for “corporate capitalism wrapped in an American flag), US political and economic elites needed a new Demon, and one soon materialized.

Simply change the word “Anti-Communism” to “Terrorism,” wrap it in a powerful phrase – the “Global War On Terror” (A Bush’ian phrase the Obama administration quietly changed to “The Long War”) - and leverage said mojo throughout the US “news industry” culture. Voila. The US is now combatting “Terrorism” with “Democracy and Free Market Globalization,” cover for what Project Censored’s former director Peter Phillips calls the transnational capitalist class. Their triune goal? Pro-corporate globalization, driven by the need to “privatize, financialize, and militarize” everything in sight. And yes, there is a name for this phenomenon: “neoliberalism,” or, as some have named it, “fascism.”³⁷

So now what? When confronted with Neoliberalism/Fascism in a 21st century Digital Age, what do we do? Regardless of one’s politics, most thinking people agree that teaching critical media literacy education (CMLE) has never been more vital than it is now. And reviving and updating Chomsky and Herman’s “propaganda model of news” (PMON 2.0) is central to this collective work. To that end, I’ve summarized the TEN PMON 2.0 filters outlined here in an easily accessed two page handout, along with dozens of other free CMLE resources, at vermontindependent.org - and our use of a Creative Commons license makes these handouts universally available for linking, copying, distribution and use.

In memory of *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s vital if largely ignored work on the PMON, I’ll give the late great Edward Herman the last word, in the form of a question. *Cui Bono* is a Latin phrase that means “Who benefits?” Herman ends his 2017 *Monthly Review* essay with this quiet rhetorical bombshell.

“The mainstream [NEWS] media never ask *cui bono*?”³⁸

Herman’s vital question is one upon which we in the 21st century, might build an entire global critical media literacy education and “news industry” reform effort.

R.I.P. Edward Herman.

Thanks to you and Noam Chomsky for showing us a way forward, towards a more just, democratic, and humane 21st century culture of news we can use.

Here's to a revived PMON 2.0 for our 21st century Digital Age!

¹ Nick Turse. *Kill Everything That Moves: The Real American War In Vietnam*. (New York: Picador, 2013).

² See Brian Covert's "Played by the Mighty Wurlitzer: the Press, the CIA, and the Subversion of Truth," in *Censored 2017*, online at http://projectcensored.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/C17_06_Covert_Played.pdf; which is also Chapter 6 of Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth, *Censored 2017: The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2015-2016* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016).

³ The book is forthcoming.

⁴ Search for Nafeez Ahmed, "How The CIA Made Google," MEDIUM, January 22, 2015)

⁵ As quoted in George Seldes' *The Great Thoughts*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996) - referenced online, no page # available.

⁶ Scholarly literature on the "Deep State" is growing. See the work of Canadian researcher Peter Dale Scott, and for a cogent introduction, Mike Lofgren, *The Deep State: The Fall Of The Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

⁷ Rob Williams, *Plan 'V' - Designing A 2nd Vermont Republic* (Waitsfield: Vermont Independence Press, 2017).

⁸ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), xii.

⁹ Ibid, 298.

¹⁰ Ibid, 303.

¹¹ Ibid, ix.

¹² Ibid, xi.

¹³ Edward S. Herman, “Still Manufacturing Consent: The Propaganda Model at Thirty,” *Censored 2018* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017)

¹⁴ Ibid, 209.

¹⁵ Ibid, 211.

¹⁶ Ibid, 209.

¹⁷ In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky name and order their PMON filters in this way: 1) Ownership; 2) Advertising; 3) News Makers; 4) Flak; 5) Ideology. A subsequent Media Education Foundation (MEF) documentary entitled “The Myth Of The Liberal Media: The Propaganda Model of News” ordered the filters thusly: 1) Advertising, 2) Ownership; 3) News Makers, 4) News Shapers, and 5) Flak, and explored IDEOLOGY more broadly. I do another shuffle for pedagogical purposes. Watch the MEF film online here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYlyb1Bx9Ic>

¹⁸ Herman, *Censored 2018*, 211.

¹⁹ Ibid, 211.

²⁰ Ibid, 215.

²¹ Ibid, 215.

²² Herman and Chomsky, 298.

²³ Ibid, 303.

²⁴ Herman, 208.

²⁵ Herman and Chomsky, 14.

²⁶ Ibid, 14.

²⁷ Ibid, 18-19.

²⁸ Ibid, 23.

²⁹ Ibid, 26.

³⁰ Edward Herman, “Fake News On Russia And Other Official Enemies.” *Monthly Review*, July 1, 2017. Again, for a deeper exploration of CIA media manipulation, see Brian Covert’s “Played by the Mighty Wurlitzer: the Press, the CIA, and the Subversion of Truth,” Chapter 6 in *Censored 2017*, online at http://projectcensored.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/C17_06_Covert_Played.pdf

³¹ *ibid*, 1.

³² *ibid*, 1-2.

³³ *Ibid*, 10, 13.

³⁴ Andre Damon, “Google Escalates Blacklisting Of Left-Wing Web Sites And Journalists,” *WSWS.org*, October 20, 2017.

³⁵ Robert Epstein, “Google Is The World’s Biggest Censor And Its Power Must Be Regulated,” *USANews.com* June 22, 2016.

³⁶ Herman and Chomsky, 29.

³⁷ Cornell West, “This Is What Neo-Fascism Looks Like,” *Democracy Now*, December 1, 2016.

³⁸ Herman, 14.