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Bringing propaganda back into news media studies

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Abstract

With the ascendance of liberal democracy, propaganda activities have vastly increased. The main aim of propaganda has been to protect state-corporate power from the threat of public understanding and participation. Because of its societal importance for public opinion formation, the news media constitutes an obvious channel for the dissemination of propaganda. However, contemporary communication, media and journalism studies have mostly neglected to critically assess the news media's role in producing and distributing propaganda. In fact, despite of the news media's integration into the state-corporate nexus, the term propaganda is rarely used in academic treatises on the news media. Furthermore, only a small number of scholars have engaged in elaborating a systematic understanding of the manifold propaganda techniques that are currently applied in liberal democracies. To fill these research gaps, this article maps out various concepts of propaganda and relates them to the process and content of the news media. On the basis of theoretical and empirical studies, the article demonstrates how different forms of propaganda can manifest in news media content. Based on an integration with, as well as a development of, existing literature, the essay aims to build a tool box that can be applied and refined in future studies in order to detect propaganda in news media texts.

Keywords

Propaganda, news media, journalism, politics, elites, ideology, hegemony

Introduction

The news media constitute a central channel for the dissemination of information in liberal democracies. Additionally, scholars see the news media as a crucial institution for democratic decision-making: in theory, the news media provide a significant portion of the information on which citizens base their political choices (see Jarren and Donges, 2002: 143-145; also Curran and Seaton, 2010; Page, 1996).

Yet, despite its societal and political importance, the news media are rarely assessed in terms of how powerful interests have co-opted them to disseminate propaganda. Some propaganda scholars, such as Bussemer (2005: 389-397), even claim that contemporary

democracies consist of decentralised communication systems which render propaganda virtually obsolete.

That this disregard of the important role of propaganda in liberal democracies has a history, is indicated by the scholarly treatment of Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1957 [1948]) classic text 'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action'. This essay constitutes 'one of the most frequently cited and anthologized' texts in media and communication studies (Simonson and Weimann, 2003: 12). Yet, contrary to 'received wisdom' in academia, the authors endorsed the notion of that the news media played a role 'in maintaining capitalist hegemony' by means of propaganda (Simonson and Weimann, 2003: 12-13).

Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that 'chief power groups, among which organised business occupies the most spectacular place' in liberal democracies used 'economic power' for 'psychological exploitation, achieved largely by disseminating propaganda through the mass media of communication' (1957 [1948]: 457-458). Moreover, as Lazarsfeld and Merton (1957 [1948]: 465) further pointed out, propagandistic news media performance resulted from the fact that 'the mass media are supported by great business concerns geared into the current social and economic system' and thus 'contribute to the maintenance of that system'. As a consequence, they argued, the news media failed to 'raise essential questions about the structure of society' and thus restrained 'the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook' (1957 [1948]: 465). Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1957 [1948]: 466) essay suggested that social objectives 'are consistently surrendered by commercialized media when they clash with economic

gains'. On a more general level, Lazarsfeld and Merton had observed how in liberal democracies, propaganda had taken the 'place of more direct means of control' arguing that 'this change in the structure of social control merits thorough examination' (1957 [1948]: 457-458). Yet, in contemporary communication, media and journalism studies, there is a reluctance to pursue the kind of critical institutional analysis of the role of propaganda in liberal democracies and its relationship with the news media, as demanded by Lazarsfeld and Merton who were two of the leading early scholars in the field.

More than fifty years after Lazarsfeld and Merton's essay was published, it is time to reassess the relationship between the news media and propaganda. Such an undertaking is important for several reasons: First, liberal democracies are highly stratified and research suggests that governance on issues such as welfare, economics, and foreign policy is biased towards elite interests (see Ferguson, 1995; Miller and Dinan, 2010; Page, 1996; Zollmann, 2015d). Secondly, under the guise of the 'war on terror', the US, UK and Germany have been engaging in continuous war in the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia with serious consequences for the target societies as well as domestic populations (see Zollmann, 2015d). And thirdly, anthropogenic climate change as well as potential future nuclear disasters threaten the survival of the human species. How these interest-driven issues will be governed in the future is at least partly determined by the news media as a major institution of information circulation. Theorizing the relationship between the news media and propaganda is thus crucial.

As Silverstein (1987: 50) stressed, 'propaganda analysis lacks a basic body of

literature'. According to Silverstein (1987: 54), propaganda studies should consider the different 'forms' of propaganda and build a scientific tool box that systematizes the processes and contents of propaganda. Such a conceptual framework for the study of propaganda and its related activities has recently been provided by Bakir et al.'s (2016) text 'Rethinking Propaganda as a Sub-Set of Organised Persuasive Communication [henceforth OPC]'. Bakir et al. (2016) also observed the need to study the occurrence of unintentional propaganda, promulgated 'either through misperception, self-deception or institutionally'. In fact, unintentional and institutional propaganda is produced and distributed by journalists because news organisations are constrained by state-corporate power. Institutional pressures are geared into the news media system in the fashion outlined by Lazarsfeld and Merton. Journalists adhere to institutional constraints because of their socialisation in the newsroom as well as internalisation of dominant values, norms and ideologies (see Zollmann, 2009, 2012, 2017). Journalists thus unintentionally produce and disseminate propaganda. Gans (1980) indirectly referred to this process in his major work on journalistic gatekeeping. Gans stated at the end of his study that he had 'largely ignored the intriguing possibility that journalists and their firms are pawns of larger and more basic social processes to which they unwittingly respond' (Gans 1980: 290). Similarly, contemporary media and communication studies have not much to say about these processes and the prevalence of propaganda in the news (see Herman 1986: 174-175). Moreover, a second assumption about propaganda is that it must be based on one-dimensional falsehoods. Some scholars have thus argued against a conflation of news and propaganda (see for example Allan, 2004 and Hallin, 1994).

To rectify these misconceptions, this study relates to Bakir et al.'s framework and the work of other propaganda scholars in order to build a tool box that can be used to detect propaganda in the news. Moreover, the study assesses whether the concept of propaganda can be used to describe the performance of the news media. Based on an integration as well as development of existing literature, the essay will demonstrate that news media mediated propaganda is often distributed unintentionally and may be based on facts.

The article proceeds in several steps: In the first section, I will discuss the marginalisation of propaganda in academia. Afterwards, I will introduce Herman and Chomsky's (2008) Propaganda Model (henceforth PM) as the main approach that has contextualized the processes that explain why the news media constitutes a propaganda system. However, scholars using PM have been criticized for not addressing the question of whether their findings, largely derived from content studies, actually prove that news media texts are propagandistic. The main part of this article will consequently demonstrate that major findings generated from content and theoretical studies actually match with how leading scholars have classified the properties of propaganda.

The marginalisation of propaganda

With the ascendancy of liberal democracy, propaganda was instituted in order to govern people through the management of perception and behaviour. In a prominent initial formulation, Bernays (2005 [1928]) designated propaganda to a broad range of promotional activities conducted by business, governmental or non-governmental organisations as well as the news media. In accord with the realist paradigm, Bernays

(2005 [1928]: 54) argued that if elites ‘can no longer do what they want without the approval of the masses, they find in propaganda a tool which is increasingly powerful in gaining that approval’.

During the first half of the twentieth century and subsequently, scholarship detected a vast increase in propaganda activities. Already in 1927, Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 34) had identified the development of ‘a corps of men who do nothing but study the ways and means of changing minds or binding minds to their convictions’. ‘Propaganda’, Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 34) observed, had ‘become a profession’. Peel (1944: 268) stressed how, since World War I, propaganda had been ‘organised as an industry’ and a ‘science of propaganda’ had developed (see also Mathews, 1957: 186).

Writing several decades later, Carey documented how propaganda was applied as a means of ‘consent-engineering’ and ‘social and ideological control’ in democratic societies in which power and privilege are not predominantly shielded by coercive force but are susceptible to public opinion (1995: 21, 81). Carey (1995: 18) highlighted how the increase in democracy, most notably the extension of the popular vote and the expansion of the trade union movement, was countered by professional propaganda originating from the corporate sector that regarded democracy as a threat to its power.

Similarly, Miller and Dinan, who expanded on the work of Carey, regarded the PR industry as ‘a huge apparatus for legitimating the interests of the few at the expense of the many’ (2008: 5, 181). Miller and Dinan (2008: 6) argued it became increasingly

important to facilitate ‘elite unity’ – of different corporate and political fractions – through propaganda-managed action (see also Miller and Dinan, 2000).

However, despite its societal significance, the term propaganda has largely been excluded from debates about public opinion formation in liberal democracies. This constitutes a rather recent phenomenon. For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the term was unambiguously used by business practitioners in order to describe their promotional activities (Miller and Dinan, 2008: 18). Only after World War I, during which the same propaganda measures had been applied by the belligerent parties to generate support for their war efforts, did business leaders introduce ‘the term “public relations”’ (Miller and Dinan, 2008: 18). Propaganda had also been associated with the German Nazi regime whose news and information operations were based on the propaganda techniques prescribed in the early business literature written by pioneers such as Bernays and Ivy Lee (Miller and Dinan, 2008: 18).

Philologically, a neutral or positive connotation of the term was thus negated in its meaning because both World War experiences demonstrated the manipulative potential of propaganda. As a consequence, new terminology was not only established in the industries but also in academia where researchers increasingly kept away from the use of the propaganda terminology particularly in treatises on Western democracies (see Carey, 1995: 1; Miller and Dinan, 2008: 5; Schulz, 2004: 518). During this process, academic fields were rebranded: the disciplines which nowadays contain what had initially been designated as propaganda studies are PR and advertising as well as subjects within psychology and sociology (cf. Jowett and O’Donnell, 1992: 117-119;

Miller and Dinan, 2008: 4-5; Schulz, 2004: 518; Silverstein, 1987: 50). Moreover, media, communication and journalism related research has largely neglected to scrutinise the central role of propaganda in our societies. For various reasons it has remained convenient to sidestep an assessment of the problematic nature of PR and advertising as propaganda techniques. Similarly, the news media's role as a main producer and purveyor of propaganda is rarely assessed. While US-American scholars of the 1930s, who established the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, emphasised the prevalence of propaganda in newspaper, radio, or magazine productions (see Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1995 [1937]: 223), the propaganda perspective is virtually not applied in contemporary academic works about the news (see Mullen, 2010).

The marginalisation of propaganda is striking because, as Simpson highlighted, the field of 'communication research' is rooted in US-government and intelligence funded 'psychological warfare programmes' (Simpson 1994: 2). This means that many of the foundational centres of post-war communication studies such as Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research (Columbia University), Hadley Cantril's Institute for International Social Research (Princeton) and Ithiel de Sola Pool's Center for International Studies (MIT) operated in the government-psychological warfare nexus (Simpson 1994: 2). According to Simpson (Simpson 1994: 52):

For the first decade after 1945 – which is to say, the decade in which communication studies crystallized into a distinct academic field, complete with colleges, graduate degrees, and so on – U.S. military, propaganda, and intelligence agencies provided the large majority of all project funding for the field.

Out of these scientific undertakings grew a dominant research paradigm that defined the field (see Simpson 1994: 52). This foundational research has been concerned with areas that are still important to this day, such as media effects, public opinion and audiences, diffusion, motivation, two-step communication, content analysis, national media systems and development theory (Simpson 1994: 107-116). These certainly constitute valid research areas. Yet, US-government funding for psychological warfare studies incentivised a particular application of research largely concerned with how to effectively persuade and dominate target audiences (Simpson 1994: 5). Incidentally, such applied social management research suited both US political as well as commercial interests. In terms of the former, one main goal of psychological warfare has been to manage opinions in the Third World and Europe in order to keep these regions in the US sphere of influence (Simpson 1994: 7). In terms of the latter, the corporations benefitted from research that could be used to measure and direct attention towards their products and services as well as to techniques to manage politics and policy (see Simpson 1994: 19). Simpson (1994: 3) thus argued that the military, intelligence and propaganda agencies, 'helped bankroll substantially all of the post-World War II generation's research into techniques of persuasion, opinion measurement, interrogation, political and military mobilization, propagation of ideology and related questions'. These developments help to explain why the dominant terminology applied in media, communication and journalism studies has shielded the role of academia in developing propaganda techniques as well as the existence of a vast propaganda apparatus of which the news media is, it is argued here, a crucial part (see Althusser, 1971: 154).

Hence, in the light of this discussion, there is no reason why the news media should not be scrutinized as potentially a channel for propaganda. Indeed, such an undertaking should be an academic priority. As Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 46) pointed out back in the 1920s: propaganda techniques ‘may be perverted to partisan, personal and class ends’.

News media and propaganda

Why should news media performance be framed in terms of propaganda? The news media are seen as central to the distribution of propaganda by a number of scholars. For instance, Jowett and O’Donnell (1992: viii) identify the ‘range of new communication technologies’ and ‘myriad channels for disseminating information’ as obvious ‘opportunities for increased propaganda activities’.¹ Scholars who have postulated a propaganda function of the news media point to their integration into the state-corporate market nexus as well as to the influences of powerful lobby groups (see Curtis, 1995: 165; DiMaggio, 2009; Edwards and Cromwell, 2006; Herman, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988, 2008; Keeble, 1997; Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1957 [1948]: 457-458; Miliband, 1987 [1973]: 197-198; 211; Smythe, 1981: 39; Winter, 2007).

Perhaps the most widely used propaganda approach to the news media is Herman and Chomsky’s (1988, 2008) Propaganda Model which describes a set of five news ‘filters’ that guide news selection processes and lead to propagandistic output (see 2008: 1-29). Largely based on US data, the PM emphasises how ownership, corporate control and advertising funding as well as market forces shape the respective behavior of managers, journalists and external actors/institutions that provide information to or put pressure on the news media (Herman 1986, 2000; Herman and Chomsky 1988, 2008). As a

consequence of these institutional constraints, the PM proposes that news media content is generally aligned with state-corporate elite interests at various time/space contexts (see Herman, 1986, 2000; Thompson 2009). The PM does not suggest news media performance to be monolithic, nor that the dissemination of propaganda is its only activity. Moreover, the PM does not specifically assess how effective propaganda may be (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: IL; see also Herman, 1986, 2000; Thompson 2009).

It should be further noted that PM's economic and ideological processes are uncontroversial and had, in isolation, already been identified by the so-called Gatekeeper researchers as well as scholars concerned with the political economy of the news like Lazarsfeld and Merton or Marxist scholar Miliband (see Herman, 1986; Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1957 [1948]; Miliband, 1987 [1973]: 203; Zollmann, 2009, 2012). Furthermore, current research suggests that these same processes are highly relevant in the online realm (see Curran 2012: 19; McChesney, 2013; Zollmann, 2015c).

The PM is further considered to be an accepted research model by a range of scholars (see e.g. Allan, 2004; Cottle, 2006; McChesney, 2008; Miller and Dinan, 2010; Sparks, 2007; Thompson, 2009; Winter, 2007). McChesney (2008: 287) even argues that the PM 'remains the starting point for any serious inquiry into news media performance'.

The PM has also been applied to the US, UK, Canadian and German contexts, amongst others (for an overview see Zollmann, 2012). On the other hand, the PM has generally not obtained much attention in the Anglo-American social sciences (Chomsky, 1989; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010: 218). Although the shortfalls of the PM have been addressed, there has been a recurring tendency in academic treatises to rule it out without thorough

engagement (McChesney, 2007: 94). While the processes theorised by the PM are supported by a large body of scholarship, its conclusion, that the news media constitute a propaganda system, appears to be the reason for its negligence. In fact, scholarly treatises that produced similar findings like those of the PM scholars but, at the same time, did not use the propaganda terminology, appear to be more frequently and prominently cross-referenced in academia (see Herring and Robinson, 2003). This handling of the PM has to be seen in the context of the already identified trend in academia to neglect the concept of propaganda in relation to liberal democracies and their communication systems. The issue is further alleviated by the fact that scholars using the PM have not yet proven whether the media content pattern identified by the PM actually constitutes propaganda. Moreover, some critics of the PM have argued that journalistic non-intentionality as well as the news media's rather factual and diverse output would render propaganda obsolete. It is thus important to elaborate on the concept of propaganda in more detail and assess as to whether it can be applied to the news media. Such an undertaking responds directly to Boyd-Barrett (2010: 32) who criticised the failure of PM scholars to identify the 'mechanisms of propaganda in the text itself'.

In the following, the essay proceeds in several steps: (1) Propaganda will be defined in relation to the various definitions that exist in the literature; (2) The question of whether the proposed definition of propaganda can plausibly be applied to the news media will be discussed. This will be done with reference to findings on news media performance put forward by the PM and related scholars as well as the broader literature

on news and propaganda. During this course a number of indicators for news media mediated propaganda will be fleshed out (see Kromrey, 2009).

Propaganda: a practical definition

Propaganda has often been described as the intentional manipulation of public opinion (Bussemer, 2005: 28; also Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992: 4; Silverstein, 1987: 51). Allan (2004: 55-56) seems to start from a similar premise when he argues that news and propaganda should not be conflated because 'the propagandist, unlike the journalist [...], sets out with the deliberate intention of deceiving the public, of concealing "the truth" so as to direct public opinion in a particular way'. According to such a view it is problematic to describe news media performance as propaganda because of the lack of intent on behalf of the journalists. This perspective assumes that propaganda must entail an element of intentionality in terms of its distribution by an agent. In contrast, an examination of the literature reveals that the intentional distribution of propaganda by an individual or group is only one among many types (Ellul, 1973: 79).² Silverstein (1987: 51) argues 'propaganda is spread in a variety of ways, ranging from intentional disinformation promulgated by governments to much more subtle examples'. The latter and subtle examples, this paper argues, include propaganda that may be distributed in an unintentional fashion by journalists. Such propaganda, of course, also entails an important intentional element. The actors and groups who own, fund and control the environment in which journalists operate – powerful owners, managers, advertisers, corporate affiliates, business lobbies and governments – actually have the intention to shape news media messages in accord with their interests, values and practices (see Herman 2000: 102). Yet significantly, this does not require intentional behaviour on

behalf of the distributor who may act as an unconscious intermediary. The following elaboration of a practical definition of propaganda further sheds light on this.

According to Bussemer (2005: 29-30), who synthesized the numerous definitions of the term used in the social sciences, propaganda can be understood ‘as normally media mediated forming of action relevant opinions and attitudes of political or social groups through symbolic communication and as manufacturing of public in support of particular interests’.³ While this definition is useful, it seems to focus on the effect of propaganda, rather than the phenomenon itself. Yet, Bussemer also identified five conceptualizations of propaganda, which were applied in different theory contexts (2005: 33). He described one concept as ‘propaganda as primary agency of integration of the society’ (2005: 34):

Here, propaganda is understood as a device to manufacture social coherence, which can both be systematically operated by central agencies of the society [...] but can also come as a spontaneous and unconscious diffusion of ideology from the members of a society.

Such concepts of propaganda include institutionalised propaganda and do not imply intentional distribution by agents. This is in accord with a concept of news media mediated propaganda that the PM suggests and with what earlier scholars have described as integrating propaganda (or propaganda of integration) (see Ellul, 1973: 74; Silverstein, 1987: 50).⁴ However, for this perspective it is important to consider that while there is no intention on behalf of the journalist, there is intention on behalf of the agents and groups controlling the news media environment. These are powerful actors and institutions that aim to manipulate the news in accord with their class interest and

conscious (see Althusser, 1971: 154; Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Miller and Dinan (2008: 4) add a useful intentional dimension to the definition of propaganda. Miller and Dinan (2008: 4) understand PR itself, but also activities such as corporate lobbying, networking, media manipulation and social responsibility as propaganda. This focus investigates how social interests intentionally produce propaganda and on how this might impact on society and institutions like the news media (Miller and Dinan, 2010: 1).

A comprehensive definition of propaganda would therefore allow for a distinction between the distribution of propaganda, which may be conducted unintentional by journalists, as well as the actors who intentionally control the news media environment in order to manufacture public support and/or action. Furthermore, media as well as non-media mediated forms of propaganda should be accounted for, the latter of which include coercive measures (such as censorship or *flak*) (see also Elter 2005: 20 who provides a broad conceptualisation of propaganda).

Acknowledging the contested terrain over what constitutes propaganda (see Miller and Dinan, 2008: 5), and incorporating the concepts of Bussemer (2005), Elter (2005) as well as Miller and Dinan (2008), propaganda can thus be understood as *the forming of texts and opinions in support of particular interests and through media and non-media mediated means with the intention to produce public support and/or relevant action.*

Such a definition is relatively broad and proceeds on the assumption that liberal democratic societies are exposed to a range of propaganda techniques applied by

various institutions and actors. It is postulated that propaganda not only manifests in symbolic communication (i.e. media-mediated) but also in physical interventions (i.e. non-media mediated) whereas both techniques are aimed at shaping opinion and/or influencing behaviour (i.e. action relevant). Importantly, opinion does not necessarily need to change in order for action to be influenced. Furthermore, the definition suggests three categories for empirical enquiry that are (1) production and distribution, (2) content and (3) reception orientated: (1) Non-media mediated societal processes such as the institutional workings of PM's 'filters', lobbying, strategic interventions, censorship, intimidation or violence. Here, the focus is on how institutions, groups or agents intentionally constrain other institutions, groups or agents and how this results in the manufacture of a particular image of reality or conformity to an agenda. This category is also about distributions of power and the use of coercive measures. Furthermore, the category grasps the intersection between intentional management of the news environment by agents or groups and the unintentional distribution of propaganda by journalists (2) Media mediated manifestations of propaganda such as content of media, PR, or advertising. Here, the focus is on how media content patterns are supportive to specific interests. (3) Effects of media propaganda such as changes in public attitudes and actions (see also Miller and Dinan 2010: 2).

Implications for the news media

In news media texts, propaganda manifests itself if content patterns are supportive to the specific interests that control the news environment. Journalistic performance largely derives from resulting organisational practices and pressures – as defined in PM's 'filters'–, which journalists abide by (see Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Only rarely do

journalists act intentionally, as the primary agent of propaganda (for agency see Boyd-Barrett, 2004).⁵

If news media content patterns are in support of specific interests, this has implications because the normative arrays ascribed to news journalism are incongruent with propaganda. However, the suggested definition of propaganda does not yet incorporate a normative/ethical component. For instance, there are different opinions in the literature as to whether propaganda is always nefarious or may also entail benign elements (see Bakir et al., 2016). Drawing from the literature on propaganda, PR and strategic communication, Bakir et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework has overcome this contradiction by theorizing a broad set of OPC activities that accounts for consensual (benign) and non-consensual (nefarious) communication activities. Accordingly, OPC based on consensual communication includes categories such as dialogue or information. Non-consensual communication, on the other hand, includes categories such as deception, incentivisation and coercion (see 2016). In order to obtain analytical clarity, Bakir et al. (2016) argue that propaganda should be seen as a subset of OPC, namely the non-consensual and deceptive type. In accord with the OPC framework by Bakir et al. (2016), deception can be understood to

involve... persuasion via *lying, distortion, omission* or *misdirection*. It is non-consensual because it violates the requirement of *informed* consent; the target of persuasion is unable to reach an informed decision because of inadequate information [emphasis in the original].

As will be further elaborated below, elite supportive news media content patterns, although including a vast amount of information and facts, are largely based on

discourses that involve deception. In the following, I will therefore flesh out dimensions of news media propaganda that indicate different forms of deception and can be used and tested via content analysis (see Kromrey, 2009). These dimensions are derived from an integration as well as development of the literature on propaganda and related concepts. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that news media propaganda in liberal democracies derives its strength from two neglected factors: unconscious ideological integration and factuality.

Dimension 1: Integrating news media propaganda and ideology

Bussemer's (2005: 34) concept of the propaganda of integration described above suggests a link with ideology. Indeed, a strand in the literature regards 'propaganda as a purveyor of ideology' (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992: 1). For instance, Ellul (1973: 63-64) observed how 'through the medium of economic and political structures a certain ideology is established'.

In the case of the news media, propaganda can convey ideology if, in accord with Hall (1977), practices, values or meanings of a set of people or organisations are overrepresented in news coverage at the expense of others. Philo and Berry (2011: 174) used the term 'interest-linked perspective' for ideology. Again, the agents and groups who own, control and fund the news media or have the necessary political power to impact on journalistic selection processes are sufficiently able to transport their ideology in the news. Generally, as Robinson et al. (2010: 37) argued, ideological imperatives either promote 'particular justifications for the substance of' policy or 'marginalise or exclude alternative positions that might destabilise the dominant official

frames that justify the substance of policy-making. Basically, ideological media propaganda is non-consensual because it works through omission (see Bakir et al., 2016). For instance, it is well established by research that the formation of the news media within the political and corporate nexus leads to the overrepresentation of official political and corporate practices, values and meanings in media content at the expense of others (for an overview of the research see Zollmann, 2009, 2012). As a consequence, the foundations of state-corporate capitalism are rarely questioned in any sustained way (see Zollmann 2009). This constitutes the system maintaining function of the news media that, as mentioned in the introduction, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1957 [1948]: 465) had identified. There are several manifestations for such integrating ideological propaganda:

- Interest linked frames about events, issues or actors (cf. Entman, 2004: 26; Herman and Chomsky, 2008: LI; Philo and Berry, 2011: 174): in such cases, the news tends to highlight certain perspectives thereby legitimising the actions of state-corporate actors and/or the contemporary system of state-corporate capitalism via omission of other perspectives (cf. Philo and Berry, 2011: 174).
- Absence/omission of substantial criticism, which was found in virtually all studies on elite media coverage of foreign policy (see Zollmann, 2015a): the news media coherently situates US and UK foreign policy as benevolent, thus omitting its underlying economic goals as well as destructive outcomes from public visibility and discussion. Such propaganda is a device, which uses ‘glittering generalities’ (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1995 [1937]: 219).

- The descriptions of events and actions can be ideological if they relate to contested ideological concepts such as ‘war’, ‘crime’, ‘massacre’, ‘genocide’, ‘terrorism’, ‘democracy’ or ‘socialism’ (cf. Herman and Peterson, 2010; Keeble, 1997; Zollmann 2017). To use the concept or ‘war’ to describe events or actions that have the properties of ‘war crimes’ or ‘state-terrorism’ is propagandistic. Similarly, to use the concepts of ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’ to describe events that entail significant elements of fighting during battle is propagandistic as important elements are omitted (see Herman and Peterson, 2010; Zollmann, 2017).

Generally, these content indicators can be used to test PM’s first order predictions about consensual ideological aspects that bound the ‘spectrum of opinion allowed expression’ (Chomsky, 1989: 59). Propaganda manifests when content is aligned with state-corporate ideology (i.e. practices, values, meanings or interest-linked perspectives). This operationalisation is valid because, as Jowett and O’Donnell (1992: 214) stressed, one purpose of propaganda is ‘to maintain the legitimacy of the institution or organisation that it represents and thereby ensure the legitimacy of its activities’.

The functionality of integrating propaganda can be shown if the concept is related to audiences and actions: educated elites are prime targets of propaganda because they have decision-making power, can influence policies and are receptive to propaganda (see Chomsky, 1989: 38, 47, 149; DiMaggio, 2009: 233; Ellul, 1973: 76; Miller and Dinan, 2008: 180). Furthermore, when corporate capitalism or the current international hegemonic system is one-dimensionally represented as benevolent, this constitutes what

Hall, Gramsci as well as Miller and Dinan would define as ideological hegemony. According to Miller and Dinan (2010: 3) 'leadership of allied class fractions is essential and perhaps one of the greatest effects of ideological warfare'. A goal of ideological warfare is to achieve relative unity of the ruling elite (Miller and Dinan, 2010: 3). As Miller and Dinan (2020: 3) further write, unity results in "ruling ideas" and, more importantly, 'ruling practices and this in turn implies that these are able to constrain or minimize oppositional ideas and practice'.⁶ Many discourses might foster unity amongst elites and this is still an open empirical question. But to give one example: A discourse of Western benevolence, as identified in a range of content studies (see Zollmann, 2012, 2015a), fosters ruling class unity among elites who have decision-making power over or a stake in foreign policy because its one-dimensionality has great potential for minimising other ideas and practices. For instance, any policy, which demands the abandonment of substantive foreign policy norms, such as the assumed right of Western states to intervene in other countries, are excluded from discussion. Thus, as Silverstein (1987: 50) argued, such propaganda promotes 'at least implicit support' for policies among elites. Miller and Dinan defined this as the 'manufacture of compliance' (2008: 6). Ellul (1973: 63, 75) used the phrase to rationalise an existing situation or to produce 'a progressive adaption to a certain order of things'.⁷ That is the integrative element of this type of propaganda. In the literature, a dichotomy between integrating and agitating propaganda is assumed, with the latter inciting action (see Silverstein, 1987: 49-50). However, integrating propaganda is also linked to action because it seeks not only support for existing conditions but also aims to enable particular policies. Integrating propaganda is thus twofold: it strives to manufacture compliant behaviour of certain elite fractions (e.g. legislative political, professional, or managerial elites) but can also

impact on the decision-making power of other elite fractions (e.g. executive political elites). Thus, integrating propaganda can enhance the ability to act. Of course, propaganda might also more directly agitate action and such cases will be discussed below (see Silverstein, 1987: 49).

Dimension 2: Technological news media propaganda and ‘truth’

A significant manifestation of journalism practice in liberal democracy is what Hallin described as the ‘technical angle’ or ‘the tendency to frame and analyse events in terms of strategy and tactics, success and failure’ (1994: 20-21). This performance, which is related to the application of professional norms and conventions, manifests itself in the heavy prevalence of procedural/tactical criticism particularly during periods of elite conflict when the news media appears to feature factual journalism and independent contributions to the political debate (see Zollmann, 2012, 2015a). Furthermore, the technical angle prevails in coverage on human rights violations when preventive policy options are evaluated (cf. Robinson, 2000; Zollmann, 2017).

Hence, journalistic scrutiny of government policies could be observed during the later stages of the Vietnam War or during the 2003 Iraq War when Western elites were divided or favoured different policies. Moreover, critical coverage of high-level corruption, such as during the Watergate, News International phone hacking (i.e. ‘Hackgate’) and NSA scandals, was sustained because sectional elite interests were affected (cf. Chomsky, 1989: 149). In other cases, the media carried perspectives in support of ‘preventive’ war against Iraq (before the 2003 Iraq War) or advocated policies such as military interventions to stop alleged human rights violations in the

Balkans, Libya and Syria (see Zollmann, 2017). When elite interests are disregarded, such performances can be seen as evidence for a liberal or politically powerful media, that obtained leeway over the political system because it scrutinised governments or triggered military interventions (see Chomsky, 1989: 13; Robinson, 2000: 405-406; Robinson et al., 2010: 122-123).

In contrast, a propaganda framework situates such media diversity and advocacy within the dominant ideology (Chomsky, 1989: 13). That might explain why Hallin, who conflates a propaganda system with one-dimensionality (see 1994: 13, 26, 36), alleged the PM to constitute a ‘unidimensional’ model (1994: 13). However, Hallin’s perception differs from that of the PM not in regard to the existence but classification of diversity. The PM does not postulate one-dimensional performance. As Chomsky explained, media ‘reflect the range of debate over tactical questions among dominant elites’ (1989: 11). ‘Controversy may rage’, Chomsky argues, ‘as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites’ (1989: 48) – the latter evident in the ideological consensuses discussed in the previous section. Within this universe, Chomsky stressed, professional journalism can operate with integrity and commitment (1989: 11). In this sense, media are not monolithic, however, diversity is bounded by an elite consensus. In fact, this kind of propaganda is factual, albeit selective. It can thus be classified as misdirection aimed at shifting public attention towards specific areas of policy that have elite utility (see Bakir et al., 2016). Hence, under such considerations, the technical, procedural nature of journalism can be included in a propaganda framework.

For an understanding of technological propaganda, the political position of elites has to be further examined. Entman and Page (1994: 90) argued that procedural criticism, even if decoded ‘as disguised attacks’ on policies, provides the public with ‘little cognitive basis for participating in deliberation’ because major issues remain obscured. On the other hand, procedural discourses can be important, Entman and Page (1994: 90) stressed, by placing ‘pressure on administrations [...] to consult Congress’. This may enhance ‘the possibility of democratic dialogue’ particularly when the press provides a wide range of information (Entman and Page, 1994: 90). However, the latter argument assumes a functioning liberal democratic system. But in contemporary elite-managed democracies, it makes more sense to see procedural criticism as an expression of fractional elite discontent enabling elites to deliberate and pressure administrations to change policies. Accordingly, Miller and Dinan (2010: 2) argued propaganda can manifest as ‘intra-elite communications’ and there are instances when elites ‘communicate via the media with other elites’. Hence, the technical angle is supportive to elites who aim to correct or propose government policies. In the latter instances, this can even lead to ‘media-driven intervention’ (Robinson, 2000: 405). Generally, technological reporting resembles the ‘propaganda of agitation’ (Ellul, 1973: 70-71).⁸

It makes also sense to assume that propaganda needs to be based on a relatively fair and factual portrayal of events so that privileged elites are able to effectively make decisions based on it (see Chomsky, 1989: 151).

Content indicators for technological propaganda are:

- Procedural/tactical criticism bounded by consensual areas whereas criticisms can be linked with elite reproaches (misdirecting elite opinion).
- Coverage that incites political or military action (indignation, misdirecting publics to agree to actions) (see Zollmann, 2017).

Next to the procedural type, technological propaganda also manifests itself in factual, albeit distorted coverage (see Bakir et al, 2016). As Herman and Chomsky (1988: 15) have argued: more important than the suppression of information is the way the press presents ‘a particular fact – its placement, tone, and frequency of repetition—and the framework in which it is placed’. Similarly, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis argued in propagandistic discourses ‘under-emphasis and over-emphasis’ are used ‘to dodge issues and evade facts’ (1995 [1937]: 221). In such instances, various indicators for technological propaganda exist:

- The use of facts within a certain framework at the expense of other frameworks that match with the facts (distortion). There is interplay between integrating and technological propaganda: the frameworks within which the facts are placed are the ideological dimensions of the media discourse.
- Marginalisation of facts or statements in regard to their placement and repetition (i.e. emphasis, weighting) as well as interpretation (i.e. de-emphasis).
- The use of facts about an issue while, at the same time, other important facts about the same issue are neglected or marginalised.

The validity of the dimension of factual propaganda can be substantiated with references to the work of early propaganda theorists: in his treatment of propaganda during World War I, Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 200) outlined one tactical objective of propaganda as ‘to avoid untruth which is likely to be contradicted before the achievement of the strategic purpose’. Propaganda can be exposed as such if it is too far off from real events. Therefore, propaganda is assumed to be more effective when it is grounded in verifiable facts and occurrences.

Ellul (1973: 85) observed that, in conjunction with societal progression, propaganda has become more rational, informative and factual so that nowadays it is unusual to detect propaganda ‘composed solely of claims without relation to reality’. Indeed, according to Ellul (1973: 85): ‘Propaganda’s content increasingly resembles information.’

Particularly during wartime, Ellul further suggested, ‘successful propaganda is that based directly on obvious facts’ (1973: 84). Similarly, Merton (1968: 578-579) demarcated the argumentative type of propaganda, which he called ‘technological propaganda or the propaganda of facts’, from a rather crude incendiary type. Assessing earlier studies of propaganda, Merton found that people were more willing to believe propaganda if it was grounded in facts (1968: 579).

Hallin (1994: 30) still argued ‘functional assumptions can be dangerous’ because ‘cultural institutions do not always develop in ways that are functional for the established social order’. Hence, Hallin saw conflicts between the media and other societal institutions such as during the 1960s and 1970s as evidence for ‘some degree of openness’ (1994: 36). Scholars also emphasised the existence of autonomous reporting

and dissident writers as evidence for more variation (for a discussion see Keeble, 2010: 53-54). The news media, Hallin (1994: 32) wrote, must ‘maintain the integrity of their relationship with their audience’ and the integrity ‘of the social relationships that make up the profession of journalism’. It is therefore, the argument goes, that there must be a certain degree of openness, which is inconsistent with propaganda.

In contrast, Herman and Chomsky stressed that these deviant elements are ‘not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda’ (2008: XII).⁹ Moreover, media owners and corporate managers are sufficiently positioned to restrain deviant commentators if their writings negatively impact on profits or conflict with the interests of shareholders and advertisers. As Lazarsfeld and Merton (1957 [1948]): 466) observed, “‘progressive’ views are of slight importance since they are included only by the grace of the sponsors’”.¹⁰

Dimension 3: Demonising news media propaganda and outrage

One of the central objectives of propaganda, particularly applied during times of war, is what Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 195) termed ‘to mobilise hatred against the enemy’. I use the term demonisation for this kind of propaganda aimed at representing an oppositional country ‘as a menacing, murderous aggressor’ (Lasswell, 1971 [1927]: 195).

Demonisation presents the enemy in contrast to the noble aims of the home state and like other devices it aims at enforcing the goals of the propagandist (see Lasswell, 1971 [1927]: 195). Because of its selectivity, this form of propaganda involves distortion, omission, and/or misdirection (see Bakir et al., forthcoming). There are various content indicators for demonisation:

- Negative association or name-calling is used to attach unreasonable labels to opposition actors, groups or countries (Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1995 [1937]: 218). Name-calling applies labels that do not match with the factual record or that are used selectively.
- Atrocities and nefarious actions by so-called 'enemy' states of Western governments are focused and/or exaggerated (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 29-33; Silverstein, 1987: 53; Zollmann, 2017). For example, nefarious labels are used to describe events and actions without the existence of conclusive evidence and/or weighing of contradicting facts. Indignation, details of slaughter and responsibility for nefarious actions are highlighted disproportionately and selectively if compared to similar actions conducted by other actors, groups or states (for examples see Herman and Chomsky, 2008; Herman and Peterson, 2010; Zollmann 2015b, 2017).

Conclusion

This article argues that institutional processes lead the news media to propagate output supportive of dominant state-corporate elite interests. It was therefore demonstrated, on the basis of early and contemporary scholarship, that the institutional environment of the news media allows powerful agents and groups to intentionally manage the news arena and thereby guide journalistic selection and production processes. As a consequence, journalists produce and distribute propaganda without intending to do so and on behalf of dominant state-corporate interests. Additionally, the essay demonstrates that theoretical conceptualisations of what constitutes propaganda can be

applied with validity to the content structures of media texts: the prevalence of ideological media content pattern, the selective use of facts, or the emphasis and de-emphasis of certain facts and perspectives constitutes propaganda as identified by leading scholars in the field. As this essay constitutes a first step of bringing propaganda back into news media studies, more research is needed. The proposed content indicators for news media mediated propaganda should be tested and refined. There is also scope for the development of other indicators that could be used as part of the proposed tool box to detect propaganda in media content. The terminology about different forms of news media mediated propaganda should be further clarified and refined on the basis of Bakir et al.'s (2016) OPC framework (see also Herring and Robinson, 2014-2015). Moreover, the institutional processes that lead the news media to produce and distribute propaganda on behalf of dominant elite interests should be further assessed in order to account for what Miller and Dinan (2010: 2) described as the “circuit” of communication’. While evidence points to the commercial structure of the news media as a major concern, more research is needed to understand how outside pressures of lobby groups impact on news media performance. It could be argued that these forces have obtained even more importance in the 21st century. This is so because powerful actors are currently using a range of OPC techniques to counter open spaces in the digital communication environment that potentially allows for diverse communication activities (see also Zollmann, 2015c). Consequently, the significance of the forces that are engaged in what Herring and Robinson (2014-2015: 557) termed ‘organized political persuasion’ need to be further assessed in relation to the news media. Similarly, more research is needed in regard to how these interests influence public service and online news providers. Finally, it should be noted that this essay points to the continued

relevance of propaganda in contemporary communication, media and journalism studies. In fact, the disappearance of propaganda from studies of liberal democracies and their news media and communication systems inhibits critical scrutiny and constitutes a triumph of propaganda in itself.

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Notes

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- ¹ Jowett and O'Donnell (1992: 89) saw newspapers as 'a prime source of propaganda in our society'.
 - ² Ellul used the term 'vertical' propaganda for the intentional type (1973: 79).
 - ³ This and later quotations from Bussemer's text were translated by the author.
 - ⁴ The references to Bussemer in this section were already used by this author in another text (see Zollmann, 2009).

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- ⁵ Gatekeeper scholars have suggested the importance of structural/institutional constraints in accord with PM's 'filters' at the expense of agency, which is subordinate. However, an institutional approach does not rule out agency if individual conduct is concordant with the priorities of those controlling the 'filters'. Indeed, research which pointed to the prevalence of what can be termed as agency driven coverage, when secret services or other agents manipulated the news, suggested consistency between state-corporate and agent agendas (see Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Keeble, 1997). On the other hand, agents who drove deviant agendas in the news have been marginal exceptions (see Keeble, 2010: 53). That is why in conclusion, a net effect on media output as a result of the workings of institutional constraints such as PM's 'filters' is not only theoretically plausible but also supported by a large body of empirical scholarship.
- ⁶ Elites are understood as 'the government [including the executive, legislative and judiciary as well as the military], the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives, and assorted individuals and groups who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives' (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: L). Furthermore, as the investment theory of political parties suggested, a propaganda model assumes that major political parties are dominated by large investor groups whose interests they represent. Thus, political parties and candidates tend to support varying corporate-business-elite interests (see Ferguson, 1995: 22-29). It could thus be argued that elite propaganda is important to facilitate ideological bondage between political and corporate elites. Moreover, propaganda has to ensure that the educated and politically active middle class is compliant (see Rogers, 2010: 248).
- ⁷ Such propaganda also manifested for other purpose such as to stabilise the social system in the sense of 'unifying and reinforcing it' (Ellul, 1973: 75).
- ⁸ According to Ellul, the propaganda of agitation was applied in favor of oppositional elite blocs in order to debilitate the home government or to incite civil uprisings. Furthermore, it could be used by governments to mobilise for war (see 1973: 70-71).
- ⁹ Like Hallin, Herman and Chomsky acknowledged the possibility of punctual dissent encouraged by professional journalistic integrity and other counterforces such as technology driven changes which may broaden access to the media (2008: 285-287). But while Hallin seems to regard openings as examples for a more independent system, Herman and Chomsky considered the exceptional nature of such occurrences suggesting that, as long as the news media are not radically changed, such secondary effects will be absorbed by the reinforcing 'filters' of the propaganda system (see Zollmann, 2009).
- ¹⁰ Deviant commentators are important to remain the credibility of the media institution. Credibility has been a concern for other propaganda systems: an analysis of allied and Nazi government propaganda during World War II highlighted how 'an essential element in scientific propaganda is the establishment and maintenance of credibility' (Mathews, 1957: 177). The advantage of distorted military news, it was shown, could be jeopardised if conflicting facts emerged later. Moreover, because propaganda was aimed at influencing allied policies, it needed to include accurate facts (Mathews, 1957: 177, 235). Generally, propaganda can be more effective if it contains verifiable information, a fact which was already recognized by the German Nazis whose propaganda relied on a 'truthful portrayal of facts' - if necessary (Mathews, 1957: 186).

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