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## Counterpoint: The Media has a Conservative Bias.

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**Thesis:** Conservative bias in the news is systemic. The economic structure of mass media in the United States necessarily produces news that supports corporate interests, the elite establishment, militarism, and the status quo.

**Summary:** Private news media is a business, but what exactly is the product it sells? News companies do not profit by selling news to audiences, but by selling audiences to advertisers. As such, news media is systemically biased toward corporate interests: those of media corporations and advertising corporations. Bias follows money; there is no economic incentive for the liberal bias so often alleged by conservative pundits. There is, however, a structural tendency toward conservative bias. As news media ownership becomes increasingly consolidated, the interests of media conglomerates and advertisers overlap more with those of other, unrelated industries. Disturbingly, cross-ownership between the media and the defense industry means that the media has a vested economic interest in promoting war, and that news coverage critical of war is bad for business.

### **Manufacturing Consent: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model**

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky address the economic causes of media bias in their 1988 book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. They suggest that factors such as corporate ownership, advertising revenues, reliance on government officials for information, corporate efforts to discredit dissenting voices, and anti-ideologies affect the content and perspective of the news. Twenty years after the publication of *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model remains a useful and extremely relevant tool for understanding the inherent biases of American news media.

### **Ownership**

Most news sources in the United States are owned by large media conglomerates, which are often owned by larger parent companies with holdings in other industries. Cross-industry ownership

means that the news, as one part of a business, must serve the interests of the other parts of the business, and that its coverage will necessarily be biased toward those interests. For example, the news network NBC, owned by General Electric (GE), has a network of financial interests to which it must cater, including GE's operations in transportation, energy, oil and gas, water, real estate, insurance, health care, and aviation. Should a news story arise that could threaten any of these sectors, it would be in GE's, and thus NBC's, interest to censor, suppress or put a different perspective on the story, in order to minimize damage to GE subsidiaries.

A news corporation's network of biases is further expanded by the personal, professional, and political relationships of its directors and board members. For example, Douglas McCorkindale, the chairman of the board of Gannett Company Inc., a media company, also sits on the board of Lockheed Martin, the largest defense contractor in the world. Time Warner board member Carla Hills served as US Trade Representative from 1989 to 1993, and was the primary US negotiator of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Among many other affiliations, she is the co-chair of the Council of Foreign Relations, a conservative think tank that focuses on foreign policy and defense, the director of ChevronTexaco, one of the world's six largest oil companies, and the director of Lucent Technologies, a telecommunications company that has received millions of dollars in US military contracts.

### Advertising

Herman and Chomsky argue that news companies do not profit by selling news to audiences, but by selling audiences to advertisers. They conclude that advertising is the real content of news media, and that from an economic perspective; the news itself is simply designed to capture the attention of consumers. Since the success of a news corporation is largely dependent on how well it attracts advertising, the influence of advertisers on news content is considerable. A news corporation must pander to advertisers' interests in order to compete with other news corporations. Stories that conflict with the interests of advertisers are thus likely to be excluded, if not by self-censorship, then by direct pressure from advertisers.

### Sourcing

Herman and Chomsky argue that news media rely too heavily and uncritically on elite government and corporate sources. They observe that relationships between the media and powerful sources develop out of mutual corporate and economic concerns. In exchange for privileged access to information from elite sources, the media dutifully and unquestioningly act as outlets for those in positions of power. On the one hand, the media are highly dependent on the White House press secretary for government-related news, corporate public relations representatives for business-related news, and army generals for war-related news. On the other hand, these elite sources rely on the media to help shape public opinion in their favor. Treating elite sources as authoritative and unbiased gives the news an inherently conservative skew. On the other hand, as media critic Robert McChesney has noted, interviewing or featuring protesters or the poor results in accusations against the journalist of being liberally biased.

### Flak

Another method by which counter-conservative perspectives and dissent are kept out of media is what Herman and Chomsky call "flak." Flak is used by businesses, politicians, powerful interest groups and individuals to discredit dissenting perspectives and to deter the publication of potentially damaging information.

The 1999 film *The Insider*, is based on the true story of Jeffrey Wigand, former vice president of research and development at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation (B&W), and his efforts to expose the company's practice of adding ammonia to cigarettes to enhance the effects of nicotine. Shortly before being fired from B&W for objecting to their practices, Wigand divulged information to the media about B&W's practices despite an existing confidentiality agreement. As a result, Wigand and his family received anonymous death threats. After Wigand finally agreed, in spite of the threats, to tape an interview for the television journal *60 Minutes*, CBS was deterred from broadcasting the interview by the threat of a multi-billion dollar lawsuit from B&W. CBS Corporate pressured CBS News to edit the program and remove the interview with Wigand. The tobacco company then staged a smear campaign against Wigand, and published a 500-page dossier of distorted and exaggerated claims about his past. Per CBS's instructions, *60 Minutes* broadcast the edited version of the program, without Wigand's interview. Only after the *Wall Street Journal* revealed most of the 500-page dossier to be false, and the *New York Times* published an article on CBS's efforts to censor Wigand, was the interview finally broadcast in full. The tactics B&W used to deter the publication of Wigand's charges are examples of flak.

### Anti-Ideologies

The US news media helps the government obtain the favor of the people by exploiting public fear and demonizing those considered by the government to be enemies of the state. When Herman and Chomsky first published their propaganda model, the world was deep in the Cold War and anti-communism was the most relevant anti-ideology of the time. However, Chomsky and Herman have recently argued that anti-terrorism has replaced anti-communism as the dominant anti-ideology, though the media's persistent demonizing of environmentalists and anti-globalization protesters also works to discredit their efforts.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the media played an important role in defining and developing the image of the monolithic and impersonal "Muslim terrorist" as an enemy of the state. Establishing this anti-ideology was crucial to the United States' justification for war, as it blurred the distinction between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda and helped to smooth over the fact that Iraq had nothing to do with the attacks. The threat of a common enemy also helped the nation to justify its forfeiture of basic civil liberties with the passage of the Patriot Act.

### The Military-Industrial-Media Complex

After World War II, experts predicted that the military industry would become such an important part of the U.S. economy that military expenditures would have to remain large, even when the country was ostensibly not involved in foreign conflicts, in order to keep the economy afloat.

By the time President Dwight Eisenhower left office in 1961, an economy based on military

expenditures had become a reality. In his farewell address, Eisenhower warned of "an immense military establishment and a large arms industry," imploring the United States to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex." More recently, the term "military-industrial-media complex" has been used to describe the media's collaboration with arms manufacturers and Washington's foreign-policy establishment.

Herman and Chomsky's model does a good job of showing how the media is structurally biased toward war because of its affiliation with corporate, elite and military interests. It is worth reiterating, however, the consequences of the military industrial complex's appropriation of the news. Today, the military's dominance over the media is being used to support the Iraq War. Consider the fact that images of dead and wounded US soldiers are rarely, if ever, published in mainstream news sources. Until recently, this censorship was self-imposed by media outlets, but in May 2006, the US Department of Defense officially prohibited the publication of images or names of US soldiers killed in action. Further, per order of the Department of Defense, in order to publish or broadcast information about the war dead, the soldier must have provided his or her written consent prior to the incident. The media has given in to the Department of Defense's demands. When, in February 2007, Lieutenant General Raymond T. Odierno criticized the *New York Times* for publishing a photograph of a fatally injured soldier, the Times removed the photos from its website and apologized to the soldier's family. By acquiescing to the Department of Defense's influence, the media fails to provide an accurate portrayal of the realities of war.

In February 2009, Department of Defense Secretary, Robert M. Gates, removed the 1991 ban on photographs.

In 2008, some politicians called for a return of enforcement of an existing regulation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) called the Fairness Doctrine. The FCC regulates broadcast media over the airways. The purpose of the Fairness Doctrine is to clear the broadcast of politics. Senators Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) and John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) called for enforcement of the Doctrine. Some feel the Doctrine is aimed at conservative media.

### Conclusion

A free country needs a free press. In order to ensure that our democracy lasts, we must take measures to defend our media from the powerful influences that now control its content and perspective. We must hold our news sources to higher journalistic standards, and when they fail us, we must speak out. We should petition the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to impose better regulations on media ownership to prevent conglomerates like General Electric from simultaneously providing bombs and news coverage for the same war.

### Ponder This

1. The author argues that the media is structurally biased toward "corporate interests, the elite establishment, militarism, and the status quo." In your opinion, do these categories collectively constitute "conservatism"? Would you add or eliminate any categories?

- 2. Both Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and the military-industrial-media complex have been criticized by some for being conspiratorial. Do you agree with this assessment? Defend your response using references from the article.
- 3. Which of Herman and Chomsky's theories about the media do you find most compelling? Which do you think probably has the least effect on the content and perspective of news media?
- 4. Do you agree with the author's suggestions about how we should deal with conservative media bias? Explain.
- 5. To get a balanced perspective, read information from a variety of news sources. A good resource is Google News which presents news from a wide variety of sources. Read many viewpoints then make up your mind.

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