## David Cromwell. *Private Planet: Corporate Plunder and the Fight Back*. (London: Jon Carpenter Publishing, 2002).

In their 1988 book 'Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media', Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky introduced their 'propaganda model' of the media. The propaganda model argues that there are 5 classes of 'filters' in society which determine what is 'news'; in other words, what gets printed in newspapers or broadcast by radio and television. Herman and Chomsky's model also explains how dissent from the mainstream is given little, or zero, coverage, while governments and big business gain easy access to the public in order to convey their state-corporate messages - for example, 'free trade is beneficial, 'globalisation is unstoppable' and 'our policies are tackling poverty'.

We have already touched upon the fact that corporate ownership of the media can - and does - shape editorial content. The sheer size, concentrated ownership, immense owner wealth, and profit-seeking imperative of the dominant media corporations could hardly yield any other result. It was not always thus. In the early nineteenth century, a radical British press had emerged which addressed the concerns of workers. But excessive stamp duties, designed to restrict newspaper ownership to the 'respectable' wealthy, began to change the face of the press. Nevertheless there remained a degree of diversity. In postwar Britain, radical or worker-friendly newspapers such as the Daily Herald, News Chronicle, Sunday Citizen (all since failed or absorbed into other publications) and the Daily Mirror (at least until the late 1970s) regularly published articles questioning the capitalist system.

The well-known journalist John Pilger joined the Mirror in 1963, and worked there for over 20 years. Pilger later claimed that 'The Mirror was the first popular paper to encourage working-class people to express themselves, for whatever reason, to their newspaper'. Luckily for him, 'Irreverence and a certain anarchy were encouraged'. Later, when Robert Maxwell took over ownership of the newspaper, Pilger was personally assured that his job was secure: 'Eighteen months later, after relentless interference from Maxwell, I was sacked.'

The media typically comprise large conglomerates - News International, CBS (now merged with Westinghouse), Turner Broadcasting (now merged with Time-Warner) - which may belong to even larger parent corporations such as General Electric (owners of NBC). All are tied into the stock market. Wealthy people sit on the boards of these major corporations, many with extensive personal and business contacts in other corporations. Herman and Chomsky point out, for instance, that: 'GE [General Electric] and Westinghouse are both huge, diversified multinational companies heavily involved in the controversial areas of weapons production and nuclear power.' It is difficult to conceive that press neutrality would not be compromised in these areas. But more widely, press freedom is limited by the simple fact that the owners of the media corporations are driven by free market ideology. How likely is it, then, that such owners would happily allow their own newspaper, radio or TV station to criticise systematically the 'free market' capitalism which is the source of his material wealth?

The second filter of the propaganda model is advertising. Newspapers have to attract and maintain a high proportion of advertising in order to cover the costs of production; without it, the price of any newspaper would be many times what it is now, which would soon spell its demise in the marketplace. There is fierce competition throughout the media to attract advertisers; a newspaper which gets less advertising than its competitors is put at a serious disadvantage. Lack of success in raising advertising revenue was another factor in the demise of 'people's newspapers' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is clear,

therefore, that for any publication or commercial radio or TV station to survive, it has to hone itself into an advertiser-friendly medium. In other words, the media has to be sympathetic to business interests, such as the travel, automobile and petrochemical industries. Even the threat of withdrawal of advertising can affect editorial content. A letter sent to the editorial offices of a hundred magazines by a major car producer stated: 'In an effort to avoid potential conflicts, it is required that Chrysler corporation be alerted in advance of any and all editorial content that encompasses sexual, political, social issues or any editorial content that could be construed as provocative or offensive.' In 1999, British Telecom threatened to withdraw advertising from The Daily Telegraph following a number of critical articles. The journalist responsible was suspended.

A 1992 US study of 150 news editors found that 90 per cent said that advertisers tried to interfere with newspaper content, and 70 per cent tried to stop news stories altogether. 40 per cent admitted that advertisers had in fact influenced a story. In the UK, £3.2 billion is spent on newspaper ads annually and another £2.6 billion on TV and radio commercials, out of a total advertising budget of £9.2 billion. In the US, the figure is tens of billions of dollars a year on TV advertising alone. An advertising-based system makes survival extremely difficult for radical publications that depend on revenue from sales alone. Even if such publications survive, they are relegated to the margins of society, receiving little notice from the public at large. Advertising, just like media ownership, therefore acts as a news filter.

The third of Herman and Chomsky's 5 filters relates to the sourcing of mass media news: 'The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest.' Even large media corporations such as the BBC cannot afford to place reporters everywhere. They therefore concentrate their resources where major news stories are likely to happen: the White House, the Pentagon, No 10 Downing Street, and other centralised news 'terminals'. Although British newspapers may occasionally object to the 'spin-doctoring' of New Labour, for example, they are in fact highly dependent upon the pronouncements of 'the Prime Minister's personal spokesperson' for government-related news. Business corporations and trade organisations are also trusted sources of stories considered newsworthy. Editors and journalists who offend these powerful news sources, perhaps by questioning the veracity or bias of the furnished material, can be threatened with the denial of access to their media life-blood - fresh news.

Robert McChesney, a professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, points out that 'Professional journalism relies heavily on official sources. Reporters have to talk to the PM's official spokesperson, the White House press secretary, the business association, the army general. What those people say is news. Their perspectives are automatically legitimate.' Whereas, according to McChesney, 'if you talk to prisoners, strikers, the homeless, or protesters, you have to paint their perspectives as unreliable, or else you've become an advocate and are no longer a "neutral" professional journalist.' Such reliance on official sources gives the news an inherently conservative cast and gives those in power tremendous influence over defining what is or isn't 'news'. McChesney, author of Rich Media, Poor Democracy, warns: 'This is precisely the opposite of what a functioning democracy needs, which is a ruthless accounting of the powers that be.'

The fourth filter is 'flak', described by Herman and Chomsky as 'negative responses to a media statement or [TV or radio] program. It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, law-suits, speeches and Bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat and punitive action'. Business organisations regularly come together to form flak machines. Perhaps one of the most well-known of these is the US-based Global Climate Coalition (GCC) - comprising fossil fuel and automobile companies such as Exxon,

Texaco and Ford. The GCC was started up by Burson-Marsteller, one of the world's largest public relations companies, to rubbish the credibility of climate scientists and 'scare stories' about global warming (see Chapter 4).

In her 1997 book Global Spin, Sharon Beder documented at great length the operations of corporations and their hired PR firms in establishing grassroots 'front movements' to counter the gains made by environmentalists. One such coalition, the Foundation for Clean Air Progress, is 'in reality a front for transportation, energy, manufacturing and agricultural groups'. The Foundation was established to challenge the US Clean Air Act by 'educating' the public about the progress made in air quality over the previous twenty-five years. As Beder notes, the Foundation's 'focus is on individual responsibility for pollution, as opposed to the regulation of industry to achieve further improvements.' The threat - real or imagined - of law-suits can be a powerful deterrent to media investigation. In the UK, environmental journalist Andrew Rowell notes that, 'Britain's archaic libel laws prevent much of the real truth about the destructive nature of many of [the] UK's leading companies from ever being published or broadcast. Very few people within the media will take on the likes of Shell, BP or [mining company] RTZ'.

The fifth and final news filter that Herman and Chomsky identified was 'anti-communism'. Manufacturing Consent was written during the Cold War. A more apt version of this filter is the customary western identification of 'the enemy' or an 'evil dictator' - Colonel Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, or Slobodan Milosevic (recall the British tabloid headlines of 'Smash Saddam!' and 'Clobba Slobba!'). The same extends to mainstream reporting of environmentalists as 'eco-terrorists'. The Sunday Times ran a particularly nasty series of articles in 1999 accusing activists from the non-violent direct action group Reclaim The Streets of stocking up on CS gas and stun guns.

The demonisation of enemies is useful, essential even, in justifying strategic geopolitical manoeuvring and the defence of corporate interests around the world, while mollifying home-based critics of such behaviour. The creation of an 'evil empire' of some kind, as in postwar western scaremongering about the 'Soviet Menace' or earlier talk of the 'Evil Hun', has been a standard device for terrifying the population into supporting arms production and military adventurism abroad - both major sources of profit for big business. Iraq's Saddam Hussein has been a useful bogeyman for US arms manufacturers who have notched up sales of over $100bn to Saddam's neighbours in the Middle East. The fifth filter also applies to media demonisation of anti-globalisation protesters - often described as 'rioters' - and anyone else perceived as a threat to free-market ideology.

This brief description of the propaganda model hardly does justice to the sophisticated and cogent analysis presented by Herman and Chomsky. The interested reader is urged to consult their book directly. Its particular relevance here is that it explains how and why the status quo of corporate power is maintained in modern society, the dominance of the neoliberal agenda of free trade with its automatic rejection of alternatives (Margaret Thatcher's 'There Is No Alternative'), and the emasculation of dissident viewpoints which are variously labelled as 'biased', 'ideological' or 'extreme'. How likely is it that anyone calling for radical change in society - whether environmentalists, human-rights activists or opponents of the arms trade - will be consistently and fairly reported by corporate news organisations? How much more likely is it that their arguments will be vilified, marginalised or simply ignored?

[The above is an extract from the 'Spotlight on the Media': Chapter 3 of 'Private Planet' (Jon Carpenter Publishing). See http://www.private-planet.com for more about the book.]