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## The Propaganda Model in 2011: Stronger Yet Still Neglected in UK Higher Education?

John W. Robertson  
Reader in Media Education  
University of the West of Scotland

Herman and Chomsky's 'Propaganda Model' remains neglected in Higher Education in the United Kingdom. This is despite growing evidence of its applicability across a range of topics beyond the obvious examples of war and foreign policy. This paper attempts to resolve the contradictions in an ongoing debate by UK media academics using, in part, evidence from recent self-authored empirical studies of UK media coverage of economic issues.

Propaganda Model | UK Higher education | Media Studies | Internet News

'We pulled every dirty trick in the book; we made it [UK industrial action in the winter of 1978/1979] look like it was general, universal and eternal when it was in reality scattered, here and there, and no great problem' (Channel 4, 1998).

Interviewed in a Channel 4 documentary, twenty years after the 'Winter of Discontent' in the United Kingdom, then editor of *The Daily Express*, Derek Jamieson, made the above admission and agreed that his purpose had been to assist the electoral success of the Conservative Party by undermining the Labour government. It's an all-too-rare example of the kind of dirty tricks many on the political left suspect elite journalists make a habit of but are rarely able to prove.

Nevertheless, it is the above kind of story that seems to prompt an enthusiasm for Herman and Chomsky's 'Propaganda Model' (PM), judging by its use and justification in undergraduate writing set and assessed by this author and by at least one other academic working in UK Higher Education (Jhally, 2007: 9 & 10). Jhally asserts: 'I teach the PM as a scientific model, a hypothesis, a model concerned with content ... The PM is easily tested.' However, the PM has been generally less popular with media academics since it was first introduced in 1988. Mullen carried out a survey in 2008, which revealed a marked neglect of the model within North America and Europe. In a sample of 3 053 journal articles from 1988 to 2007, only 79 articles (2.6%) made any mention of the PM while in a survey of 48 media, communication and cultural studies textbooks widely used in higher education, only 11 (22.9%) considered the PM and only 4 did so in any depth (Mullen, 2008: 2).

Reasons for the neglect of the PM are difficult to pin down empirically. Authors who do not engage with it tend not to rationalise their choice. The small group of academics who do engage with the PM sometimes offer quite sympathetic critiques rather than outright opposition but do present clear criticisms, which can be debated. These more

subtle and nuanced critiques are of particular importance because they come from elite academics with a strong presence as researchers, editors, journal referees and writers of textbooks. Perhaps the best known and the highest quality debate on the PM has been the exchange, beginning in the pages of the *European Journal of Communication*, between PM 'champion' Jeffery Klaehn (2002, 2003), constructive critic John Corner (2003) and later in a special edition of the 'Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture' devoted to the PM, by Colin Sparks (2007). The critiques advanced by Sparks and Corner, which explore both theoretical matters and the whole issue of empirical evidence, form the basis for this paper's structure but it is Klaehn's call for a focus on empirical evidence to defend or attack the PM (2003: 377) which defines its central thrust. The subsequent debate is based up a set of nine points of criticism of the PM made by Corner and/or Sparks. Each is presented and debated and where necessary defended.

### Contesting the PM: Points for Debate

As indicated at the end of the preceding section, what follows here is set of nine criticisms of the PM's alleged flaws or contradictions, made by Corner and/or Sparks. Each of these is explored and problematized below:

1. Contradictions in the way the PM is characterized (by Corner) in terms of media effects and the determinism of these effects (Corner).
2. The suggested failure of the PM to acknowledge other critical models, especially in Europe, concerning inter-relations of media/ state/corporate power (Corner).
3. The need for the PM to address elite-to-mass communication as well as elite-to-elite communication (Sparks).
4. A failure in the PM to take account of splits in and differences between elites (Sparks).
5. A perceived tendency in the PM to oversimplify the political structures of capitalist democracies (Sparks).
6. A failure in the PM to recognise the extent of differences between the US and other contexts (Corner and Sparks).
7. Apparent contradictions in the PM regarding the nature, conscious or unconscious, of self-censorship by journalists and over-reliance in the PM on the routines of journalism and on the socialization of journalists in explaining media conformity with elite interests (Corner and Sparks).

8. A mistaken assessment in the PM of the class positioning and loyalties of the majority of journalists (Corner and Sparks).

Not discussed by Corner or Sparks but briefly discussed by Herman (2007) and discussed further in Mullen and Klaehn (2010: 223-225)

9. What are the possible effects of increasing Internet-based news agencies on the usefulness of the PM?

### Contesting the PM: Discussing Nine Criticisms

Each of the nine criticisms of the PM, outlined above, is expanded and responded to below.

#### 1. Contradictions in the way the PM is characterized in terms of media effects and the determinism of these effects.

'What does distinguish the Propaganda Model, however, is the *extent* to which, in its 'headline' listings, the five factors are assumed to *function without much, if any, need for further specification or qualification*. The model projects, if not always explicitly, a *totalizing and finalizing view*. The idea that the filters leave '*only the cleansed residue fit to print*' (Klaehn: 158) seems resoundingly conclusive on the question of effectiveness.' (Corner, 2003: 369)

Corner dissociates himself from those critics who are offended by the PM's characterisation of the media as: 'thoroughly located within a system of inequality' (2003: 368), who see it as: 'reliant on ideas of conspiracy' (Ibid.) or who attack it by: 'accusing it of "determinism" without appearing to recognise how an element of the deterministic is a necessary feature of all propositions at this level' (Ibid.). Where Corner does find reason for concern is in the apparent contradictions in the language used by Herman and Chomsky and, periodically, also by Klaehn. For example, the effectiveness of the filters in leaving: '*only the cleansed residue fit to print*' (above) seems to Corner to go well beyond the commonly understood meaning of the filter analogy.

Filters, Corner asserts, do not go so far as to determine output in the way that, for him, the PM portrays them (Corner, 2003: 370). Also, Chomsky's periodic use of the term 'brainwashing' and, in other places, the use of terms like 'indoctrinated' and 'thought control' (Ibid. 373) of audiences suggests an effect much more deterministic than the PM authors indicate elsewhere. Klaehn makes no direct response to the examples of possible contradictions or ambiguities in the choice of phrases such as these at the end

of the above paragraph but, rather, he writes: 'It is *perfectly fine* to emphasize the fact that Chomsky has used such words as 'indoctrination', 'brain-washing' and 'thought control'.

To my mind it seems important not to do so at the expense of momentarily neglecting and/or diverting attention away from the propaganda model's actual programme of empirical enquiry and/or predictions' (Klaehn, 2003: 380). Klaehn appears, here, to be treating Corner's identification of potentially contradictory language-use as a kind of trivial point-scoring, which does not detract from the overall utility of the model but which does dissipate energy that might be more constructively used. He does not say so directly but it may be that Klaehn accepts that a theory developed over a period of time, in a large quantity of writing and by more than one author, will inevitably carry inconsistencies or ambiguity in expression. The writings of Marx are often criticized for contradictions but the overall theory remains at the centre of political and economic debate in Higher Education. Foucault goes further and insists on his *freedom* to change his opinion and even to contradict himself on key concerns such as free-will and determinism and yet his work certainly suffers no neglect (Paras, 2006).

Regarding Corner's reading of the term 'filter', Klaehn writes that while: 'the model assumes that the various dynamics highlighted by the five filter mechanisms have a range of powerful effects and are extensive in their overall reach and resiliency', it *does not* predict that the filter mechanisms 'function without much if any need for further specification or qualification' (Corner, 2003: 269) and points to circumstances under which media will be relatively 'open' or 'closed' (Klaehn, 2002: 150).

Both of these criticisms raised by Corner are, as Klaehn describes them, 'perfectly fine' in the sense that they correctly point to contradictory or perhaps, in the case of filters, ambiguous language in a large body of writing. Perhaps the important question is 'do they weaken the model beyond a continuing usefulness?'

#### 2. The alleged failure of the PM to take account of other critical theory, especially in Europe, on media, state and corporate relations.

'My primary purpose in outlining the above is to pose a question. Klaehn's article is essentially organized around the issue of why so little attention has been paid to the 'propaganda model' within media research and debate. My question would be – why do advocates of the 'propaganda model' pay so little attention to the wide-ranging and well-established literature of critical media enquiry?' (Corner, 2003: 371)

Corner points to a US-centric tendency in Herman and Chomsky's writing. Successive US administrations and their

foreign policies are Herman and Chomsky's primary targets and much of their writing and activism is in response to these actions, from Indochina to Afghanistan. That a US academic theory should neglect relevant European research is of course regrettable but it is by no means unusual or unexpected. However, the extent of this neglect is debated. Boyd-Barrett (2007: 7) claims: 'The PM is a well-crafted synthesis of the work produced by media sociologists in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, particularly British research. It drew upon political economy work (Peter Golding, Graham Murdock), the sociology of organisations (Jeremy Tunstall) and cultural studies (Stuart Hall).'

Herman and Chomsky could have given more credit in their writing to the worth of earlier or contemporary critical models originating in the UK or in other parts of Europe, but how much does this matter? If the 'Propaganda Model' offers media researchers, as Klaehn argues: 'an analytical framework [and] one that is oriented toward empirical research' (2003: 381) then surely such a theory demands a more central place in academic writing on the media than it currently holds? Indeed, Herman (2007: 2) offers evidence to suggest that, as a consequence of developments in the media since 1988, that the filters are *more* applicable and more useful today than they were two decades ago.

### 3. The suggested need for the PM to address elite-to-mass communication as well as elite-to-elite communication.

'These obvious facts, which are well known to Herman, have a logical corollary, of which he is almost certainly aware but which he does not discuss at any length: the commercial media are owned by the elite but most of the time they are not directed at the elite. On the contrary, for most media the bulk of their audience is made up of working class people, since this group forms the overwhelming majority in a developed capitalist society.' (Sparks, 2007: 75)

The above quote does, potentially, contain an important criticism of the completeness of the PM. If elite-to-mass communication can be shown to be fragmented and lacking in a coherent narrative favouring elites, then the PM is perhaps weakened. Sparks does make this same criticism and suggests a greater diversity in reporting, aimed at differing readerships, that is for Sparks, contrary to the 'central formulations' (Ibid. 76) of the PM. In this, he has the support of writers such as Hesmondhalgh (2005). However, Klaehn writes:

'No one perspective or optic can be seen to adequately capture and/or account for the complexity of social reality.... Should the propaganda model be held to what can be seen to

be a higher standard than virtually every other conceptual model within the social sciences? That is, should the applications and corresponding limitations clearly laid out by its formulators be taken as not enough?' (Klaehn, 2003: 380)

So, the PM may neglect elite-mass communication and a definitive meta-narrative would require that completeness but the authors of the PM do not make a claim for completeness:

'We never claimed that the propaganda model explained everything or that it illustrated media omnipotence and complete effectiveness in manufacturing consent. It is a model of media *behavior and performance*, not of media *effects*.' (Herman, 2000: 103)

Further, Klaehn highlights the PM's assertion that most media work to divert public attention away from topics and issues critical to power (2009: 47).

### 4. A suggested failure in the PM to take account of splits in and differences between elites.

'...there are always many competing capitalists, and they each individually have different, indeed conflicting, interests. The owners of pharmaceutical companies want high prices for prescription drugs, for example, because that will improve their profit margins, while the owners of US car companies want those prices driven down, not because they are charitable but because health cover for unionized workers is a burden on their profit margins. (Sparks, 2007: 73)

Sparks accepts that the PM does not make a claim to absolute uniformity in elite communications but he does argue, as above, for a degree of disunity of interests amongst elites which might be expected to generate disputes which go beyond the 'tactical' questioning of issues to the 'strategic' questioning of policy and gives the above example. However, the notion of car manufacturers actually lobbying against high drug prices does not convince given the ease with which major corporations can simply abandon health care and pension schemes in difficult times. Further evidence of media failure to talk to the power of 'big pharma' can be found in Winter (2007, 2010).

The case Sparks makes most strongly as an example of a strategic split between elites is the Iraq War in 2003: 'If outright opposition to participation in the most reckless imperialist adventure since Suez is recuperable into the PM's concept of 'tactical' there is little to argue about at this level, but such a term is probably better used to describe differences over issues like whether the invasion required a separate UN resolution 27 legitimized it rather than

something as fundamental as the launching of a major war. Such issues, surely, are better conceived of in terms of strategy?' (72). However, the split between elites remains tactical rather than strategic in that dissenting elites in journalism, politics and in religion rarely made much of the underlying economic exploitation of the region (Robertson, 2004) and were mostly drawn to support the troops and to moderate their dissent once the campaign was underway. This latter use of patriotic appeals to emotion and even to the use of colour in visuals, to frame debates, is usefully explored in Broudy (2009)

### 5. A suggested tendency in the PM to oversimplify the political structures of capitalist democracies.

'Internally, however, the US is a capitalist democracy. It is characteristic of such societies that there is legitimized public debate about policy between different sections of the elite that are more or less autonomous of each other .... the range of debate about issues of domestic policy tends to be rather wider than is accounted for by the classical iteration of the PM. Even in the USA, while the coverage of internal disputes between capital and labour is usually but not always, uncritically on the side of big business, there are exceptions where the voice of labour has been given a substantial hearing in the mainstream press (Kumar 2007).' (Sparks, 2007: 73-74)

Sparks argues that the 'classical iteration' of the PM does not take account of the range of debate. Though he acknowledges that, in the US, coverage of capital vs. labour disputes tends to favour the former, Sparks suggests the presence of exceptions. Kumar's study of the success of The International Brotherhood of Teamsters' 1997 industrial and, crucially, media, campaign against the United Parcel Service is, however, the only example given. In a survey (Robertson, 2009) of UK coverage of economic issues, only one case of media sympathy to labour came in the form of a Coast Guard strike. Exceptions give the appearance of diversity and perhaps justice but if they are too rare they can be seen for what they are, exceptions to the norm. In the US, three recent studies can be argued to be more typical.

Kollmeyer's comparison of statistical indicators of economic growth with coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* suggests: 'the data reveal that, despite growth patterns that overwhelmingly favoured economic elites, the negative news about the economy disproportionately depicted events and problems affecting corporations and investors instead of the general workforce. When the *LA Times* did discuss problems affecting workers, the articles were relatively short, most often placed in the back sections of the newspaper, and rarely discussed policy alternatives to the status quo (2004: 432). Champlin and Knoedler (2008) summarise an

extensive set of reports of US media coverage from the 1980s through to the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They find, repeated, a failure to recognise growing poverty among the working and middle-classes or, where it is acknowledged, a failure to go beyond basic reporting to attribute causes, which might be addressed at a political level.

Mostly they find suggestions that the declining fortunes of the American middle-class (including blue-collar workers) are attributed to: 'inevitable and impersonal historical forces such as technological change or globalization' (Champlin and Knoedler, 2008: 137). Herman (2003) finds: 'a notable illustration' (Ibid. 8) of the PM's value in Tasini's (1990: 7-9) comparison of the coverage of miners' strikes in the US and in the Soviet Union. The 1988 strike in the Soviet Union drew considerable and sympathetic reporting in the US press while the long Pittson miners' strike, in the same year in the US, drew very little coverage in the same newspapers. The above exemplify Chomsky's 'boundaries of expression' limiting media coverage of debates which may be threatening to the interests of power (Klaehn, 2002c: 307, 2003: 366, 2009: 49).

### 6. A failure in the PM to recognize the extent of differences between the US and other contexts.

'If the PM is to sustain the general status its progenitors make for it, then it must be able to account for the performance of the mass media elsewhere than in the USA, at the very least in societies where circumstances are similar...' (Sparks, 2007: 76-77)

'I want to suggest that, despite the continuing value of Herman and Chomsky's substantive analyses of international political news, particularly as this relates to the United States' foreign policy and is reported within US media, there is very little by way of new theoretical insight that the propaganda model can bring to European media research. Indeed, there are signs that taking it more seriously as a conceptual framework *may actually hinder* the cause of critical analysis.' (Corner, 2003: 367)

This is the most common criticism of the PM by European media academics. Relying on one high-profile example, the coverage of the build-up (only) to the Iraq War in 2003 does suggest a fairly marked contrast between the relatively diverse UK coverage and the almost entirely 'patriotic' and uncritical coverage by US TV and press (Robertson, 2004; Lewis, 2006). *The New York Times'* after-the-event apology (2004) to its readers serves only to highlight the contrast with the UK where *Channel 4 News* along with the *Independent*, *Daily Mirror* and *Glasgow Herald* newspapers presented a quite oppositional narrative, at least in the build-up phase. These are, however, news outlets with amongst the lowest audiences and readerships in the UK. Indeed, it was the BBC

which most readily gave in to government pressures and which was largely uncritical of the war plans (Lewis, 2006).

In parts of mainland Europe, considerable public opposition to the Iraq War (Pew Research Center, 2004) made oppositional coverage possible (Hafez, 2004; MIT Communications Forum, 2003). Perhaps explaining this difference, an extended comparison of 984 newspaper articles from *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *The New York Times*, selected from the period 1965 to 1997, by Benson and Hallin (2007: 43) found the former two to have a 'greater presence of interpretation and opinion' than the *NYT*. Looking beyond the content, the authors suggest structural differences in ownership favouring independent reporting, a critical professional culture amongst French journalists and greater inertia in their professional practices in the face of Americanising influences. Differences between US and European journalists from several countries had been identified earlier by Patterson (1998: 21-24) with the former more likely to be passive reporters and the latter more likely to challenge leading politicians. Thus it may be by contrast with the foreign policies of Europe, the Middle East and beyond, rather than with the UK, that the PM's limitations, on this issue, are greatest and most in need of qualification.

Corner goes beyond Sparks' critique to condemn the PM as offering nothing new (for European media research) and perhaps having the potential for a malign influence on academic debate. This is the part of his critique which is most difficult to accept. Taking the model more seriously rather than pretending it does not exist must, surely, expose it to wider debate. If the readers of journals and textbooks meet the PM they will have the opportunity to adopt it or to reject it themselves. For an elite group of academics to deny it exposure suggests a kind of filtering that is much more likely to damage academic debate. Indeed, this writer's extensive experience of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching suggests that the PM is of particular value in introducing a much broader audience to critical analysis of their own empirical projects.

Final-year students of journalism and media studies *have* found places where thought control is absent, in 'alternative' media, blogs, vlogs and, even, in rare pieces of mainstream journalism. Equally, they have discovered to their surprise the presence of hegemonic influence in news coverage of apparently rational issues such as planning permission for roads. The PM is not, again, all-encompassing and non-elite groups, like students, are able to use it critically to enhance rather than to damage academic debate. Though they might be horrified at the suggestion, Corner and Sparks appear as UK equivalents of the US elite academics who interlock with elites in the media and other sectors and who produce conformity in their students and, subsequently, in the media professionals they become. In a paper focusing on US higher education Chomsky argues:

'If you go through a place like Harvard, most of what

goes on there is teaching manners; how to behave like a member of the upper classes, how to think the right thoughts, and so on.' (Chomsky, 1997: 2)

This marginalizing of the PM in academia is further demonstrated in Jensen's study of US journalism schools (2010) and, in 2003, was at the heart of Klaehn's first demolition of Corner's stance.

### 7. Suggested contradictions in the PM regarding the nature, conscious or unconscious, of self-censorship by journalists

'... but the main thrust of the model is to concentrate on two structural factors – the routines of newsgathering and the socialization of journalists – to explain the voluntary conformity of the media. Both of these factors are clearly important, but it is questionable whether they will quite bear the weight that the PM places upon them.' (Sparks, 2007: 78)

Sparks expresses a great deal of agreement with the PM's identification of journalists' reliance on at-hand source material and the ways in which the high pressure routines of production encourage such reliance. Where he disagrees with the PM is in its insistence on the overwhelming dominance of sources operating in the interests of business and of governments. Davis warns us not to imagine: 'a new-found liberal pluralism in the public sphere,' and reminds us: 'that the majority of PR resources are used by those with the greater economic and political resources,' (2003: 54). The consequences of such an imbalance are fairly clear in what Freedman calls a: 'close ideological conformity with the broad interests of one constituency – that of business,' (2006: 921)

Corner's chief concern, here, is with the operation of the routines of journalism with particular regard to the mental state of journalists as they work through them to produce conformity with corporate and state interests. In Klaehn's account, Corner argues, the process operates at an unconscious level in producing meaning, at a self-conscious level in the appointment of 'right-minded' staff and with deliberate intent when campaigns are planned (Corner, 2003: 373). This, for Corner, makes the PM inconsistent. Klaehn has come back to explore these issues further, most notably in various interviews he undertook which were included in his book, *Bound by Power: Intended Consequences* (Klaehn, 2006).

A direct response to Corner would acknowledge the possible ambiguity in the language used but, more usefully, draw attention to the variation in professional status of those operating in different ways as regards to their level of consciousness in writing or editing reports and in staffing appointments. For example, as highlighted at the very beginning of this paper, there is some evidence of deliberate

(fully conscious) campaign planning by elite journalists, editors and owners to undermine groups within society including, at times, government politicians and workers' representatives. In the appointment of staff, however, shared social and academic backgrounds would not require fully conscious or deliberate planning to result in the kind of narrow staffing profile to be found at the top of media organizations (see below). Then, at the level of junior reporters, socialization within the organization and gradual adoption of its dominant ethos along with tight deadlines might result in unconscious self-censorship. This variation within journalists of different status, from knowing and complicit suppression of ideas to being 'genuinely clueless about the forces to which they are responding', has already been illustrated in Klaehn's earlier study (2002c: 306) of Canadian press reporting on East Timor.

### 8. A perceived mistaken assessment in the PM of the class positioning and loyalties of the majority of journalists.

'While the owners of the media are capitalists, and while the senior journalists are closely related to them and other elites through a thousand channels, the bulk of journalists, even in elite media, have a very different social situation. They are subordinates in a hierarchical division of labour and their activities are directed by their superiors. Their wages and conditions are not princely, and they are subject to severe pressures by the very nature of their job. The bulk of journalists are not, as the PM sometimes has it, 'middle class.' They are, in a phrase, wage workers engaged in alienated labour.' (Sparks, 2007: 79)

The UK average hourly rate for journalists in 2004 was £16.83 or roughly £35 000 per annum. For plumbers, it was £10.62 per hour or roughly £22 000 per year (ESRC, 2008). Given that some journalists are paid much more (see below) than this average, some journalists will be paid even less than the above figure. If Herman stills holds to his 1982 statement that media staff are: 'predominantly middle class' (Herman, 1982: 149) he is, on the basis of the objective income criterion, wrong in the UK context. The author could not find a more recent confirmation or qualification of this statement. There is no mention of the issue in Herman's 'retrospective' in 2000. So, perhaps the obvious is restated here - most journalists are not middle class. Two important questions, however, follow. First, does professional socialisation change the class identification of journalists? Second and perhaps more significant, are journalistic elites, especially in TV news, so dominant in the construction of political realities that their small number does not seriously impede the creation of a wider elite-favouring hegemony?

Perhaps deciding to enter a career like journalism

suggests a predisposition to be more open and/or sympathetic to elite perspectives? A study by Richardson (2007: 1), in the UK, seems to undermine this thesis. He writes: '... not one entered into the profession to disseminate ruling class ideology. Most [students] wanted to help inform the public, to educate, to play a role in the democratic system.'

Sparks points to the less than complete and permanent effects of socialisation (2007: 79) though he offers no evidence of this. Giving him the benefit of the doubt on this, professional socialisation cannot be demonstrated, he argues, to be transforming in its impact on the thinking and behaviour of journalists. If this is true, the presence of journalists of working class origins in positions of media influence should seriously undermine the PM. Evidence, however, suggests a different picture with the top UK journalists and TV news presenters coming from a quite unrepresentative elite background.

In a report from the Sutton Trust (2006) on the educational backgrounds of leading UK journalists, it emerged that only 7% of the general population was educated in independent schools in 2006, as opposed to 54% of the top 100 journalists. This latter figure re-presented an increase from 49% in 1986. Only 12% of these top journalists were educated in state comprehensive schools, which currently educate 90% of pupils, while the remaining 34% attended the selective-entry state or Church of England schools, formerly known as Grammar schools. Of those who attended university, 56% attended either Oxford or Cambridge and 72% attended one of the 13 top-ranked UK universities. The authors of the report ask: 'Is news coverage preoccupied with the issues and interests of the social elite that journalists represent? Should the profession not better reflect the broader social make-up of the audiences it serves?' (Sutton Trust, 2006: 3-6). In 2008, an illustrative example emerged. The *BBC* economics editor, Evan Davies, resigned and was replaced almost instantly by Stephanie Flanders. Both had selective-entry school educations, both took first degrees at Oxford, both went on to Harvard for postgraduate study and both had early appointments at the Institute for Fiscal Studies. On the *BBC* website, Davies is described as: 'outspoken but apolitical' (Oliver, 2008) yet in 1998 he published a book arguing for the privatisation of public services (Davies, 1998).

Further, the presence of elite journalists in TV news, as exemplified above, puts them in a very powerful position: 'Television is [...] the central vehicle where people are able to access current affairs and political debate and it is trusted more than any other media.' (Ward, 2004: 4). Surveys across Europe have highlighted the continuing significance of television news, especially when produced by public service providers, as the most widely accessed and the most trusted source of current affairs information (Towler, 2002: 36-38; Ward, 2004: 3-5).

So, to conclude, most journalists are clearly not middle

class and perhaps they are a grouping that is difficult to categorise satisfactorily, but if we accept the above argument of elite domination of TV news, this fact makes little difference in determining the class interests, which are best represented in dominant media.

### 9. What are the possible effects of increasing Internet-based news agencies on the usefulness of the PM?

Neither Corner nor Sparks makes any mention of recent developments such as political blogging but it seems quite important in 2010 to consider the usefulness of the PM's filters in the context of Internet news production.

At first sight, there would appear to be less opportunity for the PM's filters to operate in the non-hierarchical world of the Internet. Though openly repressive regimes such as that in China can limit access, via search engines like *Google* or *Yahoo*, to sites critical of the regime, there are limitations on the effectiveness, over time of the web-screening used by these regimes. For example, the US government agency responsible for broadcasting (BBG) is currently testing a system known as 'feed over email' (FOE) which can bypass web-screening in China and Iran (*Daily Telegraph*, 2009).

In democratic states, filtering to prevent access, say to pornography, can only be implemented by the user. The use of sites promoting, say, politically motivated violence can be monitored, servers located and shut down but, again, the offending material will often migrate to other servers. So, is Internet news relatively free of the constraints identified by the PM? Rampton (2007: 2-5) put Internet news through each of the five filters. With regard to media ownership, the dramatically lower cost of entry into Internet publishing contrasts very favourably with those of conventional, press or TV, media apparently cancelling out the effect of the first filter. Second, Internet advertising does attract revenue for some sites but is not an essential requirement and, as Rampton insists, can be counter-productive in irritating and driving away users. Third, reliance on official sources may still be a factor for some sites but there is, at least, the opportunity for citizen journalism to diversify the sources such as those who took the photographs of flag-draped coffins in Iraq and emailed them to friends back in Seattle (*Ibid.*: 4), who countered UK police propaganda after the G20 protests in London (Lewis, 2009) or who used *Twitter* to report on the recent political protests in Iran (Poniwozik, 2009).

The fourth filter, flak, is characterized by Herman and Chomsky as a form of bullying whereby corporations and government can apply pressure to media. The bullying of the BBC by Alistair Campbell, UK Prime Minister Blair's PR director, in the build-up to the Iraq war in 2003 is a typical example. For Rampton, however, the Internet allows every blogger the opportunity to aim flak at politicians, corporations and mainstream media thus democratizing the phenomenon. Finally, anti-communism and, perhaps more commonly now,

anti-Islam will inevitably survive the Internet 'revolution' but will now have to co-exist with a wide range of background ideologies guiding bloggers, including pro-communism and pro-Islamism. So, taken together, Rampton sees the possibility for the enhancement of democratic processes as a result of the Internet but he, carefully, does remind us that television news remains the dominant source of information for US citizens (5). The same can be said of UK citizens (Ward, 2004). Like Rampton, Hermes (2006) and Chadwick (2006) see emancipatory possibilities in the Internet.

Less optimistic than Rampton, Hermes or Chadwick, Watson (2008) found that popular Internet search engines are unlikely to foreground news that is critical of government or corporate positions. For example, a *Google* search for 'Seattle protest 1999' finds over a million items (ranked on their popularity) while searching with *Alternet.org* finds only 86. This choice of search engine matters, argues Watson, because the latter search finds information critical of the government position while the former swamps this small set in millions of hits, intimidating the searcher, and thus creating a new kind of filter – information overload (Watson, 2008: 4). Related to this concern, Dreyfus, worries about the effect of hyperlinks on conventional hierarchical organization systems. The latter provide students with paths to increasing depth in a topic while the former produces random associations, which may or may not be useful. Observing his own students, Dreyfus notes that they: 'spend more time on the Internet than any other medium. It is trance-like. But they aren't finding enough meaningful information (2001: 4).

Herman, himself, takes a very pessimistic view (2007: 3): 'The rise of the Internet potentially challenges the model. However, it still holds for the operation of the mass [corporate] media. Also, its impact and emancipatory potential should not be overestimated; research has shown that only six per cent of Internet users are accessing alternative sources with most using existing news outlets. We are also witnessing an attempt by media conglomerates to try and control the Internet - manifest in the current battle over net neutrality for example.' Reinforcing Herman's conclusion, Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) report the dominant presence, in the US, of rightwing, sometimes ultra-rightwing, bloggers rather than those of the left, in the blogosphere. An empirical study in the UK found, similarly, a greater presence of rightwing bloggers amongst the more popular sites (Dale, 2008). Traditional elite print media that now offer Internet journalism also now offer for public consumption the blogs of their elite journalists who, with the weight and integrity of their corporate sponsors, can further increase their prestige.

Missing from the pessimistic analysis of Dreyfus and Herman and perhaps neglected in that of Watson (2008) is the effect of education on Internet-use. Watson correctly reminds us that knowledge of particular alternative search engines can enable the user to access non-establishment material but he does not suggest, and Dreyfus seems unaware of the possibility of doing so, the use of online



research journals, guided by professional educators in HE, as a way of accessing critical, credible and up-to-date findings. This does not, of course, deal with the dominance of mainstream TV news, which continues to fail the PM's test (Robertson, 2009).

## Conclusions

The discussion presented in this essay demonstrates the continuing usefulness of the PM as one essential component in the media researcher's toolbox. Empirical studies continue to demonstrate its applicability in a range of international contexts. Further empirical research is necessary to test it as part of an ongoing process.

What Klaehn, Corner and Sparks have achieved in their constructive critiques is to have helped to bring the PM into the centre of media and communications research, where it belongs. The central aim of this paper has been to reinforce that effort by offering further defence of the model. The PM, in a time of increasing concentration of power and the shutting down of debate, is revealed to be of enormous value as a tool for direct criticism of complicit mainstream media by both elite academics and a much wider population of citizens.

Though a cloud of 'truthiness' (Colbert in Broudy, 2009: 1) continues to surround the PM and its relevance to media criticism, further research must be expected to disperse it. The presumably genuine beliefs of elite media academics, in the UK, and their dominance of academic publishing, seem all too like the 'truthiness' apparent in the pronouncements of elite, mainstream, media professionals regarding news events such as the wars on terror or on drugs. Highly educated and respected, this professoriate is no more resistant, perhaps less so than 'ordinary' citizens, to the charms and inducements of corporate media and the reassurances of democratic pluralism they claim to promote.

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