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Propaganda in a Neoliberal Universe: An Interview with James Winter

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Professor James Winter returns to his award-winning work *Lies the Media Tell Us* (Black Rose Books, 2007) to reassess his critical analysis of propaganda and corporate media behavior in contemporary society. He grounds his critique of current trends in the long history of indoctrination carried out against citizens in the interest of maintaining the existence and the interests of an elite corporatocracy. Included in the dialogues are Winter's reflections on the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement and efforts made by citizens to regain democratic control over political institutions. With a particular emphasis on international affairs, he cites many examples that serve to illustrate the central threat to global political freedom. Winter describes the problems we face in gaining intellectual freedom from sophisticated media systems of thought control which dominate contemporary life.

corporate media | imperialism | corporatocracy
indoctrination | neo-liberalism | Occupy Movement

Daniel Broudy: You have written so much over the course of your career about the power that corporate media wield in influencing consumers in the interests of big capital. In your view, why is it so vital in so-called free and democratic societies to engage in scholarly work that critiques this free market?

James Winter: The so-called "free market" is anything but free. Under neo-liberalism, which is the most recent, viral form of capitalism, the 99 percent have become increasingly beholden to the top one percent of the rich. One of the actions taken by the rich this time around is that they have pretty much entirely bought up and controlled the news and entertainment media — which in this day and age aren't necessarily two distinct categories. This means, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, that conventional wisdom is very largely under elite control ... more so — ironically — in an "open and democratic society" than in an autocratic one where people know they are being manipulated. We think we are free and so we are easier to manipulate. One might speculate that the wealthy learned from the experience in the early part of the last century when muckraking journalists wrote exposés in *Collier's Weekly* and *McClure's Magazine*. Ida Tarbell and Will Irwin and Upton Sinclair blew the whistle and this led to the temporary trust-busting of robber baron monopolists such as J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller.

Today, the corporate media of North America are owned by a handful of men who could fit in my cramped office. They espouse neoliberalism. Most academics toe the party line, and, consequently, do little or nothing to contradict the corporate media perspective. This reticence is understandable because resisting and opposing power is costly. Hence,

it is crucial that critically-minded professors engage students in research of topics and sources which will pull aside the corporate shroud, and reveal the real world. If we can do this in academia, then some of our students will carry this initiative forward to the streets, and foment change. Of course, it becomes increasingly more difficult for us to do this, as neoliberalism invades university campuses, which are filled with Maquiladora-style adjunct professors who subsist in tenuous jobs, on poverty wages.

D.B.: In your book, *Lies the Media Tell Us*, you observe in one chapter titled, "Global Village, or Global Pillage?" that the organized protest movements against globalization in the 1990s were predictably spun in mass media as perpetuated by "mentally unstable, ... mostly violent youth ... bent on destruction." Do you see any significant parallels between the 1990s protests and the more recent Occupy Movements that swept much of the world in 2011 and 2012?

J.W.: Yes! Often we fall into the trap of criticizing corporate media for "failing to do their job." In reality, they are doing their job perfectly. But, we have to realize that it is their job to virulently defend the status quo. Why would corporate media propagate positive societal change, unless that meant more-of-the-same-only-worse? It's like asking a dictator to voluntarily step aside: they're not going to do it, unless you bring substantial pressure to bear. So, when people go into the streets in Egypt, as they did in 2011, they can relatively peacefully bring down the dictator Hosni Mubarak. Then, of course, the U.S. will try to restore the old regime in whatever way is possible.

In the U.S. and Canada, with the Occupy Movements, the corporate media portrayed these people as misguided, mis-directed ne'er-do-wells. They were depicted as leaderless and unfocused: they didn't know what they wanted to change. Although the Occupy people identified the "one percent" as their target, this is the same one percent which is guiding conventional wisdom, directly and indirectly through the corporate media. So, in the usual way, the Occupy Movement was ridiculed and marginalized and de-emphasized until they more or less evaporated. People were frustrated and tired and felt helpless. Not that the whole experience wasn't worthwhile, which it was. We learn from each and every encounter. Look at the struggles in Central and South America! How many decades have they been fighting oppression? How many times were they beaten down again? And now, at last, they are winning some important battles. Well, with the Occupy Movement, we got out on the streets and talked to each other, demonstrated solidarity, got organized, it was very positive. To further that movement we, maybe, need to form partnerships with labour groups and Indigenous peoples and other various enemies of neoliberalism.

But as our sisters and brothers in Latin America have demonstrated, it will be a lengthy struggle. We have to be in it for the long term. We can't just go to one demonstration and then go home.

D.B.: The point you're raising here about the "one percent" — a target clearly defined by the Occupy Movement — reminds me of the power that elites wield in the public space in terms of defining key words and concepts. Not just in defining but in effectively registering those definitions in the public consciousness. In the late 1990s, Herbert Schiller discussed this kind of power in terms of a governor's ability to control society's key definitions, but I wonder if the power to do so has largely shifted to the corporate person.

J.W.: I think this is true. The political elite such as governors and premiers or even presidents and prime ministers are really little more than political minions who do the bidding of their betters, the corporate people who put them in 'power.' A very recent example of the "corporate speak" to which you refer happened in January 2014 when Fiat/Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne issued an ultimatum to Canada: pony up or wave goodbye to Chrysler in Windsor Ontario, Canada's 'Automotive Capital.'

In 2014, Chrysler was about to invest an estimated \$2 billion into the manufacturing of its new Pacifica Minivan. But, if workers and all three levels of government didn't subsidize the investment, then the new Pacifica would be built elsewhere, throwing 4500 people in Windsor Ontario out of work. One Chrysler executive openly pointed to the example of Volkswagen, which got over half the cost, \$577 million, from the State of Tennessee for a new plant worth \$1 billion, which opened in 2011. This corporate whipsawing has now replaced the union whipsawing of the 1950s and 1960s. Beginning in the 1970s, corporations began to reverse the process whereby unions played off one company against another, by outsourcing to foreign production. This became widespread with so-called free trade agreements beginning in the 1980s. Previously, the Canada-U.S. Auto Pact required that for every car sold in Canada, one must be manufactured here. Free trade threw that out the window.

But whereas union whipsawing was labeled as such, today's corporate whipsawing is nameless: it's just reality. So, corporate leaders and their political and media minions are responsible both for creating new economic environments (free trade) and labeling them (reality). If we called this process corporate whipsawing, then we could identify the process and the culprits and work to change the system.

D.B.: You refer to 'manufacturing' here in terms of the material production of a major global industry — a process, also, in news gathering and reporting that Herman and Chomsky explore in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). Earlier in

this interview, you also pointed to manipulation, the ability of major media organizations to mold the public mind in a form that aligns with the interests of elite storytellers. If the narratives we consume today in these media are largely the result of elaborate productions, in what form do these productions appear to you as a researcher? To what extent do you perceive them as manufactured?

J.W.: To elaborate on the previous example, the substitution of the concept of "reality" for what is really "corporate whipsawing," is an elaborate production. It involves years of negotiations in international trade agreements, the selling of tolerance for those agreements to the public, and selective interpretations of economic realities while countless numbers of corporations flee to cheap labor markets. So, what is really self-evident to any ten-year-old child is completely misrepresented on a daily basis in the corporate media: Free trade is a horrific disaster for workers and the economy as a whole. Its selective benefits accrue to the huge conglomerates. Now, consumers can also acquire cheaper products at the dollar stores, such as bamboo cutting boards for \$2. But, it is simply ludicrous to pretend that this sort of 'value' compensates for all of the lost jobs.

Another related example comes from the realm of foreign affairs. There would be no point in free trade agreements, if corporations couldn't control Third World economies, guaranteeing access to cheap resources and cheap, unorganized labor. Well, how do they do this? It's accomplished by spreading freedom and democracy abroad, which, on the surface, has such a nice philanthropic ring to it. At least, this how the practice is portrayed. The reality, though, involves bribery, arm-twisting, blackmail, economic coercion, coups, repression, torture, invasions, bombings, genocide, and so forth. Of course, the details are all in the historical record for anyone who is mildly interested in something called reality. Just look up what transpired in Iran in 1953, when the CIA and the British and American governments orchestrated a coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh because he dared to nationalize the oil industry. It was all revealed in a special report in *The New York Times*, in 2000, after 47 years of denial and silence. Now, you can even read about it in Wikipedia.

The media would have us believe that this was an isolated, if not unique, event. The truth of the matter is that it has been the norm for this to occur, around the world, especially since World War II. Just look into what really happened in Libya when they wanted to get rid of Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011, for example, or in Egypt where they wanted to protect their dictator Hosni Mubarak, in 2011. It's far too soon to read anything approaching reality in *The New York Times* or *Wikipedia*, but you can find reliable accounts in the alternative media such as *Third World Resurgence*, *Z Communications*, (zcommunications.org) in the U.S., or the

Global Research Centre (globalresearch.ca) in Canada. There are literally dozens of examples detailed by authors such as William Blum, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, et cetera. When enough time has passed, you can get some realistic details in Wikipedia about General Augusto Pinochet's Chile, for example, and the economic warfare conducted by Richard Nixon against socialist president Salvador Allende, and U.S. involvement in the 1973 coup d'état by Pinochet. But you are much better off relying on the above authors.

So, to more directly answer your question, these productions are obviously manufactured when you contrast the syrupy "spreading freedom and democracy" version of world events in the corporate media, to the realities of working people abroad (and increasingly at home), as captured by alternative media authors. When you have read enough examples, the fog lifts and the patterns become clear. As secret government documents are released, they confirm alternative media perspectives. This has transpired regarding Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Vietnam, East Timor, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Jamaica, Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan ... the list goes on.

The best way to engage in the process is to read all of the alternative media accounts that you can find, and then just contrast those with what you read and see and hear in the corporate media. It helps if you have some historical knowledge, but it's not essential. Look at Venezuela. It provides an excellent and current test case for what I'm saying. So, for example, if you read corporate media depictions of Venezuela's former president Hugo Chavez, he was portrayed as a despot, a dictator, a leftist strongman, et cetera. But the reality is that he was popularly and repeatedly elected, in 2012 by a 10 percentage point margin of voters, in an election characterized by the (Jimmy) Carter Centre, as "there was no dispute about the results or serious controversy about the outcome." What this means is that these media descriptions of Chavez are simply wrong.

It's apparent from an analysis of Venezuelan politics that the corporate media despised Chavez because his actions supported the poor, organizing them politically, improving their health care, education, and well-being. It is clear that looking out for the interests of the people was against national and international elite interests: directing petroleum profits to social programs instead of corporate profits is verboten! The corporate media bias is patently obvious when its depictions are contextualized within this living reality of the Venezuelan majority, and the rules established by historical accounts. As Chomsky says:

" ... the assigned functions of Third World countries are to be markets for American business, sources of resources for American

business, to provide cheap labor for American business, and so on. I mean, there's no big secret about that — the media won't tell you and scholarship won't tell you, but all you have to do is look at declassified government documents and this is all explained very frankly and explicitly" (Understanding Power, p. 64).

Once you understand this principle, then you can observe the way in which despots such as Hosni Mubarek or Augusto Pinochet or General Suharto of Indonesia are kept in power as long as possible, because they are implementing the international corporate agenda. Conversely, progressive socialist leaders who work to improve their people's lives, such as Salvador Allende, or Hugo Chavez or Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, or even Muammar Gaddafi, will be deposed because they have committed the cardinal sin. Chavez, in fact, was briefly deposed in a U.S. sponsored coup in 2002, but the coup was overturned by massive public demonstrations which returned him to power. Ortega was effectively deposed by Ronald Reagan's illegal Contra army, in 1989.

The corporate media role in all of this is indispensable: they grossly distort people and events in order to manufacture the consent of the public.

DB: Many of the words you've drawn upon so far to describe your observations of corporate media performance create the sense that we are all members of some vast theatre audience. Metaphors such as "role," "depiction," "(mis)-representation," "portrayal," "direct," "guide," "orchestration," and "elaborate production," speak of players, playwrights, and their mass audience. This seems especially to be the case when ethically questionable ideas and practices are staged for view. I'm referring to your reference to "spreading freedom and democracy abroad." If you are alluding to America's post-9/11 response played out in Iraq, are you saying that the concept itself had to be cast in a way that the theatre audience would find it acceptable, if not, to some extent, pleasurable?

J.W.: Well, when you put it that way it reminds me of the late 90's film, *Wag The Dog*, with Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, and Anne Heche. It was a spoof, but it's not far off reality. Hoffman played a shameless Hollywood manipulator who fabricates an imaginary war to distract the public and get the president re-elected. A similar film is *Canadian Bacon* by Michael Moore. The elite agenda is sold more subtly than this, but both films have the right idea. I was reading an account of the British Empire by Tony Cartalucci, and he cites the Latin slogan or motto they used on Americans, which was, "Non Sibi, Sed Aliis," which means, "Not for self, but for others." Cartalucci writes, "... it encapsulates perfectly the use of noble-intentioned [empires] to exploit human tragedy for the benefit of the elite." This applies, not just to

Iraq, but around the world, dating back to the U.S. takeover of Hawaii in the 19th Century.



Well, this is precisely what the U.S. Administration says about itself. It propagates what's been called "American Exceptionalism," which means, 'Other empires in the past have been greedy but we are an exception, we reach out to others in compassion and owing to our benevolence.' Well, this is ridiculous, if you possess even a passing knowledge of history, and what these leaders have said in frank moments about their own intentions. But the vast majority of North Americans seem to believe in American Exceptionalism. And, even Canadians who occasionally will accept that the U.S. leadership has been selfish and wrong on occasion, refuse to own up to Canadian complicity. We pretend that Nobel Peace Prize winning former Prime Minister Lester Pearson was a peacemaker, when, like Henry Kissinger and Jimmy Carter and the others, he has been labeled as a war criminal.

People prefer the fairy tale version of events, because it's not as painful, because we are indoctrinated, it has been imbued in our very psyche through osmosis ever since we were tiny children, and because you are treated like a pariah or an outcast if you speak the truth. Really, any sane person would just stick to the script!!!

In the fairy story by Hans Christian Anderson about the *Emperor's New Clothes*, the little boy who tells the truth is a hero, but in reality today, critical thinkers who challenge the status quo are marginalized and condemned in the mainstream. This is true even for Noam Chomsky, who is either ignored or derided and dismissed, and he always has been. When he was voted in an online poll as the leading intellectual in the world, a few years ago, the corporate media either ignored that completely, or implied that it was just

because of his purported Koolaid-sipping followers, or they said it's because of his bona fide work in the field of linguistics. As for his political work, well, he's simply crazy in that regard, and this work should be dismissed. For his part, Chomsky says this is his most important work, above and beyond the linguistics.

DB: I wonder how long the mirage can be maintained that America stands as some unique exception among all other nations — as Clinton (Bill and Hillary), Bush, and Obama have reiterated over recent years — ostensibly embracing, on one hand, the value of free speech rights for all people yet, on the other, dismissing citizens who speak out freely about the injustices and abuses of corporate, political, and military power. Do you see Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's work on the Propaganda Model informing us today about how media perform to help sustain the prevailing mythologies surrounding free speech?

J.W.: In a word, yes. Their work in the PM and elsewhere lays bare the role of the media in this regard. For example, Chomsky wrote in an article in *Truthout* in June, 2014:

" ... the constitutional lawyer in the White House seems determined to demolish the foundations of our civil liberties. The principle of the presumption of innocence, which dates back to the Magna Carta 800 years ago, has long been dismissed to oblivion. Recently The New York Times reported the "anguish" of a federal judge who had to decide whether to allow the force-feeding of a Syrian prisoner who is on a hunger strike to protest his imprisonment. No 'anguish' was expressed [by the judge or the Times] over the fact that he has been held without trial for 12 years in Guantanamo, one of many victims of the leader of the Free World, who claims the right to hold prisoners without charges and to subject them to torture. These exposures lead us to inquire into state policy more generally and the factors that drive it. The received standard version [via the media] is that the primary goal of policy is security and defense against enemies. The doctrine at once suggests a few questions: security for whom, and defense against which enemies? The answers are highlighted dramatically by the [Edward] Snowden revelations. Policy must assure the security of state authority and concentrations of domestic power, defending them from a frightening enemy: the domestic population, which can become a great danger if not controlled."

So much is revealed in this quote. In his usual fashion, Chomsky highlights for us the contradictions in the posturing

by the Administration and the media, in this case the *New York Times* whose “standard version” of reality, although patently ludicrous, is probably accepted by many as factual. The reality is that the threat to the Administration and media’s brand of “democracy” is posed by the public itself.

Chomsky and Herman and others lay this bare for those of who take the trouble to look up their work. That’s the key responsibility of the public: seek out these alternative voices, to have any hope of comprehending a reality unfiltered by the forces of corporate interests.

How long can the mirage go on? Well, the U.S. is the dominant empire, and many people will perhaps blindly follow along while this is the case. There are signs that it may all end very soon, though, with the impending U.S. economic collapse that many non mainstream observers are predicting, and which appears to be forthcoming. It will be horrendous for the populace, of course. But it is not possible for the U.S. to continue overspending on imperial wars, while cutting taxes for the rich and paring-to-the-bone social, health and education programs. Printing vast quantities of money has only delayed the impending economic collapse. Possibly the only positive outcome of the collapse may be the realization by the public that they have been sold a massive bill of goods, and that the one percent and its minions are responsible. It is possible that this will precipitate another American Revolution.

D.B.: This being primary season in American electoral politics, what can be learned from the tone struck in the public discourse that might signify a kind of corporate pillaging of the political establishment? What reflections of our discussion do you see so far in the current electoral process?

J.W.: To be honest, I haven’t paid a lot of attention to the U.S. elections because they don’t really matter a whole lot. It’s a contest between corporate party number one and corporate party two. If the results really mattered, they wouldn’t let people vote. Bernie Sanders would be refreshing, but he likely won’t win the Democratic nomination. And it’s not at all clear that if did that he would represent much change in international affairs, given that he admires the British imperialist Winston Churchill. We could be excited about the prospect of the first woman president, but Hillary is so steeped in the establishment that her gender hardly matters. Just look at Michael Moore’s portrayal of what she did with health care in his film *Sicko*. In international affairs, she has aligned herself with Henry Kissinger!

If you really want to vote for a *progressive* woman, think about voting for Dr. Jill Stein of the Green Party. Here is some of what she has said about U.S. foreign policy: “As part of this new principled foreign policy, we would also end the

supply of arms and funding to governments that are massively violating human rights and international law. This includes ending support for and collaboration with the Saudi monarchy, which is committing war crimes in Yemen and horrific human rights violations of its own citizens, including mass beheadings and executions. We would also end the \$8 million a day of military support for the Israeli government, which is committing war crimes and massive human rights violations, including periodic massacres, occupation, home demolitions, collective punishment and apartheid.” With progressive policies like these, Dr. Stein is all but eliminated from the mainstream corporate media, and the debates and so forth. It’s difficult to find her in the social media.

The main thing is that, once again the public has been hoodwinked. That’s not surprising when you think about the milieu in which we live. The media are owned by corporate behemoths. It’s rather ludicrous to expect them to report on corporatism. Is it trite to say that it’s like asking a fish to comment on the air around us? Let’s just use the example of foreign affairs, which we’ve been discussing. The political narrative has been, “terrorists.... blah... blah... blah... terrorists... Mr. Trump will keep Muslims out of America...Mr. Trump will build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and Mexico will pay for it ... how can Obama travel to Cuba to support those communists when terrorists have struck Belgium?” Well, this is all distraction or misdirection, or inciting fear in the populace.

Bernie Sanders, the only corporate party candidate who is even mildly progressive, has largely limited his criticism to the 1953 CIA overthrow of the Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh, which, after decades of denial, even the *New York Times* admitted with the release of CIA documents in 2000. But these topics occupy just an *infinitesimal* portion of the political debate. Someone following the campaigns very closely wouldn’t even notice these topics. The corporate media are willfully ignorant, and so the populace is mostly just clueless because they haven’t read the books or the alternative media which cast light on these topics. They don’t have the luxury of free time to do this, as they are preoccupied with several part-time jobs and scraping out a living under neo-liberalism.

It just doesn’t occur to people that when Registered Nurses with four-year university degrees are replaced with cheaper Registered Nurse Assistants with two-year community college degrees, this is neo-liberalism. When municipalities hire out services such as waste disposal or parking ticket collection to private companies, the only thing the media focus on is how much taxpayer money is saved. Rarely does anyone connect this to the swim to the bottom line of capitalism’s wage pool. We’re saving money by throwing our neighbours on the food lines. And we’ll be next.

The story of what happens in international affairs is even more remote. Brutal, murderous dictators are installed, supported and encouraged, as long as they're willing to starve their people and give away natural resources. Think of Batista's Cuba, Pinochet's Chile, or Suharto's Indonesia, or the Philippines under Marcos, or Haiti under the Duvaliers ... or, for that matter, Honduras under Hernandez, following the 2009 U.S.-sponsored coup. Economic and political agreements mean that U.S. leaders look the other way in the face of Saudi Arabian horrors, while castigating Cuba for allegedly imprisoning "dissidents," who are in fact revolutionaries paid millions of dollars annually by the U.S. The Saudis are "friends" to U.S. imperialism and corporatism, while the Cubans are not.

In the Middle East, the U.S. client state Israel can periodically slaughter Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and elsewhere, with impunity, because they are allegedly protecting themselves from people whose land they have occupied and embargoed. Israel portrays itself as victim, when it is the aggressor. People who point this out are labelled as being 'anti-semites,' even if they are Jews. A good example is Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein. Dr. Chomsky is a tenured and partially retired professor emeritus. Dr. Finkelstein was labelled a holocaust denier, even though his parents are German concentration camp survivors!! In 2007, Finkelstein was denied tenure and fired by DePaul University in Chicago, apparently because of his criticism of Israel, although independent academic assessors hired by his department found no problems with his work, and although his department voted in favour of his tenure. In 2008, Finkelstein was banned from entering Israel for a period of ten years. He is currently teaching at Sakarya University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, in Turkey.

A similar thing happened to Helen Thomas, the dean of White House correspondents. In 2010, she was asked for some comments on Israel. She replied, "Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine Why push people out of there who have lived there for centuries?" She issued an apology immediately, when the quotation surfaced, but she was forced to resign from Hearst Newspapers. She later said, "You cannot criticize Israel in this country and survive." Although she issued an apology, she said she still, "had the same feelings about Israel's aggression and brutality." The next day on NBC's *Today Show*, President Obama called her remarks "offensive" and "out of line" and said her retirement was "the right decision." To criticize Israel is to criticize U.S. foreign policy.

The corporate media are doing an excellent job, the one they are paid to do, which is to support and promote the policies of the corporatocracy.

Bios:

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Daniel Broudy is Dean of the Graduate School of Intercultural Communication and Professor of Rhetoric and Applied Linguistics at Okinawa Christian University. He is co-editor of *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific* (Cambridge Scholars, 2013) and co-author of *Rhetorical Rape: The Verbal Violations of the Punditocracy* (Waldport Press, 2010). He has taught in the U.S., Korea, and Japan. His research activities include analysis of textual and symbolic representations of power that dominate post-industrial culture. He serves as a co-editor of *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures* and writes about discourse practices that shape public opinion.