The Propaganda Society: Promotional Culture and Politics in Global Context
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What is This?
attempting to cope with the ethical demands of the current media landscape; it further offers in both form and content a substantial model for how to proceed ethically in the face of rapid technological and social changes.


Reviewed by: Melissa Aronczyk, Carleton University, Canada

The introduction to *The Propaganda Society* opens with an epigraph by Guy Debord, whose 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* was a prescient portrait of a world divorced from reality by the preponderance of images – images of an economy and polity obsessed with ‘having’ instead of ‘being’, and of a dominant class devoted to producing generalized acceptance of this totalizing system.

Sussman’s critique is no less damning and no less totalizing. His aim is to describe the globalized character of disinformation in contemporary liberal democracies, the result of a ‘transnational economic, technological, political, military and institutional regime’ (p. 2) of neoliberal ideology. The convergence of interests across these systems is both the cause and effect of ‘systemic propaganda’ by corporate, political and media decision-makers. In Sussman’s breathless telling, this situation manifests in a very long list of consequences:

we link the growth of propaganda and promotion to the neoliberal regime of capitalist accumulation, characterized by the almost unfettered expansion of transnational corporate trade and investment, corporate megamergers (with millions of lost jobs), convergent technologies (functionally and through ownership), massive cuts in social spending, government deregulation, tax ‘reform’ for the rich, militarism, escalated assaults on labor organizations, the privatization and outsourcing of public institutions and services, and increasing moral deregulation. (p. 5)

Here the reader begins to wish for a somewhat more grounded and nuanced analysis to flesh out these multiple clauses. It is not that these features aren’t real or relevant; indeed these items are increasingly being addressed in mainstream and academic work as tentacles of neoliberalism’s characteristically flexible and wide-grasping system. Yet by assimilating them so readily Sussman limits the force of his overarching argument. If everything is propaganda then nothing is; and efforts to use these ideas for critical engagement are blunted by the difficulty in separating the threads of the narrative. If indeed, as he writes, ‘the project of critical propaganda studies is to develop an understanding of how the immaterial aspects of persuasion reflect the intrinsic material interests of the forces that they serve’ (p. 14), then we need not only more but also more fine-grained accounts of so-called ‘propaganda’ and how it works in specific geopolitical settings.

The invisible hand guiding Sussman’s critique, which becomes visible in many of the chapters in the volume, is Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model, elaborated in 1988’s *Manufacturing Consent* to account for the mainstream American media’s ‘integration into the political economy of the dominant economic system’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988/2002: xii). This model consists of a set of five mutually reinforcing ‘filters’ staunching the flow of mainstream news: (1) the oligopolistic
ownership and profit incentive structure of media outlets; (2) advertising as the major source of income of these outlets; (3) government, business and ‘experts’ as primary sources of information to these outlets; (4) critics of mainstream media (namely, the actors in #3) whose goal is ‘to contain any deviations from the established line’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988/2002: 28); and (5) ‘anticommunism’ as an ideological other to communism’s dangerous line. These five filters amount to a regime of Western propaganda whose primary function is to manufacture consent worldwide.

It is fitting therefore that a chapter by Edward Herman himself (‘Legitimizing versus Delegitimizing Elections: Honduras and Iran’) figures among the contributions to this volume. Building on the findings of Manufacturing Consent, Herman and co-author David Peterson demonstrate the continued salience of the propaganda model in U.S. government efforts to control news accounts of elections in foreign countries. Unsurprisingly, countries whose leaders support (or at least do not threaten) the interests of the U.S. government are represented as legitimate; countries whose leaders run up against established interests are not, regardless of the actual conditions in the country in terms of violence, corruption or repression.

Four other chapters explicitly make use of this propaganda model as the basis for a range of evidence in a variety of settings: from the ownership and advertising structure of online social networks (Tim Dwyer) to U.S. news media coverage of the 2008 financial crisis (James F Tracy); and from Silvio Berlusconi’s Italian media empire (Massimo Ragnedda and Glenn W Muschert) to Canada’s increasingly integrated state communication (Patricia Mazepa). Other chapters, such as Sue Curry Jansen’s strong analysis of the dense communication networks created by international public relations agencies, do not explicitly engage this model but identify similar effects.

The strongest chapters in the book are those that offer nuanced and historically contextualized accounts of determinate cases. The lead chapter, ‘Advertising and the Genius of Commercial Propaganda’ (Robert W McChesney, Inger L Stole, John Bellamy Foster, and Hannah Holleman) gives students of advertising a valuable lesson in the industry’s historical economic functions: to create demand and overcome stagnation. Aeron Davis links the terms of promotion to the conditions of financial markets, showing how the kinds of thinking that are required to accept the premises of intangible, highly complex and probabilistic assets depend on the creation of engaging promotional narratives. Davis exposes the interrelation between financial and business news coverage, the strategic maneuvers of public relations consultants and lobbyists, and the performative ability of intangible financial products to inspire confidence in their efficacy. Sharon Beder looks at recent corporate communication campaigns to discredit environmental issues, placing the case of global warming in the context of the longstanding relationship between American public relations firms and energy interests. Inger L Stole’s chapter on corporate incursions into social causes and Michael Barker’s chapter on celebrity philanthropy are also illuminating. Both chapters express concern over how the merger of charity and profit margins has complicated the moral bases of ‘selfless’ giving. To echo Debord, if our qualities as humans are increasingly degraded by the preponderance of desires to ‘have’ rather than to ‘be’, what happens when even the altruism of giving is yoked to the systemic propaganda of having? For Sussman, it is incumbent upon us to expand alternative media sources, encourage
critique by public intellectuals, and educate new generations of students (p. 318). The Propaganda Society comes as one contribution to that effort. Students, activists and intellectuals alike should find useful arguments in its pages.

References


Reviewed by: Yuji Shimohira Calvo, University of Edinburgh, UK

Jodi Dean’s Blog Theory is a successful attempt to psychoanalyze today’s media practices. The book is structured into four chapters, each devoted to the analysis of modern dynamics on the Internet, ranging from the economic impact of blogging to the political impact of networking. She makes use of Lacanian theory mainly through Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of it, which may make it more difficult for some to understand. Despite this potential obstacle, one inevitably gets a feeling of reading a fresh piece of work on the Internet; Blog Theory does not take for granted the World Wide Web’s liberating or democratizing elements. This is a book avowedly written from a critical standpoint, a book that explores how the Internet reproduces communicative capitalism and its interests by entrapping individuals in circuits of drive. The result is the creation of what Dean refers to as ‘whatever beings’ (p. 66), individuals with diffuse and interchangeable personalities who interact in affective networks that simulate belonging in a social group.

Dean’s central claim is that communicative capitalism is the general context in which the perverse dynamics of drive (the will to start something again) take place through widespread media practices like Googling and Facebooking. Media practices in communicative capitalism are not only ephemeral and fast, but also ubiquitous and banal in most cases. For Dean, these practices entrap the Internet user in never-ending circuits of intensive surveillance. Drawn from Foucauldian theory, the surveillance that characterizes social networks is, for Dean, also internalized by social actors, so in addition to the State and the Internet as a whole, surveillance is carried out by individuals themselves on their peers on websites such as Facebook and Twitter (p. 18). These circuits capture us with extraordinary strength as they are based in the jouissance, the double enjoyment of controlling and of being controlled that causes anxiety if one does not pursue the jouissance (p. 92). Moreover, Dean goes beyond the formal conceptualization of communicative capitalism, which exploits communication in the same way that industrial capitalism exploited labor. For Dean, the fragmented nature of modern media practices prevents individuals from grasping society as a totality, and thereby from critically thinking about the social order, as fragmentation implies distraction and disengagement.