

# Methods of Media Manipulation

by

Michael Parenti

**W**e are told by people in the media industry that news bias is unavoidable. Whatever distortions and inaccuracies found in the news are caused by deadline pressures, human misjudgment, budgetary restraints, and the difficulty of reducing a complex story into a concise report. Furthermore—the argument goes—no communication system can hope to report everything; selectivity is needed.

I would argue that the media's misrepresentations are not all the result of innocent error and everyday production problems, though such problems certainly do exist. True, the press has to be selective, but what principle of selectivity is involved?

Media bias usually does not occur in random fashion; rather, it moves in the same overall direction again and again, favoring management over labor, corporations over corporate critics, affluent whites over low-income minorities, officialdom over protesters, the two-party monopoly over leftist third parties, privatization and free market "reforms" over public sector development, U.S. dominance of the Third World over revolutionary or populist social change, national security policy over critics of that policy, and conservative commentators and columnists like Rush Limbaugh and George Will over progressive or populist ones like Jim Hightower and Ralph Nader (not to mention more radical ones). The built-in biases of the corporate mainstream media faithfully reflect the dominant ideology, seldom straying into territory that might cause discomfort to those who hold political and economic power, including those who own the media or advertise in it.

## ***Suppression by Omission***

Manipulation often lurks in the things left unmentioned. The most common form of media misrepresentation is suppression by omission. Sometimes the omission includes not just vital details of a story but the entire story itself, even ones of major importance. As I just noted, stories that might reflect poorly upon "the powers that be" are the least likely to see the light of day. Thus, the Tylenol poisoning of several people by a deranged individual was treated as big news, but the far more sensational story of the brown-lung poisoning of thousands of factory workers by large manufacturing interests (who themselves own

or advertise in the major media) remained suppressed for decades, despite the best efforts of worker safety groups to bring the issues before

the public.

We hear plenty about the political repression perpetrated by left-wing governments such as Cuba (though a recent State Department report actually cited only six political prisoners in Cuba), but almost nothing about the far more brutal oppression and mass killings perpetrated by U.S.-supported right-wing client states such as Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, El Salvador, Guatemala, and others too numerous to mention.

Often the media mute or downplay truly sensational (as opposed to sensationalistic) stories. Thus, in 1965 the Indonesian military—advised, equipped, trained, and financed by the U.S. military and the CIA—overthrew President Achmed Sukarno and eradicated the Indonesian Communist Party and its allies, killing half a million people (some estimates are as high as a million) in what was the most heinous act of political mass murder since the Nazi Holocaust. The generals also destroyed hundreds of clinics, libraries, schools, and community centers that had been opened by the communists. Here was a sensational story if ever there was one, but it took three months before it received passing mention in *Time* magazine and still another month before it was reported in the *New York Times*. (The April 5, 1966, piece was accompanied by an editorial that actually praised the Indonesian military for "rightly playing its part with utmost caution.")

Information about the massive repression, murder, and torture practiced by U.S.-sponsored surrogate forces in the Third World, and other crimes committed by the U.S. national security state, simply are omitted from the mainstream media and thereby denied public debate and criticism. They are suppressed with an efficiency and consistency that would be called totalitarian were it to occur in some other countries.

## ***Attack and Destroy the Target***

Sometimes a story won't go away. A congressional investigation begins or information is circulated around the world on the Web, as recently happened with the CIA-crack exposé. In any case, it begins to reach larger publics and gain visibility despite the suppression perpetrated by "our free and independent media." When omission proves to be sufficient, the media move

from ignoring the story to vigorously attacking it. So come the hit pieces in the print and broadcast media—a barrage, unrelenting, repetitive, unforgiving, backed by a cascade of outright lies.

Thus, at one time or another over the course of forty years, the CIA involved itself with drug traffickers in Italy, France, Corsica, Indochina, Afghanistan, and Central and South America. Much of this activity was the object of extended congressional

Some common negative labels include “leftist guerrillas,” “Islamic terrorists,” “conspiracy theories,” “inner-city gangs,” and “civil disobediences.” These, too, are seldom treated within a larger context of social relations and issues. The press itself is facetiously and falsely labeled “the liberal media” by the hundreds of conservative columnists, commentators, and talk show hosts who crowd the communication universe while claiming to be shut out of it.

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investigations—by Senator Frank Church’s Foreign Relations Committee and Congressman Otis Pike’s House Select Intelligence Committee in the 1970s, and Senator John Kerry’s Select Committee on Intelligence in the late 1980s—and is a matter of public record. But the media seem not to have heard about it.

In August 1996, when the *San Jose Mercury News* published an in-depth series about the CIA-contra crack shipments that were flooding East Los Angeles, the major media held true to form and suppressed the story. But after the series was circulated around the world on the Web, the story became too difficult to ignore, and the media began its assault. Articles in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* and reports on network television announced that there was “no evidence” of CIA involvement, that the *Mercury News* series was “bad journalism,” and that the public’s interest in this subject was the real problem, a matter of gullibility, hysteria, and conspiracy mania. In fact, the *Mercury News* series, drawing from a year-long investigation, cited specific agents and dealers. When placed on the Web, the series was copiously supplemented with pertinent documents and depositions that supported the charge. In response, the mainstream media simply lied, telling the public that such evidence did not exist. By a process of relentless repetition, the major media exonerated the CIA from any involvement in drugs.

### **Labeling**

Like all propagandists, media people seek to predetermine our perception of a subject with a positive or negative label. Some positive ones are “stability,” “the president’s firm leadership,” “a strong defense,” and “a healthy economy.” Indeed, who would want instability, weak presidential leadership, a vulnerable defense, and a sick economy? The label predefines the subject and does it without having to deal with actual particulars that might lead us to a different conclusion.

### **Face-Value Transmission**

One way to lie is to accept at face value what are known to be official lies, uncritically passing them on to the public without adequate confirmations. For the better part of four years, in the early 1950s, the press performed this function for Senator Joseph McCarthy, who went largely unchallenged as he brought charge after charge of “treason” and “communist subversion” against people whom he could not have victimized without the complicity of the national media.

Face-value transmission has characterized the media’s performance in almost every area of domestic and foreign policy, so much so that journalists have been referred to as “stenographers of power.” (Perhaps some labels are well deserved.) When challenged on this, reporters respond that they cannot inject their own personal ideology into their reports. Actually, no one is asking them to. My criticism is that they already do. Their conventional ideological perceptions usually coincide with those of their bosses and with officialdom in general, making them faithful purveyors of the prevailing orthodoxy. This influence of bias is perceived as “objectivity.”

### **False Balancing**

In accordance with the canons of good journalism, the media is supposed to tap competing sources to get both sides of an issue. In fact, both sides are seldom accorded equal prominence. One study found that on National Public Radio, supposedly the most liberal of the mainstream media, right-wing spokespersons are often interviewed alone, while liberals—on the less frequent occasions they appear—are almost always offset by conservatives.

Furthermore, both sides of a story are not necessarily *all* sides. During the 1980s, television panel discussions on defense policy pitted “experts” who wanted to maintain the existing

high levels of military spending against other “experts” who wanted to increase the military budget even more. Seldom, if ever heard, were those who advocated drastic reductions in the defense budget. Progressive and radical views are almost completely shut out.

## **Framing**

The most effective propaganda is that which relies upon framing rather than on falsehood. By bending the truth rather than breaking it, using emphasis and other auxiliary embellishments, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity. Framing is achieved in the way the news is packaged, the amount of exposure, the placement (front page or buried within, lead story or last), the tone of presentation (sympathetic or slighting), the headlines and photographs, and, in the case of broadcast media, the accompanying visual and auditory effects.

Newscasters use themselves as auxiliary embellishments. They cultivate a smooth delivery and try to convey an impression of detachment that places them above the rough and tumble of their subject matter. Television commentators and newspaper editorialists and columnists affect a knowing style and tone designed to foster credibility and an aura of certitude—or what might be called authoritative ignorance—as expressed in remarks like “How will this situation end? Only time will tell” or

“No one can say for sure” (better translated as, “I don’t know and if I don’t know then nobody does”). Sometimes the aura of authoritative credibility is preserved by palming off trite truisms as penetrating truths. So newscasters learn to fashion sentences like “The space launching will take place as scheduled if no unexpected problems arise” and “Because of lagging voter interest, election-day turnout is expected to be light” and “Unless Congress acts soon, this bill is not likely to go anywhere.”

We are not likely to go anywhere as a people and a democracy unless we alert ourselves to the methods of media manipulation that are ingrained in the daily production of news and commentary. The news media regularly fail to provide a range of information and commentary that might help citizens in a democracy develop their own critical perceptions. The job of corporate media is to make the universe of discourse safe for corporate America, telling us what to think about the world before we have a chance to think about it for ourselves. When we understand that news selectivity is likely to favor those who have power, position, and wealth, we move from a liberal complaint about the press’ sloppy performance to a radical analysis of how the media serve the ruling circles all too well with much skill and craft. ■

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# What a Marvelous Word

by J. L. Kubicek

*What a marvelous word, “PERSPECTIVE.”  
It holds voluptuousness and scope  
in equal proportions; within cattails  
and stars; Reykjavik and Rangoon.*

*When awakened  
it rises from imagination’s fields  
and one “sees,” falling  
and fallen leaves;*

*that the prestissimo busyness  
of the House Wren is not unrelated  
to the adagio meditations of the Tortoise*

*as each travels from the Olduvai  
via identical stars; take care  
that you and I believe otherwise.*