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Mediterranean Quarterly, Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 2002, pp. 56-66 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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# Monopoly Media Manipulation

Michael Parenti

In the United States, the corporate news media usually reflect the dominant official ideology both in their reportage and commentary. At the same time, these media leave the impression that they are free and independent, capable of balanced objective coverage and critical commentary. How they achieve these seemingly contradictory but legitimating goals is a matter worthy of study. Notables in the media industry claim that occasional inaccuracies do occur in news coverage because of innocent error and such everyday production problems as deadline pressures, budgetary restraints, and the difficulty of reducing a complex story into a concise report. Furthermore, no communication system can hope to report everything, hence selectivity is needed.

To be sure, such pressures and problems do exist, and honest mistakes are made, but do they really explain the media's overall performance? True, the press must be selective, but what principle of selectivity is involved? I would argue that media bias usually does not occur in random fashion. Rather, it moves in more or less consistent directions, favoring management over labor, corporations over corporate critics, affluent whites over low-income minorities, officialdom over protestors, the two-party monopoly over dissident third parties, privatization and free-market "reforms" over public-sector development, U.S. dominance of the Third World over revolutionary or populist social change, and conservative commentators and columnists over progressive or radical ones.

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### Suppression by Omission

Some critics complain that the press is sensationalistic and invasive. In fact, it is more often muted and evasive. More insidious than the sensationalistic hype is the artful avoidance. Truly sensational stories (as opposed to sensationalistic) are often downplayed or avoided outright. Sometimes the suppression includes not just vital details but the entire story itself, even one of major import. Reports that might reflect poorly on the national security state are least likely to see the light of day. Thus we hear about political repression perpetrated by officially designated “rogue” governments (Iraq, Libya, Yugoslavia, and Taliban Afghanistan), but information about the brutal terrorism and torture practiced by U.S.-sponsored forces in such countries as Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and others is denied public airing, being suppressed with a consistency that would be called totalitarian were it to occur in some other countries.

The media downplay stories of momentous magnitude. In 1965 the Indonesian military—advised, equipped, trained, and financed by the U.S. military and the Central Intelligence Agency (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 greatest act of political mass murder since the Nazi Holocaust. The generals also destroyed hundreds of clinics, libraries, schools, and community centers that had been established 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 yet another month before it was reported in the *New York Times* (5 April 1966), accompanied by an editorial that actually praised the Indonesian military for “rightly playing its part with utmost caution.”

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 investigation by one Senate committee and two House committees in the 1970s and 1980s.

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

When omission proves to be an insufficient mode of censorship and a story somehow begins to reach larger publics, the press moves from artful avoidance to frontal assault in order to discredit the story. In August 1996, the *San Jose Mercury News*, drawing from a year-long investigation, ran an in-depth series about the CIA-Contra crack shipments that were flooding East Los Angeles. Holding true to form, the major media mostly ignored the issue. But the *Mercury News* series was picked up by some local and regional newspapers and was flashed across the world on the Internet with copious documents and depositions supporting the charges against the CIA. African American urban communities, afflicted by the crack epidemic, were up in arms and wanted to know more. The story became difficult to ignore. So the major media began an all-out assault. A barrage of pieces in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* and on network television and the Public Broadcasting System assured us that there was no evidence of CIA involvement, that the *Mercury News* series was bad journalism, and that its investigative reporter Gary Webb was irresponsibly playing on the public's gullibility and conspiracy mania. By a process of relentless attack and shameless mendacity, the major media exonerated the CIA from any involvement in drug trafficking.

### **Labeling**

Like all propagandists, mainstream media people seek to prefigure 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, not many Americans would want instability, wobbly presidential leadership, a weak defense, and a sick economy. The label defines the subject without having to deal with actual particulars that might lead us to a different conclusion.

Some common negative labels are *leftist guerrillas, conspiracy theories, inner-city gangs, and civil disturbances*. 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-shows hosts who crowd the communications universe while claiming to be shut out from it. *Islamic terrorists* is,

of course, a favorite label, all the more apposite since the horrendous 11 September terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. But we never hear of the U.S. terrorist aerial attacks of Panama, Iraq, or Yugoslavia. In similar fashion, we hear of Palestinian terrorists but not Israeli terrorists.

A new favorite among deceptive labels is *reforms*, whose meaning is inverted; being applied to any policy dedicated to *undoing* the reforms that have been achieved after decades of popular struggle. So the destruction of family assistance programs is labeled *welfare reform*. Reforms in Eastern Europe, and most recently in Yugoslavia, have meant the heartless impoverishment of formerly communist countries, the dismantling of what remained of the public economy, its deindustrialization and expropriation at fire-sale prices by a corporate investor class, complete with massive layoffs, drastic cutbacks in public assistance and human services, and a dramatic increase in unemployment and human suffering. *International Monetary Fund reforms* is a euphemism for the same kind of bruising cutbacks throughout the Third World. As Edward Herman once noted, “reforms” are not the solution, they are the problem.

In April 2001, the newly elected prime minister of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi, was widely identified in the U.S. media as a reformer. His free-market “reforms” included the privatization of Japan’s postal saving system. Millions of Japanese have their life savings in the postal system, and the reformer Koizumi wants private investors to be able to get their hands on these funds.

*Free market* has long been a pet label, evoking images of economic plentitude and democracy. In reality, free-market policies undermine the markets of local producers, provide state subsidies to multinational corporations, destroy public-sector services, and create greater gaps between the wealthy few and the underprivileged many.

Another favorite media label is *hard-line*. Anyone who resists free-market “reforms,” be it in Belarus, Italy, Peru, or Yugoslavia, is labeled a hard-liner. An article in the *New York Times* of 21 October 1997 used *hard-line* and *hard-liner* eleven times to describe Bosnian Serb leaders who opposed attempts by North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces to close down the “hard-line Bosnian Serb broadcast network.” The radio station in question was the only one in all of Bosnia that offered a perspective critical of Western intervention in Yugoslavia. The forceful closing of this one remaining dissenting media voice was described by the *Times* as “a step toward bring-

ing about responsible news coverage in Bosnia.” The story did note “the apparent irony” of using foreign soldiers for “silencing broadcasts in order to encourage free speech.” The NATO troops who carried out this repressive task were identified with the positive label of “peacekeepers.”

It is no accident that labels like *hard-line* are never subjected to precise definition. The efficacy of a label is that it not have a specific content that can be held up to the test of evidence. Better that it be self-referential, propagating an undefined but evocative image.

### **Preemptive Assumption**

Frequently, the media accept as given the very policy position that needs to be critically examined. Whenever the White House proposes an increase in military spending, press discussion is limited to how much more spending is needed, how much updating of weaponry: are we doing enough or need we do still more? No media exposure is given to those who hotly contest the already gargantuan arms budget in its totality. It is assumed that U.S. forces must be deployed around the world and that hundreds of billions must be spent each year on this global military system.

There is a similar pattern to media discussion of Social Security “reform,” a euphemism for the privatization and eventual abolition of a program that is working well. The media preemptively assume the very dubious position that needs to be debated: that the program is in danger of insolvency (in thirty years) and therefore in need of drastic overhauling today. Social Security operates as a three-pronged human service, providing (1) retirement pensions and medical care for the aged, (2) survivors’ insurance up until the age of eighteen to children in families that have lost their breadwinner, and (3) disability assistance to any person of preretirement age who has sustained serious injury or illness. But from existing press coverage you would not know this—and most Americans do not.

### **Face-Value Transmission**

Many labels are fabricated not by news media but by officialdom. U.S. governmental and corporate leaders talk about *our global leadership, national*

*security, free markets, and globalization* when what they seem to really mean is “All Power to the Transnationals.” The media uncritically and dutifully accept these official views, transmitting them to wider publics without any noticeable critical comment regarding the actual content of the policy. Face-value transmission has characterized the performance of the press in almost every area of domestic and foreign policy.

When challenged on this, reporters respond that they cannot inject their own personal views into their reports. Actually, no one is asking them to. My criticism is that they already do, and seldom realize it. Their conventional ideological perceptions usually coincide with those of their bosses and with officialdom in general, making them face-value purveyors of the prevailing orthodoxy. This uniformity of bias is perceived as objectivity.

The alternative to challenging face-value transmission is not to editorialize about the news but to question the assertions made by officialdom, to consider critical data that might give credence to an alternative view. Such an effort is not an editorial or ideological pursuit but an empirical and investigative one, albeit one that is not usually tolerated in the corporate-owned press beyond certain safely limited parameters.

### **Slighting of Content**

One has to marvel at how the major media can give so much emphasis to surface happenings, to style and process, and so little to the substantive issues at stake. A glaring example is the way elections are covered. The political campaign is reduced to a horse race: Who will run? Who will get the nomination? Who will win the election? News commentators sound like theater critics as they hold forth on how this or that candidate projected a positive image, came across effectively, and had a good rapport with the audience. The actual issues are accorded scant attention, and the democratic dialogue that is supposed to accompany a contest for public office rarely is heard through the surface din.

Accounts of major strikes—on those rare occasions the press attends to labor struggles—offer a similar slighting of content while focusing heavily on process. We are told how many days the strike has lasted, the inconvenience and cost to the public and the economy, and how negotiations

threaten to break down. Missing is any reference to the substance of the conflict, the grievances that drive workers reluctantly to the extreme expediency of a strike, such as cutbacks in wages and benefits, loss of seniority, issues of safety, or the unwillingness of management to negotiate a contract.

Media pundits often talk about the “larger picture.” In fact, their ability or willingness to link immediate events and issues to larger social relations is almost nonexistent. In any case, a broader analysis would not be tolerated by their superiors. Instead, they regularly give us the smaller picture, this being a way of slighting content and remaining within politically safe boundaries. Thus the many demonstrations against international free-trade agreements, beginning with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), are reported, if at all, as contests between protestors and police, with little reference to the issues of democratic sovereignty and unaccountable corporate power that impel the protests.

Consider the press treatment of the suppression of the vote in Florida during the 2000 presidential campaign. After a count of ballots by the *Miami Herald* and *USA Today*, which took a limited view of what was open to challenge, major media across the country announced that Bush in fact won in Florida. Other investigations indicate that such was not the case at all, but these remain largely unpublicized. Furthermore, press treatment has focused almost exclusively on problems relating to questionable counts, with much discussion of ballot dimples and chads. But in the aftermath, hardly a word was uttered about the ballots that were never collected and the thousands of people who were disfranchised by the repressive ploys of Florida officials and state troopers. Again, what we got was the smaller (safer) picture, one that does not challenge the legitimacy of the electoral process and the authorities who preside over it.

### **False Balancing**

In accordance with the canons of good journalism, the press 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

spokespeople 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 usually *all* sides. The left-progressive and radical portion of the opinion spectrum is amputated from the visible body politic.

False balancing was evident in a BBC World Service report of 11 December 1997 that spoke of “a history of violence between Indonesian forces and Timorese guerrillas”—with not a hint that the guerrillas were struggling for their lives against an Indonesian invasion force that had slaughtered some two hundred thousand Timorese. Instead, the genocidal invasion of East Timor was made to sound like a grudge fight, with “killings on both sides.” By imposing a neutralizing gloss, the BBC announcer was introducing a serious distortion.

The U.S.-supported wars in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s were often treated with that same kind of false balancing. Both those who burned villages and those who were having their villages burned were depicted as equally involved in a contentious bloodletting. While giving the appearance of being objective and neutral, one actually neutralizes the subject matter and thereby drastically warps it.

### **Follow-up Avoidance**

When confronted with an unexpectedly dissident response, media hosts quickly change the subject, or break for a commercial, or inject an identifying announcement: “We are talking with [whomever].” The purpose is to avoid going any further into a politically forbidden topic no matter how much the unexpected response might seem to need a follow-up query. An anchorperson for the BBC World Service on 26 December 1997 enthused, “Christmas in Cuba: For the first time in almost forty years Cubans were able to celebrate Christmas and go to church!” She then linked up with the BBC correspondent in Havana, who observed, “A crowd of two thousand have gathered in the cathedral for midnight mass. The whole thing is rather low key, very much like last year.” Very much like last year? Here was something that craved clarification. Instead, the anchorperson quickly switched to another question: “Can we expect a growth of freedom with the pope’s visit?”

On a PBS talk show on 22 January 1998, host Charlie Rose asked a guest, whose name I did not get, whether Castro was bitter about “the historic failure of communism.” No, the guest replied, Castro is proud of what he believes communism has done for Cuba: advances in health care and education, full employment, and the elimination of the worst aspects of poverty. Rose fixed him with a ferocious glare, then turned to another guest to ask, “What impact will the pope’s visit have in Cuba?” Rose ignored the errant guest for the rest of the program.

### **Framing**

The most effective propaganda relies on 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 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.” Trite truisms are palmed off as penetrating truths. Newscasters learn to fashion sentences like “Unless the strike is settled soon, the two sides will be in for a long and bitter struggle.” And “The space launching will take place as scheduled if no unexpected problems arise.” And “Unless Congress acts soon, this bill is not likely to go anywhere.”

### Stuff Just Happens

Many things are reported in the news, but few are explained. Little is said about how the social order is organized and for what purposes. Instead we are left to see the world as do mainstream pundits, as a scattering of events and personalities propelled by happenstance, circumstance, confused intentions, bungled operations, and individual ambition—rarely by powerful economic interests. We are told that the 11 September terrorism happened because America is hated by Islamic fanatics. And they hate us because we are prosperous and free. No attempt is made to contextualize the event; there is no mention of the hard feelings created by the coercive and often violently repressive role played by the United States throughout the Middle East over the past half century.

Passive voice and impersonal subject are essential rhetorical constructs for this mode of evasion. So we read or hear that “fighting broke out in the region,” or “many people were killed in the disturbances,” or “famine is on the increase.” Recessions apparently just happen like some natural phenomenon (“our economy is in a slump”), having little to do with the maldistribution of wealth, the sagging buying power of underpaid workers, and other contradictions between the economy’s productive power and the public’s earning power.

If we are to believe the media, stuff just happens. Consider *globalization*, a pet label that the press presents as a natural and inevitable development. In fact, globalization is a deliberate contrivance of multinational interests to undermine democratic sovereignty throughout the world. International “free-trade” agreements set up international trade councils that are elected by no one, are accountable to no one. They operate in secrecy without conflict-of-interest restrictions and with the power to overrule just about all labor, consumer, and environmental laws and all public services and regulations in all signatory nations. What we actually are experiencing with GATT, NAFTA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, General Agreement on Trade in Services, and the World Trade Organization is *deglobalization*, an ever greater concentration of politico-economic power in the hands of an international investor class, a global coup d’état that divests the peoples of the world of any trace of protective democratic input.

In keeping with the dominant paradigm, the media never asks *why* things happen the way they do. Social problems are rarely associated with the politico-economic forces that create them. So we are taught to truncate our own critical thinking. Imagine if we attempted something different. Suppose we report, as is seldom reported, that the harshly exploitative labor conditions existing in so many countries generally have the backing of their respective military forces. Suppose further that we cross another line and note that these right-wing military forces are fully supported by the U.S. national security state. Then suppose we cross that most serious line of all, and instead of just deploring this fact we also ask *why* successive U.S. administrations have involved themselves in such unsavory pursuits throughout the world. Suppose we conclude that the whole phenomenon is consistent with a dedication to making the world safe for free-market U.S. transnational corporations, as measured by the kinds of countries that are helped and the kinds that are attacked. Such an analysis almost certainly would not be printed anywhere except in a few select radical publications. We crossed too many lines. Because we tried to explain the particular situation (bad labor conditions) in terms of a larger set of social relations (corporate power), our presentation would be rejected out of hand as Marxist (another dismissive negative label).

In sum, the news media's daily performance is not a failure but a skillfully evasive success. We often hear that the press "got it wrong" or "dropped the ball" on this or that story. In fact, the media do their job remarkably well. Media people have a trained incapacity for the whole truth. Their job is not to inform but disinform, not to advance democratic discourse but to dilute and mute it. Their task is to give every appearance of being conscientiously concerned about events of the day, saying so much while meaning so little, offering so many calories with so few nutrients. When we understand this, we move from a liberal complaint about the press's sloppy performance to a radical analysis of how the media maintain the dominant paradigm with much craft and craftiness.