

# The Print Media as a Handmaiden of the Neo-liberal Regime

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*A vast body of theories of the media, known popularly as 'media theory', has evolved and developed into separate, distinguishable and often contesting paradigms with osmosis between the distinct schools of thought taking place at regular intervals. A number of schools have emerged questioning the traditional orthodoxy of state-media-audience relations. These have been drawn from several sources: anti-statist liberalism, market liberalism and the many variants of Marxism. Several other questions like are the media changing something, preventing something, facilitating something or reinforcing something and reaffirming something are integral to the direction of effect that media messages might take. It is important to state that the media do inhibit as well as promote change.*

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An analysis of the discourse theory holds great potential for harnessing arguments that justify bourgeois control of contemporary media, in India and across the world. The selection of words to supply and therefore construct a headline for a news report is significant in that if the headline would have been worded differently, the import and impact of it would change almost drastically. Language, thus is a system, a construct.

Derrida<sup>1</sup> would deconstruct a headline to differentiate between factual discourse and 'pure fiction'. He presupposes the role of the media in generating and sustaining discourse and propaganda. Language for him is the origin of history and by extension of Western scientific and philosophical thought.

Structuralism – the edifice of all historical and metaphysical knowledge – is itself the victim of unbridled 'construction', in terms of thought as well as language. Structure also, for Derrida is the formal unity of form and meaning. The relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized.

The construction of language used in disseminating news to the masses is more often than not influenced by divergent meanings which in turn impacts on the ultimate impact the news has on the reader or the listener. Foucault<sup>2</sup> goes a step further and defines discourse as the means by which subjects frame, classify, define and generate knowledge

about themselves and the 'other'. The concept of the 'other' becomes important if we are to study the ways in which the extreme right in India ingeniously subverts all forms of alternative knowledge like folk art and literature and attempts to establish a hegemonic discourse in which the Muslims are conceived of as the significant 'other' whose interests and aspirations are diametrically opposite to that of the majority community.

The critique of the discourse theory, elaborated by Habermas concentrates on the concept of 'balance' in the dissemination of news. However, balance is also a mediation of the practices of bourgeois politics. The Marxian understanding of the nature and role of the media undertakes to delineate the true purpose of the newspaper as being coerced into disseminating a knowledge idiom constructed by its bourgeois ownership.

For Marx, the media, a significant bulwark of bourgeois society plays a role designated for it within the confines of capitalism, a thought pioneered – albeit as part of the liberal school – by Benedict Anderson in his deliberation on print capitalism as a precursor to the development of communities and therefore, nation-states. The language used, then becomes a tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie to propound and construct meanings that remain embedded in the minds of the readers leading to a social construct, a stereotype that refuses to see reason, precisely because what the newspaper has written is taken to be the truth. Hence, truth too is a deliberate construct.

A vast body of theories of the media, known popularly as 'media theory', has evolved and developed into separate, distinguishable and often contesting paradigms with osmosis between the distinct schools of thought taking place at regular intervals. For instance a number of schools have emerged questioning the traditional orthodoxy of state-media-audience relations.<sup>3</sup> These have been drawn from several sources: anti-statist liberalism, market liberalism and the many variants of Marxism.

Now that the background has been prepared in significant detail, the question – does the print and the electronic media play an ideological role in 'manufacturing consent' for the neo-liberal regime? – needs to be attended to elaborately. A broad consensus exists, especially among Marxist scholars that contemporary media actively promotes the cause of the dominating classes, in simpler terms, the bourgeoisie.

Several other questions like are the media changing something, preventing something, facilitating something or reinforcing something and reaffirming something are integral to the direction of effect that media messages might take. It is important to state that the media do inhibit as well as promote change. A 'no change' effect is also, therefore crucial. The direction of impact towards certain sections of society while other sections are considered to be outside the sphere of influence finds a mention within the structural paradigm elaborated by theorists like Chomsky and Herman.<sup>4</sup>

### **'Manufacturing Consent'**

One of the reasons why questions about the influence of mass communication are so difficult to answer lies in the uncertainty about the 'mechanisms' by which effects are produced. The foremost plausible fact that one must keep in mind while making a study of mass media in general is the primary importance of the existence of a source, a message that is generated by the source and the receiver who receives the message sent by the source. The intriguing factor here is the social class to which the sender and the receiver both belong changing the import of the message dramatically.

Are the media, then political actors? Judith Lichtenberg<sup>5</sup> has elaborated on the direct role of the press or more generally the media as such. Formally, the media performs a negative political act by protecting freedom of speech, and enjoys a positive function by brokering information across society and setting the agenda. Through the years the democratic role of the media has been challenged. They have been seen to perpetuate the values of the political, social and economic elites. Effectively the mass media reinforce the dominant ideology over the mass of citizens.

The political role of the media is defined as an effective check on the government of the day by the liberal theorists. The Marxists would designate the majority of media as agencies of class control and capitalist in nature. The communists offer the public ownership model as the most accurate pointer towards the media system as a whole. The liberals and the neo-liberals in particular would favour the term 'free market' to public ownership.

It is imperative to bring in Chomsky and Herman at this point who in *Manufacturing Consent*, set out a systematic framework or theory, which they call the *propaganda model*. It is in this context that we move on to discussing the long-standing and often self-deprecating debate in media circles and among theorists. The structural paradigm has often posed a challenge to the stranglehold of the instrumentalist model or paradigm for describing the media and its effects.

Studies of the media can be usually divided into three general areas: firstly, the analysis of the conditions of ownership and control; secondly, analysis of the nature of media content; and lastly, analysis of audience reception or the effects of the media. Approaches to these questions are, on the whole, polarized between those who employ a Marxist framework of analysis and those who employ a liberal pluralist perspective. Within both perspectives are tensions between those who regard the media as an instrument or tool of some group or individual and those who regard the media as a structured institution within the wider structure of society. Chomsky's work broadly falls under the Marxist tradition.

It would be ideal at this stage to summarize a few assumptions and arguments made by the liberal pluralist as well as the Marxist traditions. The liberal pluralists assume the media institutions, media personnel and audiences to be largely autonomous<sup>6</sup>, that is, their behaviour and decision-making patterns cannot be said to be determined by other institutions, for instance the state, or 'bosses', or in the case of India editors with links across the saffron spectrum or in the case of the audience by other often competing media messages, for example a insidious but baseless news report.

Such a framework implies certain characteristics about the nature of modern industrial society, namely that no one group in society can be said to be systematically dominant, that power is pluralistically distributed and that people are capable of articulating and exercising their individual and group interests. The demise of the old press baron and the rise of the faceless shareholder are cited as examples of how autonomy is safe in the hands of the shareholder who is an inconspicuous citizen and not someone who could influence decisions.

In contrast Marxist work in the field begins from the premise that media institutions work within and are subject to the constraints of the wider economic, political and social framework of capitalism. As this economic system significantly privileges a minority group, who might loosely be described as 'owners of the means of production', then it seems logical to conclude that the ideas and messages put out by media institutions operating within this system will avoid undermining these privileges. The implicit assumption behind such a framework is that audiences are an undifferentiated mass who unproblematically 'read' messages in the 'required' way. In other words, messages flow in one direction from top down.

The *propaganda model* is a logical extension of the argument being made here. It suggests that there are certain filters through which the 'raw material of news' must pass before an event is deemed newsworthy.<sup>7</sup> Three of these are structural in nature and the rest instrumentalist in content. A discussion of these 'filters' would be illuminating.

The first notes the necessary large investment required which precludes the majority from 'ownership of media with any substantial outreach'. Free market mechanisms and the drive to reach large audiences, together with technological improvements meant an increase in capital costs, which completely suffocated and literally drove out the working class press.<sup>8</sup> It thus prevented anyone but the wealthy from setting up a media business or a company. From the time of media entry into the market, processes of concentration and conglomeration mean 'the pressures of stockholders, directors, bankers and advertisers'. This also means that media companies lose some of their autonomy to large investors, more importantly advertisers.

Herman and Chomsky opine that media giants are brought into close relationship with the mainstream of the corporate community through directorships and outside investment in media stock.<sup>9</sup> These holdings, individually and collectively, do not convey control, but these large investors can make themselves heard and their actions can affect the welfare of the companies and their managers.

The other link that the scholars are wary about is the one between the media companies and the government. They are referring basically to the fact that the government grants franchise and licenses and thus makes use of any opportunity of exerting pressure

requiring companies to conform to regulations that are synonymous with the interests of the government.

The second filter identifies the media's dependence upon advertising as a source of revenue, which means that the advertiser's choices affect media prosperity and thus survival. With the growth of advertising, papers that attracted advertisements could not afford a copy price well below production costs. For this reason, an advertising-based system will tend to drive out of existence or into marginality the media companies and types that depend on revenue from sales alone. With advertising coming up in a big way, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which the final buyer choice decides the content and form of the product. This has two effects. First, the lions share of advertising revenue tends to gravitate towards media forms attracting the affluent audience. Chomsky notes the sophisticated techniques media companies use in selling 'space' according to audience profile. In other words, at the extreme, little support could be found from advertisers for television programmes attracting audiences without the requisite buying power.

The working class and radical media suffer from the political discrimination of advertisers. Political discrimination is structured into advertising allocations by the stress of people with money to buy. It is here that Herman and Chomsky inject the concept of intentionality into the structural framework. Therefore the possibility of advertisers withdrawing their patronage from 'unfriendly media institutions' weighs down media organizations, which is the second effect.

The media's requirement for a regular and credible supply of stories to meet news schedules can be designated as the third filter which leads them to rely heavily upon the government and business corporations. Economic criteria are highly influential here. Media companies cannot afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important stories may break. Economics dictates that they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs, where important rumours and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held.<sup>10</sup>

Governments and corporations are ready sources of news. The relationship between the government and big businesses is symbiotic where the public relations operations within government departments and corporate businesses seek to have their interpretation of

events and agendas publicized. In Chomsky's words then, 'the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's cost of acquiring the raw material and producing news.'

The fourth filter that Herman and Chomsky identify is 'flak and the enforcers'. This refers to the ability and substantial resources that government and big businesses have to mobilize complaints and pressure which 'can be both uncomfortable and costly to the media'. The list of various bodies in the United States that are mainly funded by large corporations which seek to redress a perceived liberal bias in the media. The possibility of doing this 'reflects the power of the sponsors'.

The ideology of anti-Communism stands out as the last filter and refers to the tendency for the media to interpret any policies at home and abroad which threaten property interests, particularly American property interests, as 'Communist' or 'pro-Communist' and therefore as representing a threat. The concept of communism here is fuzzy and can refer to anything from countries that seek an independent nationalist development path, to policies that promote some kind of land or property distribution. The term becomes an emotive, catchall phrase to refer to anyone not committed to the economic and power distribution of the status quo.

Since their work on *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky has noted the quest for some new threat to replace the 'Communist threat' now that that Soviet Union has collapsed. Drug wars (Noriega) and totalitarian monsters like Saddam Hussain (Iraq) and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan have proved useful alternatives, but are ultimately less effective than the threat of the 'evil empire'. The fall of that empire may have brought about changes in the terminology of the targets, but the point remains that alternative views are demonized. These last two filters are clearly more instrumental than structural.

The propaganda model is concerned with setting out the character of ownership and control of the media within capitalist society. Herman and Chomsky thus use the hypotheses that the character of ownership does influence media content. Media are also hierarchically structured, especially the 'elite media'. They have the largest circulation so the potential for impact is large, they are also agenda setters for the smaller outlets and

the elite media becomes part of the historical record. In other words, their interpretation of events becomes history.

The media, for Chomsky wears a mask of being the exalted 'fourth estate'. Their anti-government and anti-corporate stands, if any are a façade. They never cross the line. The credo thus is 'thus far and no further'. He cites an interesting example to qualify this argument. The US business community is generally warm towards regimes that profess fervent anti-communism, encourage foreign investment, repress unions and loyally support US foreign policy. The bigger newspapers like the *Washington Post* have been conspicuous in their chastisement of the Abu Ghraib atrocities, but have stopped short of criticizing the invasion as a whole.

A cruder method of thought control can be identified as the abuse, torture and distortion of language to enforce certain ideological goals. To illustrate he recalls that in 1947 the Pentagon stopped being the War Department and became the Defence Department. In our own context, in the aftermath of the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation, Sangh Parivar activities came to be designated as 'Hindu backlash'.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Muslim-majority areas in Bombay, like Dongri, Pydhonie and Mohammad Ali Road are routinely referred to as 'mini-Pakistan' in Shiv Sena publications such as *Saamna* and *Marmik*.<sup>12</sup>

Chomsky's propaganda model thus argues that 'the combination of the endless repetitions of certain views, together with the fostering of debate strictly within permitted bounds as well as the use of questionable terminology makes for an extremely well-functioning system of propaganda which ensures that to escape its impact is remarkably difficult'.

In another of his acclaimed works, *Media Control*<sup>13</sup>, Chomsky writes that liberal democratic theorists and leading media figures, for example, Walter Lippman, who was the dean of American journalists during Woodrow Wilson's presidency was also involved in the propaganda commissions put together by the administration and recognized their achievements. He also thought that not only was this a good idea it was mandatory to 'manufacture consent' which could only be accomplished by a 'special class of responsible men' who are smart enough to figure things out. It is in this vein that Chomsky also states his view that the 'intellectual elite is the most heavily indoctrinated



sector'. High levels of communal indoctrination were in evidence in Gujarat especially in the aftermath of the carnage at Godhra and riots that unfolded thereafter. The media played an unparalleled role in the process thus proving all theories of adverse effects right.

### **Media in a developing country: The case of India**

Let us begin by taking a brief look at the media boom, more importantly the newspaper revolution that encompassed the country from the early 1980s. In India, newspapers have grown simultaneously with television. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, penetration of newspapers, measured by the number of dailies for every 1000 men, women and children, increased by nearly three times- from about 15 dailies per 1000 to about 43 (Jeffrey, 2001).<sup>14</sup> The proportion of Hindi dailies grew from 81 per cent of all dailies in 1981 to 87 per cent in 1996. By the 1990s then, even in the countryside and in states not experiencing notable economic development, Indians were exposed to more information in images and print than ever before.

To argue that ownership of Indian-language newspapers is relatively diverse seems, at best controversial. From the 1950s critics have constantly argued that Indian newspapers were largely controlled by 'monopoly capitalists'. In 1954 the First Press Commission contented that the 'power of the holder of a monopoly to influence his public in any way he chooses should be regulated and restrained'.<sup>15</sup> Eleven years later the Inquiry Committee on Small Newspapers urged 'maintaining the outcry against growth of newspaper chains'.<sup>16</sup> In 1973 the Indian Federation of Working Journalists published a small book titled *India's Monopoly Press: A Mirror of Distortion* which decried the vested interests of monopoly houses which own the biggest newspapers with the biggest circulations.<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1980s veteran journalist Pran Chopra argued that concentration of ownership was growing.<sup>18</sup> A report written for the Second Press Commission in 1982 advocated 'public takeover of the top eight newspaper establishments' because it was essential to 'delink the press from the monopoly Houses'.<sup>19</sup> The burgeoning influence of monopoly capitalists has inspired Robin Jeffrey to opine that 'the expansion of capitalism in Indian can probably be seen more concretely in the newspaper industry that anywhere else'.<sup>20</sup>

The development of Indian-language newspapers, state Jeffrey provides a thermometer for taking the temperature of Indian capitalism. At the time of independence in 1947 the Indian bourgeoisie existed mired in feudal and semi-feudal relationships with the peasantry in the hinterland. Socialist policies of the Nehru-led Congress that inherited the mantle from the British rulers did not destroy the capitalist class that thrived in most parts of the country. Forces promoting Indian capitalists grew in the 1960s in the form of the Green Revolution, which drew hundreds of farming families into full capitalist agriculture.

A landmark for newspapers in this process was the first National Readership Survey (NRS-1), conducted in 1970, which hinted at the latent purchasing power of small-town India. It also underlined the uncertainty of most Indian-language newspapers about how to confront the potential magnetism of advertising revenue. Nilakantha Khadilkar, owner and editor of *Navakal*, one of the largest circulated Marathi dailies deplored the pressure to change and adapt to the fast globalizing world by arguing that people who made money during the freedom movement now wanted to invest it in newspapers.

The invasion of territories – an example is the price wars we now witness between Times of India and the Hindustan Times – then began in right earnest with *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* in Kerala foreshadowing widespread competition for readers and advertisers in the 1960s. The emergency period saw a number of language newspapers sprouting up everywhere from the Ramoji Rao-owned *Eenadu* in Andhra Pradesh in 1974 to *Dainik Jagran's* Gorakhpur edition in 1975. Expanding newspapers thus carried capitalist practices with them. Dependence on advertising revenue in order to survive led to concentration of ownership. Big circulation brought big investments from national advertisers.

News and events, which were the staple diet for the success of Indian newspapers, started publicizing people and issues, which in earlier times would have been ignored. A public sphere is based on publicity, which became the endgame of India social relations and politics with the help of the newspaper media. Other capitalist societies have passed down a similar path: capitalism needs newspapers; newspapers spread to respond to capitalism, and in doing so they create consumers out of conspicuous citizens.

The consumables change from newsworthy items related to politics, economics, society and culture to spruced-up stories on urban, capitalist fads such as fashion – not a necessity to sell a newspaper but nevertheless an interminable part of any modern newspaper. The newspaper thus makes supplications to a select audience, a small fraternity of people with expanding purchasing power while showing utter neglect to the millions who increasingly cry out for media attention. A quote-worthy anecdote relates to P Sainath, journalist and author who – ostensibly in jest but surely making a strong statement – said that the media today is obsessed with urban Indians who are adopting newer, more modern techniques to lose weight when more than half of India's population is desperately trying to gain some.

The current crop of supposedly 'national' newspapers, in their attempt to tap the urban elite readership and gain supremacy over the nearest rival have begun the process of production of news. An event, which would not have gained any media attention even a decade ago grabs headlines. Not only aging cine legends but their offspring and their star appeal is a creation of a news media which starved of real news pretends to be the voice of the people while stifling the aspirations of those very citizens whom it claims to represent.

It is interesting to note the ascent of the right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party – a ubiquitous formation backed by big and medium capitalists and the Hindu trader community in general – and the newspaper revolution that occurred in the early 1990s. Coinciding with these processes was the go-ahead given by the Congress ministry to the telecast of the epic-drama, *Ramayana* on national television. It might have been a tactic on the part of the Congress to consolidate its Hindu vote-bank but it most certainly benefited the BJP more than the Congress itself.

The thronging crowds and the chants of *Jai Bajrang Bali* and *Jai Shri Ram* that rent the air during Advani's *rath yatra* provided enough evidence for one to gauge this fact. The telecast of these epics (*Ramayana* was followed by the telecast of *Mahabharata* on prime time national television) not only homogenized the different versions of the epics into a single authorized version but also in many ways created a unity of sensibility among Hindus of various castes and traditions, especially in North India.<sup>21</sup>

The role that the media revolution played could be seen as creating the essential conditions that enable or rather force to take on new ways of thinking about themselves and what it is that characterizes friends, Indians, countrymen and women. Some analysts consider the print media to be more influential than television in creating these new conditions in which 'Hindu politics' and 'Hindutva' have been able to flourish. According to Charu Gupta and Mukul Sharma-'...it has been the print media which has truly brought to the forefront the symbiotic relationship between the Hindu organizations, dominant culture and ideology and the media. The 'Hinduization' of the press has thus led to the portrayal of the upper-caste Hindu's view as the only and true reality.<sup>22</sup>

This argument leads us to examine the ownership and control of the Indian print media as part of the structuralist model outlined by Chomsky and Herman. The owners of north India's largest newspapers are upper-caste Hindus who might be described as belonging to the 'trading castes'. These urban, upper caste origins are the same as those on which the BJP's foundations are often said to rest. The affections of a number of these owners lie broadly with the 'Hindu politics' of the BJP and its affiliates. In fact, the Guptas and the Chopras, the proprietors of *Dainik Jagran* and *Punjab Kesari* respectively are RSS regulars.<sup>23</sup>

The causal link between the trading classes and the Indian media establishes two fundamentals. Firstly, the media is established and owned by the capitalist classes in India where these families led the newspaper revolution. Secondly, the advent of Hindutva – a creation of the trading classes themselves – presupposes the contention that the media manufactures consent in neo-liberal societies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, London and New York, 2003

<sup>3</sup> Mark Wheeler, *Politics and the Mass Media*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, (Chapter.1)

<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Vintage, London, 1994

<sup>5</sup> Judith Lichtenberg, *Democracy and the Mass Media*, 1990

<sup>6</sup> Alison Edgely, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp.152-153

<sup>7</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Vintage, London, 1994, pp.2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp.4

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp.11

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.18

<sup>11</sup> Girilal Jain, Series of Articles, *The Times of India*, 10 Sept.1986, 8 Oct.1986, 29 Oct.1986, 12 Nov.1986

<sup>12</sup> *Saamna*, Bombay, 14 January 1993, pp.1

<sup>13</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control*, Seven Stories Press, 2002

<sup>14</sup> Robin Jeffrey, "Media Revolution & "Hindu Politics" in North India, 1982-99", *Himal*, 14/7, July 2001

<sup>15</sup> *Press Commission*, 1954, Vol.1, pp.311

<sup>16</sup> *Report of Inquiry Committee on Small Newspapers*, 1965, pp.13

<sup>17</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Monopoly Press*, IFWJ Publication, New Delhi, 1973, pp.88

<sup>18</sup> Pran Chopra, EPW, 4 October 1980, pp.1655

<sup>19</sup> S K Goyal and Chalapati Rao, *Ownership and Control Structure of the Indian Press*, Second press Commission Report, 1981, pp. iii, 124

<sup>20</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-language Press*, OUP, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 208

<sup>21</sup> Charu Gupta & Mukul Sharma, "Communal Constructions: Media Reality vs. Real Reality", *Race and Class*, 38,1 (1996); *Print Media and Communalism*, New Delhi

<sup>22</sup> Charu Gupta & Mukul Sharma, "Communal Constructions: Media Reality vs. Real Reality", *Race and Class*, 38,1 (1996)

<sup>23</sup> Opinion expressed by the proprietor of *Dainik Jagran* in an interview with Robin Jeffrey, 1999