

Reviews

***Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky (1988). Vintage (1995), 9780099533115**



Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: This review is part of our series in which a current media teacher re-examines a 'classic' text in honour of *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey and his provocative 'Back to Basics' article in *MERJ* 2:2.

Of course the critical theory behind *Manufacturing Consent* would suggest that the whole idea of a canon is a product of vested interests trying to normalise ideas concerning 'expertise' and 'tradition'. Which is precisely why we should recognise its massive contribution in providing countless numbers of readers with an accessible and comprehensive frame through which to make sense of the everyday performance of the media. In proposing the 'Propaganda Model', Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky immediately cut against whole swathes of media studies that stressed complexity and heterogeneity. Instead they sought to equip media audiences with a way of talking about bias, ownership, control and politics that related to the experience of growing numbers of people that - generally speaking - established media outlets were not talking truth to power but instead sacrificing truth for power. The book provides both a conceptual frame and then a detailed application of this frame in relation to elite news in the US that, along with the Glasgow University Media Group's 'Bad News' series of books, helped to establish a systemic critique of media in capitalist democracies that has been fundamental to the radical wing of media education. It should be said, however, that Herman and Chomsky would probably be unhappy with this characterisation in that you could argue that it is not that *Manufacturing Consent* is radical but that more apolitical media education texts are essentially conservative.

What makes it 'canonical' is that I find it so hard to avoid. When I want to discuss concepts of bias and theories of objectivity, *Manufacturing Consent* provides such a consistent and provocative toolkit that it is often the best place to start though not always the best place to end up. It provides a wonderful account of the pressures and routines that skew media agendas towards those of the most powerful interests but isn't perhaps as useful in thinking through some of the tensions and slippages that exist in the media –

those that I have tried to reflect on in *The Contradictions of Media Power* – that are crucial if we are to think about ways to find alternatives to present ways of thinking.

The book is now over a quarter of a century old but its main arguments - that the news media essentially reproduce elite consensus and manufacture the appearance of meaningful debate - are as relevant as ever. Indeed, its proposition that we need to assess ownership frames, advertising, source power, rebuttal techniques and wider political contexts is essential if we are fully to appreciate how news media, as a matter of routine, cover war and terror, poverty and austerity, power and resistance. Of course, like any model, we need to take it apart and re-make it better to fit our times so that, for example, the salience of anti-communism as an organising frame for the US media has been replaced by the perceived threat of Islamism. But, in the main, it has stood the test of time remarkably well and provides a very useful framework with which to approach, for example, online news given the enduring significance of advertising and the ways in which social media platforms both entrench and resist the power of established sources and agendas. Additionally, its core argument that we should focus our attention on 'liberal' as well as more overtly conservative media outlets - specifically because they help create the illusion that our media system really does cater to all tastes and opinions - is all the more important given the growing influence of everything from the *Guardian* and the BBC to the *New York Times* and *Vice*.

I teach on political communications programmes and *Manufacturing Consent* remains key to understanding the contexts within which journalists work, politicians spin and vested interests attempt to maintain their influence. Indeed, it is as influential as ever if you think of the work that it has inspired both inside and outside academia - from scholarly attempts to extend the Propaganda Model to Hollywood Film and European public service broadcasting to Media Lens' campaigns to hold journalists to account; from the fantastic 1992 film, *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (a really great teaching tool) to the investigative journalism of John Pilger. At Goldsmiths, *Manufacturing Consent* as one of the titles that we suggest our undergraduate students read before starting on our programmes not because we expect them to agree with everything in it but because it is an example of a hugely rich, passionate, critical and engaged type of media research that we hope will inspire them.

Reviewer – Des Freedman, Goldsmiths, University of London

***Greening Media Education: Bridging Media Literacy with Green Cultural Citizenship* by Antonio Lopez (2014). Peter Lang, 978-1-4331-2590-4**

In the UK, ‘traditional Labour voters’ have reported a common dilemma, and sense of frustration, in the wake of the recent UK election, whereby their reluctance on the left to switch to the Green party was countered by an exodus on the right to UKIP. The Green manifesto seemed to contain everything they would want to hear from Labour but a combination of the electoral system, complete demise of a liberal alternative and the prevailing discourse of economic ‘caution’ combined to convince such potential converts to the environmental cause that the Greens were ‘not electable’. As it turned out, of course, neither were Labour.

Re-reading *Greening Media Education* post-election, a similar paradox pervades. I wasn’t uninitiated; the author interviewed me for his PhD, from which this book is largely adapted. We talked then about the reasons for media education resisting the ecological ‘leap of faith’. In these pages, he writes of ‘medialandia’, a place where the media literacy ecosystem is situated as a figured world within mechanistic discourse, narrow and culturally specific, marginalizing green cultural literacy as a generative space. This is partly because media literacy practitioners and organisations (more a feature of the US context) feel the need to align their work with formal education systems. But it’s partly to do with the way in which media literacy is so profoundly self-regarding – or ‘sealed off from the rest of life’.

This book is, essentially, a (fairly damning) critique of the media literacy project. Early on, projects are placed on axes, with more or less functionalist or critical orientations with four tendencies (not fixed positions), enabling the formulation of a dominant paradigm to be described for the media literacy ecosystem. In this analysis, a range of barriers to a more environmental approach are identified. These include disciplinary silos; fear of the unknown; external pressures; the dominance of Subject English (my words, from Peim’s account and my own adaptation to ‘Subject Media’); and, most interestingly, Lopez’s claim that an unofficial media literacy ‘smell test’ sniffs out sustainability education as ‘persuasion’. But it goes further. Lopez accounts for an epistemological tension between media literacy education and ‘ecomedia literacy’, and points to the ‘grassroots’ settings in which environmental issues can be at the heart of learning. An implication, never so strongly stated, is that media literacy educators and researchers have failed to get down and dirty in community settings, preferring to talk the talk within the comfort of

conventional educational settings. Equally, we have operated within a similarly comfortable but entirely conservative pedagogic frame, or in his words ‘media literacy practitioners participate in meaning-making systems that reproduce pre-existing environmental ideologies’ (p6).

There’s little to contest. And the strongest analytical moments are those where conceptual devices from literacy research, such as figured worlds and media as a boundary metaphor, are deployed: in this metaphorical configuration which serves to bind disparate practitioners together around ‘the media’, there is too much at stake to consider an alternative conception of medialandia as ‘a kind of augmented reality, with affordances, rather than a place that exists somewhere’ (p126).

The book is far from ‘just’ critique, though. Lopez walks us through a plethora of examples of ecomedia pedagogy – from scenario work through backcasting to the ecomedia wheel; working with media gadgets as boundary objects within an ecotonal approach, slow media work, various community and grassroots media initiatives, anti-fracking activism and his own ‘Wander Assignment’, with traces of mindfulness. The ‘neutral acceptance’ approach at the heart of mindful practice sits well with the need for ‘slow’ but it’s never clear to me – here and elsewhere – how such impartial observance of how things are, with no judgement or desire for change, can be so readily appropriated for movements which absolutely want to change the order of things. That said, I am conscious of listing such interventions as somewhat cursory, and for sure the reader is offered a convincing set of reflections on these modes of learning, which I can’t reproduce here. But the author goes on to lament the limited evidence of the kinds of transgression he desires – ‘of 43, only 10 students reported significant new awareness’ so the ambition of his project is set against not only the ‘big other’ of mechanistic systems, but also the ‘work in progress’ state of the art. Indeed, evidence suggests, including here, that just as the ‘consumer’ of traditional media education can ‘apply’ Laura Mulvey to objectify women in production work, so too can those engaged in ecomedia literacy work become adept at ‘reflecting the perceived desires of the professor’ (p157) or showing that they understand the difference between open and closed media systems but demonstrate little urgency for environmentalist responses. In this way, the conclusion hinges on a compromise – that ‘media education is a fun and engaging way to teach about social issues. Imagine if environmental educators could do the same by using media to teach about sustainability’ (p159).

This journal sets out to be a place where media education can be discussed, researched, moved on, its assumptions challenged, its inner workings and power dynamics laid bare. *Greening Media Education* is essential reading in this regard, making a bold and compelling

foray into 'pedagogising' much of the conceptual reorientation set in motion by Maxwell and Miller's *Greening the Media*, reviewed in *MERJ* volume 3 issue 2 (2013).

Antonio Lopez has been at the forefront of activist media education research in recent years. Here, he weaves together the multiple strands of his praxis to provide a compelling vision of a more situated, sustainable and resistant pedagogy. In the era of the 'creative economy' and neoliberal instrumentalism, it may be crazily aspirational, with limited returns to date, but Lopez writes from the heart with profound optimism about media education for social justice.

Reviewer – Julian McDougall