

In the Danger: Self Censorship, the Propaganda Model, and the Saving Grace

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Abstract

Critics of technological reliance such as Neil Postman have argued that Americans are becoming entertained at the expense of becoming informed, essentially becoming characters in a Huxlean universe: sedated and content. These attitudes, while understandable lack the ability to account for recent popular movements developed through on-line engagement.

The present work seeks to examine the ways that the internet and related technologies have played an important role in activist movements, specifically Iraq war protests and WTO protests in Seattle. The focus will be the ways in which the internet can subvert the traditional propaganda model outlined by Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman in the work *Manufacturing Consent*.

Neil Postman, writing before the internet, described Americans as follows: “Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.”¹ Postman’s argument was that even ostensibly serious arenas, such as news media, have simply been turned into entertainment mediums. The result is a society that is sedated and uninformed. Postman is articulating one of the most pressing dangers of the modern technological movement: entertainment for entertainment’s sake. This entertainment based on images, whether computer-based or television-based, is peculiar and new because it tends to be disengaged. Images wash over us placidly. Compare this idea to a group of children playing a game of baseball in a park. They are certainly attempting to be entertained, but their entertainment was active, engaged. It is quite a serious question why we have become so attuned to this disengaged mode of being.²

While the fact of disengagement is the most pressing danger, it is not the only concern. Suppose we wish to use the computer in an active manner. Suppose we wish to actively pursue truth or actively pursue engagement with other like-minded people. Will the internet then not be

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, (New York: Penguin, 1985), 106.

² This notion of disengagement and engagement is a topic I plan to take up in a future paper. Briefly, I would suggest that the modern rise in communication mediums like text-messaging may be a primordial reaction to a feeling of alienation or disengagement. People are trying to be constantly in touch precisely because they feel out of touch. It is also interesting to compare the difference between active engagement like baseball in a park, with the recent internet movement which this paper consistently refers. The latter is not engagement in a traditional sense, but it is quite active, making it new and unique.

the saving grace that arises out of the danger? The answer, as is often the case, is both yes and no. In this paper, I wish to examine some of the new filters that arise due to the structure of the internet and how these filters effectively censor material. I also wish to show how the internet, if used effectively, can provide the best hope for subverting the traditional filters outlined in Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model.

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* was one of the first serious works studying the political economy of mass media. In this work they outlined a propaganda model that would go a long way in explaining bias in news. They discovered 5 filters which are as follows: 1) size, ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media; 2) the advertising license to do business; 3) sourcing mass media news; 4) flak and the enforcers; 5) anticommunism as a control mechanism. Today number 5 has widened to include anti-Arab bias, but the point remains the same. These filters are constantly at work and keep news content critical of business interests in check. They also keep deep critiques of foreign policy in check. One is allowed to complain about minor atrocities, but one must always adhere to the doctrine of noble intentions.³

The question I wish to propose is this: does the internet have these filters? Or any filters for that matter? After all one would like to believe that any person who can access the internet immediately and by definition will have access to all of its content. I wish to suggest that this is a drastic oversimplification.

New Filters

³ Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon, 2002), 1-2.

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Let's look at an example. Recent issues over Net-Neutrality are of paramount importance concerning the future of the internet. There have been considerable efforts by cable and phone companies to control content that is disseminated over the internet. Also, because of the profit-motive filter involved, this story has not been widely reported in the press. In the book *Censored 2007: The Top 25 Censored Stories*, the number one entry was "Future Of Internet Debate Ignored By Media." It should be noted that there has been substantial coverage on the internet concerning this issue, but you have to know where to look. On Freepress.net a search using the words "net neutrality" provides 2,217 entries. However, to find these articles you have to get to Freepress.net. Starting from msn.com or yahoo.com (places people have email accounts) and clicking on hyperlinks will not get you there.

What tends to happen with the following of hyperlinks actually provides an interesting new filter. It has been frequently pointed out that page 8A of the *New York Times* might have a story that is more important than what is above the fold on page one. So it is not a new idea that hyperlinks/stories are not ordered according to importance. For example Michael Vick's dogfighting debacle or Roger Clemens' steroid allegations could be listed ahead of an issue concerning Israel/Palestine on any news site. The difference here is the journey that follows. If I'm reading the *New York Times* I do have one cohesive paper. If I read it I will get to the story that is of importance. However with hyperlinks this is not always the case.

The philosopher Hubert Dreyfus has done interesting work in the area of examining hyperlinks. He points out that hyperlinks destroy traditional hierarchical organizational systems. Whereas the traditional model was characterized by stability, hierarchical organization, and

specificity, the hyper-link model is defined by flexibility, a single-level organization, and the manner in which it allows any possible association.⁴

The flexibility of the internet allows for random associations. The searcher isn't taken deeper into an issue; rather, they are taken to a new starting point that is kind of related to the original issue. Dreyfus gives the example: "So, for instance, among the sites that contain issues on tortoises suggested to me by my browser, I might click on the one called 'Tortoises – compared to Hares', and be transported instantly to an entry on Zeno's paradox."⁵ This causes a dizzying effect that is both mesmerizing and dangerous. The danger is that my students spend more time on the internet than any other medium. It is trancelike. But they aren't finding enough meaningful material.

Also, because the internet isn't regulated (which I think is a good thing) anyone can post basically anything. It's not that there is not enough information. Instead, there is too much information. This is a new filter as well. In a traditional academic setting there can be a natural way one reads moving from one scholar to the next, both of whom are studying the same issue. The books are peer-reviewed and the information is ostensibly trustworthy. It would make complete academic sense for example to read Robert McChesney's critiques of media and be led to Noam Chomsky. Now one would have two scholars talking about the same issue. The research is going deeper, not just spiraling out. With the internet it is causing self-censorship because if one is simply doing Google searches, one gets too much conflicting information. Essentially this is censorship⁶ by the creation of skeptical relativists. If an example is needed, try

⁴ Hubert L Dreyfus, *On The Internet*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 11

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This isn't exactly a traditional usage of the term "censorship." But I think it's applicable because censor means to make information unavailable and I believe that is exactly the effect. One becomes unsure of what to believe. This could actually be more dangerous than traditional censorship. If you make a book illegal, people will search it out, if they don't know what they're not getting, they'll just remain in the dark.

finding out the religious stances of American Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson will be labeled an evangelical by some and an atheist by others.

Resulting from this phenomenon I believe we actually have to rethink our idea of censorship. Traditionally something was censored if it wasn't made public. The internet censors by making the pool of available data so large, that unless one is a savvy researcher and already knows where to go, that person will get stuck. This leads to a post-modern relativistic universe.

Perhaps as a reaction to this post-modern conception, people are attaching themselves tighter to specific ideologies. This can cause the amplification of a phenomenon that already exists: the echo chamber. On the internet because of websites dedicated to specific ideologies, one can effectively live in a bubble, consistently having beliefs reinforced. This phenomenon causes groups to become more extreme.

Subverting Traditional Filters

The new dangers that are emerging are real, but they can be subverted in a way that traditional propaganda model simply could not. This provides hope. If one knows where to go on the internet, information is available. Radical websites like zcommunications.org are providing a perspective that simply isn't offered on television. Newscasts like democracynow.org provide a newscast that literally has no fluff where subjects are talked about at length (which doesn't mean for 6 minutes). The problem, again, is that certain homepages, such as msn.com, where many people have an email account, push people towards entertainment and away from content through the use of hyperlinks.

Once someone does learn to navigate, if they are willing to use the internet for serious purposes, it becomes clear that it is the best hope we have for improving very serious threats in

the world. In Paul Hawken's recent book *Blessed Unrest* he provides much proof that social networking is already a powerful force. Citing examples such as the protests in Seattle in 1999 or the worldwide protests in 2003 before the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Hawken illustrates effectively that there is hope.

In looking at the two mentioned examples something becomes very clear: the difference between the potentiality of the internet and the television or traditional print media in subverting the propaganda model. First let's take the example of the protestors in Seattle.

On November 30, 1999 in an attempt to protest pro-corporate (anti-democratic) agendas by the World Trade Organization "more than seven hundred groups, and between forty thousand and sixty thousand individuals, took part in protests...constituting one of the most disruptive demonstrations in modern history..." Their reasons for protest were rational. They believed that the WTO was not interested in workers' rights, poor citizens or developing nations.⁷

The protest was remarkable in a few ways. First it was basically non-violent. Well that is partly true. The protestors themselves were basically non-violent. The police that broke up the protests engaged in many acts of violence such as the use of riot batons, pepper spray, and tear gas.

These protestors were well organized, something that was made possible by the internet among other things. However, they were not represented as such. Thomas Friedman's column from December 1st (Hawken also references this column) addresses the protestors in Seattle. Friedman starts his column by asking, "Is there anything more ridiculous in the news today than the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle," and to be sure he answers his own

⁷ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, (New York: Viking, 2007), 117.

question, “I doubt it”. He then describes the protestors as “a Noah’s ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960s fix.”⁸

After completely dismissing the protestors Friedman does make one interesting comment towards the end of his column. He writes, “You can make a difference today by using globalization – by mobilizing the power of trade, the power of the internet and the power of consumers to persuade, or embarrass, global corporations and nations to upgrade their standards.” Wasn’t that exactly what the protestors were doing? Were they not using the internet to form into a collective body to then have enough power to persuade “nations and corporations to upgrade their standards?”

The bias coming from Friedman writing in *The New York Times* is not unique. In general in print and on television the protests in Seattle were described as “riots” and the participants were turned into the aggressors and perpetrators of violence, exactly the opposite of what really happened.⁹ This shows the potential for the internet to get outside of the traditional propaganda model.

One explanation for the representation in Seattle is the second filter that Chomsky and Hermann point out: advertising. Big businesses spend money on advertising and by definition are not going to be ecstatic about a large, mobilized group complaining about workers’ rights. As Chomsky and Herman point out, “The mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per say.”¹⁰ Wealthy advertisers are targeting people with buying power, not people who care about the state of workers in Asia.

⁸ Thomas Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Senseless in Seattle,” *New York Times*. Dec 1 1999, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9501E4DD1E3FF932A35751C1A96F958260&scp>

⁹ The city of Seattle finally agreed to pay protestors 1 million dollars, which would be split between 160 protestors who were arrested.

¹⁰ Chomsky, 16.

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The first filter of the propaganda model is also of some importance here. This has to do with ownership. There are only a handful of major television media outlets. Again, these outlets make profits from advertising. Because they own a controlling share in the market, it is easy to control the manner a story is presented. For example, a representative from AOL could appear on AOL-Time Warner owned CNN and discuss Net-Neutrality and the average viewer at home would be unaware of the obvious conflict of interest.

However, with the internet, if used properly these filters can be circumvented. For example, a simple search on Altnet.org using the words “Seattle, protest, 1999,” found many good articles (86 entries in all) including “The Myth of Protest Violence” which was completely devoted to dispelling myths brought about by popular media. A similar search on commondreams.org found 260 entries. A search using Google provides over 1 million entries. However, this is the filter that the internet creates. By simply using Google it is easy to find many good entries; however, the total number is so large as to be intimidating.

Another relevant example Hawken uses is the war in Iraq. He points out that

On February 15th, 2003, between 6 and 10 million people took to the streets in eight hundred cities around the world to protest the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It was the largest coordinated public demonstration in history, with estimates of 2 million demonstrators marching in Rome alone.¹¹

The idea that a movement could span 800 cities and involve more than 6 million people is remarkable. This could only have been made possible by the internet connecting people across

¹¹ Hawken, 24.

the globe. After the event caused the *New York Times* to claim that two superpowers now exist: “United States and World Public Opinion.”¹²

As far as I can find, the Iraq war is the only war in American history that had significant opposition before it was launched. Take a comparison that is often made, incorrectly in my opinion, between Iraq and Vietnam. Even though there was dissent in small pockets going back to 1954, the Vietnam anti-war movement didn’t start to become massive until at least 1965.¹³ In general the public was far more willing to go along with the war in Vietnam. For the U.S. invasion of Iraq to occur a huge propaganda campaign was needed, and even with this campaign, as Hawken points out, there was organized resistance on an unprecedented scale.

While one can find mention of the protests, they were largely kept off the television and certainly not shown repeatedly, which would have inevitably led people to believe that they had a say in what happened in the world. Subsequent protests have also been either ignored by the media or radically misrepresented.

Recently we have had the rise of so-called “free speech zones.” During Hurricane Katrina it often looked as though there was no visual dissent over Bush’s handling of the natural disaster. This was not the case; rather, the protestors were simply kept off-camera.

While state power has always attempted to censor unpleasant realities, the internet makes it far more difficult. Camera phones can take pictures which can be uploaded and shared across a network of people within a short span of time. Since anyone can upload images, again as long as they have access, it makes possible the subversion of the traditional propaganda model. As an

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*. (Amherst: U of Mass, 2000), 53-4.

individual uploading an image, I don't have to worry about advertising or market shares for example.

Another recent hopeful example happened when Talking Points Memo became the first Internet-only website to win a Polk award for the work done in breaking the attorney-general scandal, where 8 US attorneys were fired for political reasons.¹⁴

But it may be asked if we have not reached a paradox: the internet is both the danger and the saving grace. It has at the same time created new filters and subverted old. It has created endless entertainment, yet it is a very serious force.

The title of this paper comes from a famous line by the German poet Holderlein who wrote, "But where danger is, grows the saving power also." This is the case today. The technological world is a threatening world. There is the danger of disengagement and perpetual entertainment. But we cannot simply give it up, nor should we want to. For, as Paul Hawken has shown the largest movement in history has arisen out of this danger.

The questions that seem to be most important now are how to deal with what is called the "digital divide," and how to help people with access to the internet learn how to navigate better, assuming they have the desire to find useful, credible information.

It seems to me that these solutions are simple. We have to share information. I find it useful to share a handout of alternative news sources with my students. That way they can check them out and decide for themselves if they are worthwhile or not. We also have to fight to make

¹⁴ Noam Cohen, "Blogger, Sans Pajamas Rakes Muck and a Prize," *New York Times*. February 25, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/25/business/media/25marshall.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Cohen+Noam+blogger&st=nyt&oref=slogin

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sure the net stays open. If it doesn't the traditional propaganda model will be reinforced and we will deal with traditional filters as well as new filters created by the internet.

The propaganda model is subverted only by democratic representation across the internet. As soon as a two-tiered system is put into place the openness of the internet would inevitably collapse. If this happens we would be taking an unforgivable step backwards. However, if we can continue to use this medium effectively more and more people will have access to truths both popular and unpopular, signaling a hopeful change in a time when great hope is most needed.

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