

Monopoly Media Manipulation

Michael Parenti

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In a capitalist “democracy” like the United States, the corporate news media faithfully reflect the dominant class 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 coverage and objective 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 everyday production problems such 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 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, and conservative commentators and columnists over progressive or radical ones.

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 downplayed or avoided outright. Sometimes the suppression includes not just vital details but the entire story itself, even ones of major import. Reports that might reflect poorly upon 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, but information about the brutal 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 are 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 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 (April 5, 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 congressional investigation — by Senator Church's committee and Congressman Pike's committee in the 1970s, and Senator Kerry's committee in the late 1980s. But the corporate capitalist media seem not to have heard about it.

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 copiously supplemented pertinent 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 hit pieces in the Washington Post and New York Times and on network television and PBS 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,” “Islamic terrorists,” “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 communication universe while claiming to be shut out from it. Some labels we will never be exposed to are “class power,” “class struggle,” and “U.S. imperialism.”

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 former 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. “IMF 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” include 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 plenitude 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 “hardline.” Anyone who resists free-market “reforms,” be it in Belarus, Italy, Peru, or Yugoslavia, is labeled a “hardliner.” An article in the New York Times (10/21/97) used “hardline” and “hardliner” eleven times to describe Bosnian Serb leaders who opposed attempts by NATO forces to close down the “hardline 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 bringing 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 “hardline” are never subjected to precise definition. The efficacy of a label is that it not have a specific content which can be held up to a 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.

Likewise with 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: in addition to retirement pensions, it provides survivors’ insurance (up until the age of 18) to children in families that have lost their breadwinner, and it offers disability assistance to persons of pre-retirement age who have 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 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 press’s performance 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 capitalist press beyond certain safely limited parameters.

Slighting of Content

One has to marvel at how the corporate news 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, safety issues, 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, nor would a broader analysis be tolerated by their bosses. 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 NAFTA and 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 protestors.

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, that 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 NPR, 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 whole 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 (December 11, 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 200,000 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 (December 26, 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 (January 22, 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 scatter of events and personalities propelled by happenstance, circumstance, confused intentions, bungled operations, and individual ambition — rarely by powerful class interests. 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 constant war of capital against labor and the contradictions between productive power and 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, 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, FTAA, GATS, and the WTO is deglobalization, an ever greater concentration of politico-economic power in the hands of an international investor class, a global coup d'etat that divests the peoples of the world of any trace of protective democratic input.

In keeping with the liberal 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 has the backing of their respective military forces. Suppose further that we cross another line and note that these rightwing 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 corporate capitalism, 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 class power), our presentation would be rejected out of hand as “Marxist” — which indeed it is, as is much of reality itself.

In sum, the news media’s daily performance under what is called “democratic capitalism” 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.