Manufacturing Consent

Perceptions about what is known are not always accurate. This idea has been exploited by media industries as they shape public opinion. The information presented in the news is often misleading and biases, missing a crucial point of view. It is filtered through a number of lenses before it reaches the public. We often get no information at all about important issues. Some alternative media sources provide annual reports on the important issues that did not make the news or that provide a view of world issues from a developing world perspective.

Noam Chomsky, an activist and well-known Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor of linguistics, points out in his books while an authoritarian government can easily control the information received by the public, control cannot be imposed by force in a democracy. Limits are placed on democracy by subtle means used to control independent or dissent views, which might translate into political, social, or environmental action and be seen as a threat. The manufacturing of public consent is accomplished by setting the news agenda using various techniques. These techniques include selecting topics and issues that will be reported, filtering information through different viewpoints such as editors, time constraints, limiting debate, and using a screening effect whereby one major event is used as a focus to distract from other significant events.

Setting the Agenda

Chomsky sees society as consisting of a political class of about 20% of the population who are well-educated and play a role in decision making. They are not easily fooled by oversimplification and illusion, but, as the collective actions of mainstream media determines, selects, shapes, controls, and restricts what gets reported, public perceptions of the world can be made to satisfy the needs of the dominant elite. The consent of this group to government and corporate policy is crucial. The role of the remaining 80% of the population is to follow the rules, not be challenged with critical perspectives or controversial ideas, and to be entertained.

Mass diversions such as national sports or shopping channels tend to pull the people away from things that matter more and reduce their interest in thinking critically about serious issues. Films about sports and the military often glorify unthinking obedience to those in positions of authority and portray stereotypical views of various groups, such as a negative view of Arab people in the 2001 film *Black Hawk Down*. The normal process of socialization in society and its institutions help to tell us what ideas, attitudes, and behaviours are acceptable.
Propaganda

The term propaganda is used to describe persuasive messages and the widespread promotion of particular ideas. There are many techniques used in communicating propaganda. A critical appreciation for the role of language is necessary for detecting propaganda. The language chosen to describe people and events can contribute to the “manufacturing” of public consent for policies that favour the dominant elite. This is particularly true in situations of military conflict. Few people want their country and youth to go to war. Even if a war is seen as right and legitimate by some, government and military leaders must often use “loaded words” to sell a war to persuade the public and win financial support from elected politicians.

Every war must be perceived to be a just cause that is a defence against or liberation from some menacing, murderous aggressor and his “cronies” and “henchmen” so that the world will become a better place. Stories of atrocities involving dead children are often used to help create this image. Leaders refer to the “theatre” of war and often use sports analogies and acronyms as a form of euphemism to soften the real horrors of war. Films of the time continue the message. The opposing side is cowardly, weak, and evil while “our” side is strong and good, with loyal heroes.

When jargon is used to manipulate or mislead, it becomes doublespeak. A commonly used example is the term collateral damage, a term referring to unintended civilian deaths.

Suppressing Dissent

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, many journalists and broadcasters discussed a perceived silencing of dissent in mainstream media ostensibly because the American public was in no mood for criticism. Government officials said that people would have to be careful of what they said and that the best way they could deal with the tragedy was to get out and shop. In North America, a continent that prides itself on freedom of speech, dissent against the mainstream view was regarded as unpatriotic in the U.S., and, in Canada, unsupportive of our U.S. neighbours.

There are many “media truisms” or ideological beliefs that are presented in mainstream news media as true and that are rarely questioned. This acts as a subtle form of propaganda. Included is the view that there is not real alternative to the status quo and the competitive corporate culture. Despite these so-called truisms, there are always alternatives.

The Role of Journalists

Journalists make useful information accessible to citizens so that they get a sense of the wider world around them. Most journalists try to be fair, balanced, and responsible and to maintain ethical standards in reporting the news. Investigative journalists play an important role in forcing governments and companies to reveal negative information that is in the public interest. Good journalism is a source of information needed to achieve accountability and acts as a check.
on media control. However, some journalists are under pressure to write or air their reports before they have full information, simply to reach the public before their competitors. The system, with its centralized control of editorial opinion about significant issues, is more likely to hire journalists that follow the values and truisms of mainstream media and who are interested in keeping their jobs. Editors tend to approve or alter stories to meet the expectations of corporate owners, acting as a filter for information. This can result in a kind of “group think” compliance with the attitudes and expectations of the corporate culture. Journalists who report in regions of war and conflict are not as able to report directly as in past conflicts. Since the conflict of the 1960s through the early 1980s, then information was revealed by journalists to the world about the involvement and actions of western governments, primarily the U.S., their movement within war zones has been restricted and military and government sources provide them with much of their information.

Journalism can be a dangerous field. Journalists in many developing countries face censorship or even death threats for reporting views on issues that are not in the interests of the powerful groups in society. Many journalists working in conflict zones have been killed, either inadvertently, as an act of terrorism, or because they have been directly targeted as knowing too much about what is going on in a particular situation.

Questions

1. Identify three filters that are used to manipulate information to construct reality.
2. How might the use of state propaganda in developing countries affect economic and social development?
3. How might the use of propaganda in countries such as Canada and the U.S. affect geopolitical patterns?
4. Explain what is meant by a) setting the agenda and b) manufacturing consent and evaluate the ability of mainstream media to accomplish these.
5. What evidence does Noam Chomsky have that democracy is compromised in our society? What influence could this have on the outcome of critical issues?