

Debate

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Of scientific relativization and differentiation

Why Siegfried Weischenberg's assessment of Noam Chomsky's propaganda approach is wrong

Abstract: Siegfried Weischenberg regards Noam Chomsky's propaganda approach as exemplary of an Alternative Media Criticism (AMC). According to Weischenberg, the AMC is lacking in balance as well as scientific relativization and differentiation. As the following article will show, Weischenberg's account of Chomsky's propaganda approach is incorrect and inconsistent with the academic literature. Weischenberg uses this distorted image as the backdrop against which he delegitimizes critical media research. The accusation of a lack of relativization and differentiation can therefore also be levelled at Weischenberg's criticism of Chomsky itself.

Introduction

In his paper »How deep is the ›misery of the media‹?« (*Journalism Research* 3/2021), Siegfried Weischenberg reprimands an »Alternative Media Criticism (AMC)« that allegedly is »one-sided, unequivocal, uncompromising, and also aggressive« (Weischenberg 2021: 170).¹ Publications that Weischenberg assigns to the realm of AMC, would, according to him, accuse all media generally to be propaganda and to not adhere to scientific standards such as »[r]elativization and differentiation« (Weischenberg 2021: 170). Noam Chomsky is, according to Weischenberg

1 A detailed discussion of Weischenberg's AMC concept can be found in Mandy Tröger's contribution in this issue: »What is ›alternative media criticism‹? A polemic in favor of a well-founded understanding of criticism«.

(2021: 171), »[t]he ›icon‹ of this approach«. He (2021: 171-173) justifies this by saying that a lecture given by Chomsky in 1997 was published in the anthology *Lügen die Medien? [Are the media lying?]* edited by Jens Wernicke (2017); that Chomsky was also positively mentioned in other AMC publications; and that the authors of the so-called AMC used a »dominant propaganda approach«, which was attributable to Chomsky. Also, Weischenberg (2021: 173) refers to Chomsky as a »linguist-turned-alternative-media-critic« and thus places him in the AMC category he created himself. But how valid is Weischenberg's assessment of Chomsky's propaganda approach?

State propaganda

Weischenberg (2021: 172) writes that on the subject of war, propaganda and the media Chomsky is »not an unproblematic authority to rely on«, because »his central thesis of ›state propaganda« is based »on the events surrounding the US entry into World War I in 1917«.

This assessment is already questionable. Although Chomsky's works on the topic of propaganda also deal with World War I, the central starting point of his propaganda approach is an analysis of the institutional structures of society and mass media in the USA (cf. Chomsky 1989; Herman/Chomsky 2008).

Notwithstanding, Weischenberg's (2021: 172) criticism focuses on what he alleges to be Chomsky's treatment of US entry into World War I: »He [Chomsky] claims that it was all a long-prepared propaganda stunt by political and corporate stakeholders to lessen the population's reluctance to go to war, leveraged by President Woodrow Wilson for the sole purpose of getting elected.« According to Weischenberg (2021: 173), Chomsky alleged, with »conspiratorial assumptions«, that as early as at the beginning of World War I »a White House ›master plan« to enter the war had existed. The US had then tried, via a Committee for Public Information (also referred to as the »Creel Commission«), to influence the peace-attuned population. Chomsky bases his »entire theory of the genesis of propaganda and public relations« on this perspective, Weischenberg writes, and this »manipulation thesis« supposedly informs »AMC discourses today« (Weischenberg 2021: 173).

Much of what Weischenberg writes here is put into Chomsky's mouth. In the texts cited by Weischenberg, Chomsky (2010 [2006], 2017) did not write that the US administration had had a master plan to enter the war at the beginning of World War I. Nor did Chomsky claim that Wilson had exclusively used the war-weariness of the population to be re-elected. Finally, Chomsky did not write either that political and corporate stakeholders had long planned a propaganda

campaign to enter the war.^[2] Here is what Chomsky's (2010 [2006]: 25) book *Media Control* says:

»Let's begin with the first modern government propaganda operation. It took place during the administration of Woodrow Wilson, who had been elected President of the United States in 1916 with the slogan »Peace Without Victory«. At the time, in the midst of World War I, the American people were decidedly pacifist and saw no reason to get involved in a European war. The Wilson government, however, had committed itself to entering the war and thus had to act against the peaceful mood. A propaganda agency, the so-called Creel Commission, was set up, which within six months succeeded in throwing the population into hysterical enthusiasm.«^[3]

The facts presented by Chomsky are undisputed: Wilson was elected US President for a second term in 1916 on the basis of a peace platform and, after the US entered the war in April 1917, initiated an unprecedented propaganda campaign with the aim of preparing the pacifist-minded population for war (cf. Elter 2005; Hamilton 2020; Jackall/Hirota 1995).

Weischenberg (2021: 173) further criticizes Chomsky's historical classification of the US propaganda campaign of World War I: »The central message is that a staged war hysteria helped unleash an avalanche of impacts that determined US and European history for decades to come.«

Chomsky does see a continuing relevance in the developments of that time: He argues that Hitler had been impressed by the successful US propaganda campaign and Germany had then set up its own propaganda system during World War II (Chomsky 2017: 116). Chomsky also argues that the US business world, because of what they regarded as a positive experience of World War I, had built up the PR industry in order to use propaganda to counteract a progressing formal democratization (expansion of voting rights and trade unions) (2017: 116-117, 2010 [2006]: 25-26).

These views are not controversial: Hitler's propaganda found inspiration with the communication techniques developed in the United States (cf. Dudley 1947: 107). Led by the USA, economic propaganda was systematically applied in liberal democracies (cf. Carey 1997; Fones-Wolf 1994). A prominent example is the fossil fuel industry's propaganda campaign, which fomented doubt to obscure the link between industrial carbon emissions and global warming (cf. Oreskes/Conway

2 Weischenberg (2021: 172-173) builds his argument on the following sentence, which is attributed to Chomsky (2017: 116) in the lecture that was published in Wernicke's (2017) anthology: »Yet his [Wilson's] intention, from the outset, was to enter the war« (Chomsky cited in Weischenberg 2021: 172). If one looks at Chomsky's discussion of propaganda in overall context, it does not matter at what point Wilson decided to go to war. Also, in the original version of this text, Chomsky (1997) never used the phrase »from the outset« (German: »von Anfang an«). The translation of this sentence in Wernicke's book is incorrect. Chomsky (1997) merely said in the original text that Wilson »was intending« to go to war (»But he was intending to go to war.«). Weischenberg would therefore have been well advised to look at Chomsky's original text.

3 This quotation and all the quotations from Chomsky (2017) referenced in this text were translated by the author.

2011). Today's propaganda techniques also go back to World War I. Thus, John Maxwell Hamilton (2020: 14) writes about »the profound and enduring threat to American democracy that rose out of the Great War – the establishment of pervasive, systematic propaganda as an instrument of the state«. Hamilton (2020: 14) remarks the following on the Committee for Public Information established in World War I: up to that point, nothing of the kind had existed and the committee could be seen »as a blueprint for the information state that exists today« in times of war and peace.

»Manufacturing Consent«

Weischenberg also finds fault with Chomsky's discussion of Walter Lippmann, which, allegedly »without offering any further evidence«, focuses on »Lippmann's role as a propagandist who is ›manufacturing consent« (Weischenberg 2021: 174).

Indeed, Chomsky (2017:117) argues that Lippmann was »a member of the Creel Commission« and then said in publications »that there is a new art in democracy which he calls ›the manufacture of consent««. Political leaders were able to »manufacture consent and thus limit people's choices and attitudes in such a way that they would ultimately only obediently do what they are told, even though they themselves formally participate in the system – for example through elections« (Chomsky 2017: 118). This is how Lippmann envisioned »a real democracy that works as it should«, writes Chomsky (2017: 118), »[t]hat is the lesson he draws from previous experiences with propaganda«.

This is also what Chomsky (2017: 117) argues in the lecture printed in Wernicke's (2017) anthology, which also refers to the book that Chomsky co-authored with Edward S. Herman and the title of which (*Manufacturing Consent*) was inspired by Lippmann (cf. Herman/Chomsky 2008). He has documented this in detail: evidence and bibliographic references that further confirm Lippmann's view of an elite managed democracy can be found in this very book (cf. Herman/Chomsky 2008: IL, 330). Chomsky establishes elsewhere how the influential intellectuals Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Harold D. Lasswell und Samuel Huntington share similar elitist assumptions about how democracy should work (cf. 1982: 6off., 1989: 16-20).

For example, Bernays (2005 [1928]: 54), who had also worked in the Creel Commission and is regarded as a founder of modern public relations, wrote in his standard work *Propaganda*: »It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind.« Nancy Snow (2010: 82) writes, after World War I, the USA »led by Bernays, took up the mantle

of propaganda campaigns in manufacturing public support for American-style democracy«. She continues as follows: »In the 1930s, Bernays worked with corporate America to convince the American people that social movements and worker rights were a threat to American business and, in turn, the American way of life« (Snow 2010: 83).

All of this is ignored by Weischenberg, who does not bother to discuss Chomsky's major works⁴ on propaganda nor to place them in the context of the body of literature produced by other propaganda researchers, yet complains that an essay based on a lecture did not contain enough pieces of evidence (cf. Weischenberg 2021: 174).

The Propaganda Model

Finally, Weischenberg (2021: 174) criticizes Chomsky for not addressing other aspects of Lippmann's work. He suggests that Lippmann pointed out that news and finding the truth should be clearly differentiated from each other, which to a certain extent relieved »journalism of exaggerated demands« (Weischenberg 2021: 173-174).

This is a contentious assumption as many journalists see truth-finding as part of their professional ethos and self-conception (cf. Kovach/Rosenstiel 2003). How balanced and truthful journalists can report on political events is indeed an important aspect of the propaganda model derived in 1988 by Edward S. Herman and Chomsky (2008) and examined in numerous quantitative and qualitative case studies. Herman and Chomsky use comparative content analyses to demonstrate how similar issues are treated with double standards in the mainstream media, according to political expediency. However, Weischenberg does not seriously consider the propaganda model. This is remarkable because Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is not only used in numerous studies (cf. Chomsky 1989; Edgley 2015; DiMaggio 2009; Edwards/Cromwell 2018; Klaehn 2002, 2003; Krüger 2019; MacLeod 2020; Mauch 2020; Pedro-Carañana et al. 2018; Pöttsch 2020; Zollmann 2017) but is also an important aspect of Chomsky's propaganda research. Only in the abstract of the text does Weischenberg (2021: 169) refer to »Chomsky's ›propaganda model«, the genesis of which he regards as »problematic«. Here, however, Weischenberg confuses Chomsky's remarks on state

4 Only in footnote 3 does Weischenberg (2021: 172) refer to Herman and Chomsky's (2008) classic *Manufacturing Consent*. Chomsky's (1989) other important piece on the topic, *Necessary Illusions*, remains unconsidered. The book *Media Control* (Chomsky 2010 [2006]: 241), which Weischenberg references, is a new edition combining chapters from Chomsky's works *Media Control* (2002, English language version) and *Necessary Illusions* (1989). However, the appendix of *Necessary Illusions*, which makes up more than half of the book and contains detailed methodological and historical documentation, was substantially shortened in the German edition of *Media Control* that is used by Weischenberg (cf. Chomsky 2010 [2006]: 241).

propaganda with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which undertakes a critique of the institutional structures of the mass media and builds on the well-known gatekeeper research (cf. Herman 1986). This error is indicative of the way Weischenberg presents Chomsky's work overall.

Concluding remark

As I noted in 2019, propaganda studies about western democracies are marginalised in communication studies (cf. Zollmann 2019a, b). Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton (1957 [1948]: 457-458) had already pointed out that propaganda had taken the »place of more direct means of control« in democratic societies and that »this change in the structure of social control merits thorough examination«. Lazarsfeld and Merton designated the mass media as an important institution of propaganda because they had been co-opted by powerful business interests (1957 [1948]: 457-458, 465). Chomsky is one of the few researchers to have advanced such a propaganda perspective for decades. The publications that Weischenberg classifies as »AMC« should certainly be subjected to a critical assessment. There is in fact a historical marginalisation of women or minorities in the field of critical media research. Instead, Weischenberg carries out an arbitrary categorisation that lumps together a variety of different works, apparently because some of them quote Chomsky or examine supposedly similar fields. This can be seen as an attempt to delegitimize critical media research. This can be understood in the following sense: if it turns out that Chomsky's statements are based on a false hypothesis, then this can also be assumed for the works that Weischenberg considers to be following Chomsky's line. A more detailed analysis shows that the points central to Weischenberg's attempt to refute Chomsky's propaganda approach are based on misrepresentations and an insufficient examination of the relevant literature. This raises the question of whether what Weischenberg claims to be Chomsky's main propaganda thesis is a straw figure. Rather than engaging with scholarly positions, Weischenberg refutes an argument of his own making with the aim of outmanoeuvring Chomsky's propaganda approach. This means that Weischenberg does not adhere to the standards of scientific relativization and differentiation that he himself demands.

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