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The Media and Matrix Reality

Kevin Carson

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On his Cyberjournal email list, Richard K. Moore made this comment about the mainstream press's coverage of the Iranian nuclear "crisis":

In any case, from reading the minuscule [San Francisco] *Chronicle* coverage, I became more convinced than ever that an attack on Iran is soon on the agenda. The *Chronicle* serves as a portal to Matrix reality. It doesn't have room for any breadth, so you get the straight Matrix line. So what do you read about Iran? ... a gradual but persistent demonization program. Day after day we see the 'international community' losing patience with Iran's stubbornness regarding its 'nuclear program'. After a while, you can't help but think, "Why don't they do something about it?" Thus are the American people, and the rest of us as well, led to accept what elites have been long planning for their own purposes.

Their purposes, following a long tradition, are to maintain their control over global finance, by

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means of dominating oil sources and controlling the currency in which oil is traded. Their current urgency arises from the fact that Iran is about to launch a Euro marketplace (bourse) for global oil sales. That would start a run on the dollar like you've never seen. "It's not nice to threaten Mighty Dollar...bad boy, Uncle Sam get mad, cut off head, you learn lesson."

I place considerably less emphasis than does Moore on conspiracy as a moving force. Nevertheless, I agree with him that there is a "Matrix reality," and that the mainstream media are an excellent approximation to it. No conspiracy is required. Through a virtually automatic filtering process, the mainstream press comes to reflect the world-view of the corporate and state power elites and the court intellectuals who serve them. They implicitly adopt the goals and assumptions of the foreign policy establishment regarding "our national interest," and see the solutions it adopts to "problems" (which actually exist only from the perspective of this elite's interests) as necessitated by objective reality.

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in *Manufacturing Consent*, put forth a "Propaganda Model" of how the media promotes the interests of a ruling class. Here's an excerpt (from Third World Traveller):

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda.

In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent. This is especially true where the media actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, and aggressively portray themselves as spokesmen for free speech and the general community interest. What is not evident (and remains undiscussed in the media) is the limited nature of such critiques, as well as the huge inequality in command of resources, and its effect both on access to a private media system and on its behavior and performance.

A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public... The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns.

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation

of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values. Within the limits of the filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable.

Chomsky and Herman list several filtering mechanisms by which the world presented in the media comes to reflect the interests of the ruling class. The most important, for me, is this:

(3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and “experts” funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power...

The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. The media need a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news. They have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet. They cannot afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important stories may break. Economics dictates that they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs, where important rumors and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held. The White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, in Washington, D.C., are central nodes of such news activity. On a local basis, city hall and

unconditional surrender was a characteristically mid-20th century objective, quite understandable for a totalitarianizing “democracy” unconsciously reenacting the imperial Athens of Thucydides. It’s the kind of thing one might expect, as a matter of course, from any of the great superstates of the period, whether those of the Axis or those represented at Yalta. What’s astounding, though, is to hear this “argument” repeated by World War II vets. Those of them who use such arguments, perhaps unknowingly, have adopted the same frame of reference as the elites who once prepared to send them to die. But what about the possibility that sending half a million American soldiers to die on the beachheads of Honshu was just as immoral as incinerating a couple hundred thousand Japanese civilians?

Another, more recent example is an op-ed piece posted by Kevin McFarlane on the Libertarian Alliance Forum, entitled (in part) “...war with Iran may be a necessity”:

THE UNIMAGINABLE but ultimately inescapable truth is that we are going to have to get ready for war with Iran.

In a way, this reminds me of the attitude of *Who Moved My Cheese?*, which you guys are probably getting heartily sick of. The “national interest,” like “change,” is something that just happens, and that we’re supposed to respond to as an inevitable force of nature. Nobody in a position of authority wants to take responsibility for it, or admit that the “national interest” looks suspiciously like *their* interest.

It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well-balanced as well as carefully patrolled ... The experts concluded that if the community were to be healthy, if it were not to revert again to a blighted or slum area, as though possessed by a congenital disease, the area must be planned as a whole.

Urban planning doesn't benefit the local growth machine, the chamber of commerce, or the real estate interests. Oh, my, heavens no! It benefits the Public Interest, which is beyond class interest, and is best promoted by the selfless engineering of those disinterested technocrats. There's a "problem" that exists, not from some concrete perspective, but from the general nature of things. And those experts, faced with this objective "problem," will figure out the best way for "us" to solve that problem.

The mainstream press's orientation toward this Matrix reality is reinforced by the nature of journalism as a New Class "profession," which predisposes journalists to share the assumptions of policy elites. Recalcitrant regimes which refuse to take direction from U.S. foreign policy elites and from the global financial interests they uphold, are seen as "problems" for "us" to "manage." It never occurs to an AP journalist to ask, "a 'problem' from whose perspective?" And who's this "we" and "us" they keep talking about; are they carrying a mouse in their pocket?

A famous example is the cliched defense of the atomic bombings of Japan in August 1945 as "necessary" to prevent hundreds of thousands of American deaths in an assault on the home islands. Now, the unspoken assumption behind this claim is that unconditional surrender was the only possible war objective that "we" could accept, and that Truman was justified in doing anything necessary to achieve it. In fact,

the police department are the subject of regular news "beats" for reporters. Business corporations and trade groups are also regular and credible purveyors of stories deemed newsworthy. These bureaucracies turn out a large volume of material that meets the demands of news organizations for reliable, scheduled flows. Mark Fishman calls this "the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy."

Government and corporate sources also have the great merit of being recognizable and credible by their status and prestige. This is important to the mass media. As Fishman notes,

Newswriters are predisposed to treat bureaucratic accounts as factual because news personnel participate in upholding a normative order of authorized knowers in the society. Reporters operate with the attitude that officials ought to know what it is their job to know... In particular, a newswriter will recognize an official's claim to knowledge not merely as a claim, but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge. This amounts to a moral division of labor: officials have and give the facts; reporters merely get them.

Another reason for the heavy weight given to official sources is that the mass media claim to be "objective" dispensers of the news. Partly to maintain the image of objectivity, but also to protect themselves from criticisms of bias and the threat of libel suits, they need material that can be portrayed as presumptively accurate. This is also partly a matter of cost: taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investiga-

tive expense, whereas material from sources that are not prima facie credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful checking and costly research.

The magnitude of the public-information operations of large government and corporate bureaucracies that constitute the primary news sources is vast and ensures special access to the media...

To consolidate their preeminent position as sources, government and business-news promoters go to great pains to make things easy for news organizations. They provide the media organizations with facilities in which to gather; they give journalists advance copies of speeches and forthcoming reports; they schedule press conferences at hours well-g geared to news deadlines; they write press releases in usable language; and they carefully organize their press conferences and “photo opportunity” sessions. It is the job of news officers “to meet the journalist’s scheduled needs with material that their beat agency has generated at its own pace.”

In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful subsidize the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media’s costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become “routine” news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers. It should also be noted that in the case of the largesse of the Pentagon and the State Department’s Office of

Public Diplomacy, the subsidy is at the taxpayers’ expense, so that, in effect, the citizenry pays to be propagandized in the interest of powerful groups such as military contractors and other sponsors of state terrorism.

Because of their services, continuous contact on the beat, and mutual dependency, the powerful can use personal relationships, threats, and rewards to further influence and coerce the media. The media may feel obligated to carry extremely dubious stories and mute criticism in order not to offend their sources and disturb a close relationship. It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers. Critical sources may be avoided not only because of their lesser availability and higher cost of establishing credibility, but also because the primary sources may be offended and may even threaten the media using them.

The key to Matrix reality is to see policy, not as the arena for a conflict of visions, or for pursuing different interests, but as the application of technocratic expertise. An attack on Iran is not necessary from the perspective of some concrete interest, like (say) the state capitalist nexus of corporate and government power, the great bankers and industrial cartels, that Moore describes above. An attack on Iran is made necessary by objective necessity, and the only thing left is for those disinterested experts in the CFR foreign policy establishment to decide on the most efficient way to promote the “national interest.”

From the perspective of the New Class managerialists who dominate both the neoconservative right and New Republic liberalism, the National Interest in foreign policy is kind of like the Public Interest as seen by liberal urban planners, in Sam Smith’s great quote from William O. Douglas.