**////Title: Reflecting on Responsibility, Intent and Conformism Among Journalists**

**////Standfirst:**

Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model is among the most renowned academic contributions to the study of journalism. Although it offers valuable insight into news content and how the media industry operates, it mostly ignores an important step in the production of news: what happens in the newsroom. Dr Tabe Bergman, an Assistant Professor at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and Deputy Head of the University’s Media and Communication department, recently assessed practices in the newsroom, with the aim to supplement the propaganda model.

**////Main text:**

The propaganda model is a conceptual framework introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in the late 1980s, in a book entitled *Manufacturing Consent*. The aim of this framework is to explain why the American mass media produce many news stories that contain biases in favour of the interests of political and economic elites, and thereby the status quo in society.

The propaganda model suggests that corporate news is ‘bad’ because of five factors: the private, concentrated ownership of the media and their profit-seeking nature; the dependence on advertising revenue; the institutional sources that professional journalists feel obliged to quote; the ability of powerful interests to discipline journalists, for instance by starting a lawsuit; and, finally, what the authors at the time identified as ‘anticommunism’. After the Cold War ended, this factor can be defined as the mainstream ideology.

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The propaganda model is supported by a wealth of empirical evidence, meaning that it provides a valuable framework for understanding corporate media and the content they produce. The model consists of an analysis of the media industries, including the interests of owners and advertisers, and includes detailed content analyses, which show that the news often contains a strong pro-establishment bias. However, the model does not consider how the process of ‘manufacturing consent’ plays out in the newsroom.

Dr Tabe Bergman at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University recently wrote a paper addressing this gap in the propaganda model. His paper is supported by existing research on the newsroom and concrete examples from his own experience as editor for the Associated Press, one of the main global news agencies, and for a small commercial news agency in the Netherlands.

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Herman and Chomsky posit that journalists internalise the values of the media organisation they work for. As a result, they do not feel that the organisation’s rules and professional practices restrict them. The authors have little more to say about the topic.

In his paper, Dr Bergman reviews research on the newsroom and reflects on his own professional experience to dig deeper into the complicated issue of what happens in the newsroom and why. He specifically focuses on three issues related to the work inside the newsroom: namely journalists’ personal responsibility, intent, and conformity to the organisation.

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Herman and Chomsky consider almost all journalists to be honest professionals who believe they are producing informative and objective news. Yet they are, without realising it, swayed by greater powers, including their employers, advertisers and governments. Dr Bergman agrees with this to a large extent, but suggests that journalists should nonetheless be held personally responsible for the content they produce.

Dr Bergman argues that Herman and Chomsky downplay the responsibility of individual journalists by pointing to the organisation’s imperatives that guide journalists’ behaviour. In practice, journalists have quite some leeway in how they report. Thus, they are responsible for their work to a considerable extent.

To support this point, Dr Bergman draws on his experience as an editor for Associated Press. He had limited autonomy in this role compared to a regular reporter, as he was primarily expected to translate news from English to Dutch. However, he was allowed to add background information to articles that often changed the overall story.

At least one colleague noticed that the background information he added often contradicted the general tenor of reporting at Associated Press. For a long time, Dr Bergman could proceed with reframing articles by adding background information. At one point, however, his manager accused him of bias. This experience demonstrates both the leeway that journalists have, and the limitations to their autonomy.

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Dr Bergman highlights how the intent of journalists is a complex social construct, which is affected by numerous factors that can be hard to disentangle.

As both existing research and his own experience demonstrate, journalists are motivated by a range of honourable and less-than-honourable factors, including making the world a little better, supporting their colleagues, paying the mortgage, and maintaining their social status in society.

As members of the middle class, many journalists have a ‘fear of falling’ in the phrase of author Barbara Ehrenreich. Such fear leads a tiny minority of journalists to commit plagiarism or otherwise break professional and ethical rules.

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In his paper, Dr Bergman discusses the strong tendency among journalists to conform to professional practices and the news organisation’s rules.

In his own case, when he felt that he might get into trouble for specific edits, he did not step out of line, but instead adhered to the organisation’s rules and guidelines. In other words, he prioritised his own financial security and career over his beliefs and personal responsibility.

With practice, the ‘objective’ writing style that characterises professional journalism became second nature to him. Like other journalists, he had trouble with clearly defining ‘objectivity’, but soon knew whether a phrase or sentence could get him into trouble for not being ‘objective’.

Dr Bergman experienced first-hand the tendency of media organisations to enforce obedience to guidelines or rules among their journalists. In his case, this entailed limiting his freedom of speech as a citizen. If he had not already given notice, he would have been condemned for providing advice to squatters on how to improve their image in the Dutch media. As the propaganda model predicts, news about the squatters was predominantly provided by police sources, and was therefore biased in favour of the powers that be.

Based on his experience, Dr Bergman believes that as the newsroom becomes a journalist’s everyday environment, the ‘normality’ of this office setting ends up influencing their work, making them more inclined to ‘conform’ with everyone else around them and less willing to step out of line for the sake of deep-digging reporting.

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Dr Bergman’s recent paper provides a fresh and personal perspective on how newsroom-related factors influence the work of individual journalists, making them more inclined to protect their company’s interests than to challenge vested interests. In the future, it could inspire more works aimed at integrating newsroom dynamics into Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model.

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