

The Manufacturing of Consent and the Professional Integrity of the Media in the New Era of the Digital Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the continued relevance of the theory of the manufacturing of consent, developed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, within the context of the contemporary digital ecosystem and new media. It seeks to offer a brief reflection on how the dynamics of technological platforms, algorithms, and the attention economy are reshaping media practices and challenging the ideals of professional integrity in journalism.

The analysis draws on the classical premises of the propaganda model to argue that, rather than disappearing, mechanisms of ideological control persist in new, more sophisticated forms that are less visible to audiences.

Finally, it reflects on the ethical challenges faced by communication professionals in an increasingly fragmented and polarized environment.

Keywords:

Manufacturing of consent, digital media, algorithms, journalistic ethics, platforms, Chomsky.

INTRODUCTION

The work *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) established foundational principles within the North American communication industry for understanding the role of mass media as ideological tools that favor the reproduction of the interests of economic and political elites in capitalist societies. The authors explained how structural factors such as media ownership, advertising, information sources, social pressure, and ideology shape the news agenda and limit the plurality of voices.

To put it succinctly, the authors argue that the mass media function as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general population. Their role is to entertain, inform, and transmit values, beliefs, and codes of conduct that integrate individuals into the institutional structures of society. In a world characterized by concentrated wealth and significant class conflicts of interest, fulfilling this role requires systematic propaganda (Herman

& Chomsky, 1988) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Entertainment and social control: digitalized audiences under the covert influence of media power.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

A más de tres décadas de su primera publicación, y en plena era digital, cabe preguntarse si esta tesis sigue teniendo vigencia y cómo se traduce en un entorno caracterizado por la intermediación, la multiplicación de fuentes, la irrupción de las redes sociales y el dominio de los algoritmos. Este artículo explora cómo la manufactura del consentimiento se adapta al nuevo ecosistema digital y qué desafíos plantea para la honestidad profesional del periodismo.

THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Framework and Background

The Manufacturing of Consent: A Brief Theoretical Overview

The propaganda model formulated by Herman and Chomsky (1988) proposes that information in mass media is filtered through five major structural mechanisms that reinforce the dominant discourse. These filters—private ownership, advertising-based funding, reliance on official sources, organized negative responses (flak), and anti-communist or national security ideology (particularly in the North American context)—function as sieves that shape what is published, how it is presented, and what is ultimately silenced.

The concept of the “manufacturing of consent” refers to the passive construction of social consensus through informational manipulation, without the need for overt censorship. Far from being neutral spaces, mass media operate as vehicles of ideological reproduction. Does this imply that the authors envision a monolithic society devoid of dissenting thought? As Herman and Chomsky (1988) state: *“The beauty of the system, however, is that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so*

that, while their presence demonstrates that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the dominance of the official agenda.”

Chomsky further clarifies that this framework does not constitute a conspiracy theory. In a 1996 BBC interview, journalist Andrew Marr asked: *“Are you saying that media owners are telling me what to say?”* (spanishexplorer74 | YouTube, 2013). Chomsky replied: *“No, not at all. I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying, every word. What I’m saying is that if you believed something different, you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.”*

Through this response, Chomsky suggests that journalists occupy their positions not because they are explicitly instructed on what to say, but because the system itself has already filtered professionals, placing those aligned with dominant or hegemonic thought in privileged positions within media institutions. This dominant thought, in turn, generates the material conditions (in a Marxist, dialectical sense) that allow its own reproduction. In this way, Chomsky makes clear that the model does not rely on conspiratorial assumptions, but

rather on structural dynamics embedded within the media system.

The Digital Ecosystem and New Mechanisms of Consent

Although the emergence of the Internet and social media has often been interpreted as a democratization of access to information, in practice, new actors and dynamics have emerged that reconfigure traditional media power structures. It must be acknowledged that, at one point, digital platforms fragmented the traditional mediation exercised by major media outlets. As Jenkins (2006) notes, *“Convergence culture maps a new terrain where old and new media collide, where corporate and grassroots media intersect, and where the power of media producers and consumers interacts in unpredictable ways.”*

However, over time, these platforms have imposed new forms of informational filtering based on algorithms, the attention economy, and business models centered on the monetization of user behavior. As McChesney (2013) argues, *“the tremendous promise of the digital revolution has been undermined by the*

capitalist appropriation and development of the Internet” (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

Clash between traditional media and digital platforms in the production and circulation of consent in the digital era.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

Algorithms as New Filters

Today, access to information is mediated by algorithms that prioritize content based on profitability criteria (engagement, clicks, retention), rather than social relevance. Platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, and Google shape perception bubbles and echo chambers, reinforcing ideological biases, polarization, and misinformation.

In this sense, it can be argued that algorithms perform a role similar to that which Chomsky and Herman attributed to advertising and official sources in mass media nearly three decades ago: they determine which information becomes visible and which is marginalized. In other words, algorithms are not neutral. They respond to specific business models and are designed to sustain and reinforce those models (see Figure 3).



Figure 3

The algorithm as an ideological filter: invisible selection of content based on the business model.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

The Attention Economy and Disinformation

The economic model of digital platforms has transferred market logic into the realm of information: what is disseminated is what captures the most attention, not

necessarily what is true or relevant. The business model is based on a single principle—keeping users engaged on the platform for as long as possible; the more time individuals spend on the platform, the more value the company generates and the higher the price it can charge for advertising space.

Applied on a global scale, this principle favors the viralization of emotional, polarizing, and often misleading content. In this way, the manipulation of consent no longer requires direct censorship; it is sufficient to invisibilize or saturate certain narratives in order to shape public perception.

Within the framework proposed by David Patrikarakos, this new environment has also created the conditions for new forms of social confrontation through narrative warfare. As he states, “*Modern war is a war of narratives, where bullets are fired both physically and virtually. If you do not understand how to effectively use the power of social media, you may win some battles, but you will lose a twenty-first century war*” (Patrikarakos, 2017).

This perspective raises key questions in relation to Chomsky's framework, which underpins this article: Who wins these narratives, this war? Who owns these new ecosystems—Meta, X, Google, Amazon? Are these neutral social actors, or do they pursue specific corporate or political interests?

The Paradox of Informational Abundance

Although the digital age has multiplied the number of voices, it has also made it more difficult for the public to distinguish between verified information, propaganda, and disinformation. This has created an environment in which information overload and post-truth dynamics erode the notion of reality, generating favorable conditions for manipulation and ideological control in more diffuse, yet equally effective ways.

Professional Integrity of Journalism in the Digital Era

Professional integrity in journalism faces unprecedented challenges. In an environment where profitability depends on traffic and metrics, the pressure to produce viral content aligned with

algorithmic logic undermines the principles of rigor, accuracy, and independence. Traditional media are increasingly forced to adapt to platform-driven dynamics.

As Napoli (2019) argues, the fundamental dilemma lies in the fact that the business model of social media incentivizes virality, which can conflict with the quality and integrity of public information: *"...the social media industry finds itself at a crossroads. A balance must be found between maximizing attention and monetization, and promoting high-quality information to minimize harm."*

In this context, defending journalistic ethics requires resisting the algorithmic and commercial instrumentalization of information, as well as rejecting practices that prioritize virality over truthfulness. The search for sustainable models that do not rely exclusively on advertising or technological platforms remains a key challenge for preserving the integrity of the profession.

CONCLUSIONS

The theory of the manufacturing of consent remains relevant for understanding how public opinion is shaped, even though its mechanisms have evolved with the digital revolution. Rather than disappearing, the filters proposed by Herman and Chomsky have been transformed into algorithms, metrics, and attention-driven logics, maintaining—and even enhancing—the capacity to shape social consent.

The challenge for media organizations and journalists is greater than ever: to safeguard professional integrity in an environment where manipulation is more subtle, pervasive, and difficult to detect. This requires not only ethical commitment, but also critical reflection on the new forms of power that are emerging in the digital age.

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