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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Manufacturing Consent: A Case Study of Noam Chomsky's "Propaganda Model" in Media Analysis

(East Timor-Cambodia Genocides)
(30 min. edited)

Interviewer: I'd like to ask you a question, essentially about the methodology in studying the propaganda model and how one would go about doing that.

Chomsky: Well, there are a number of ways to proceed. One obvious way is to try to find more or less paired examples. History doesn't offer true, controlled experiments but it often comes pretty close. So one can find atrocities or abuses of one sort that on the one hand are committed by "official enemies" and on the other hand are committed by friends and allies or by the favored state itself (by the United States in the U.S. case). And the question is whether the media accept the government framework or whether they use the same agenda, the same set of questions, the same criteria for dealing with the two cases as any honest outside observer would do.

Advertisement for ABC TV (U.S. commercial television network): If you think America's involvement in the war in Southeast Asia is over, think again. The Khmer Rouge are the most genocidal people on the face of the earth. Peter Jennings reporting from the Killing Fields, Thursday [on ABC News].

Chomsky: The "great act" of genocide in the modern period is [that committed by the Khmer Rouge under] Pol Pot, 1975 through 1978. That atrocity, I think it would be hard to find any example of a comparable outrage and outpouring of fury and so on and so forth [by the mainstream media in the U.S.]. So that's one atrocity. Well, it just happens that in that case history did set up a controlled experiment.

Interviewer (questioning two spectators at a parade in New York City welcoming back the U.S. soldiers who participated in the Gulf War): Have you ever heard of a place called East Timor?

Spectator 1: I can't say that I have.

Spectator 2: Where? Nope.

Chomsky: Well, it happens that right at that time that there was another atrocity, very similar in character but differing in one respect, we [the U.S. government] were responsible for it, not Pol Pot.

CBC Public Radio (Montreal, Quebec): Hello, I'm Louise Penny, and this is Radio Noon. If you've been listening to the program fairly regularly over the last few months, you'll know East Timor has come into the conversation more than once. Particularly when we were talking about foreign aid and also the war and a new world order, people wondered why, if the U.N. was serious about a new world order nobody was doing anything about East Timor. The area was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. There are reports of atrocities against the Timorese people, and yet Canada and other nations have consistently voted against U.N. resolutions to end the occupation.

Today, we're going to take a closer look at East Timor, what's happened to it, and why the international community is doing nothing to help. One of the people who has been most active is Elaine Briere, a photo-journalist from British Columbia. She's the founder of the East Timor Alert Network, and she joins me in studio now. Hello. [Hi.] One tragedy compounding a tragedy is that a lot of people don't know much about East Timor. Where is it?

Elaine Briere (East Timor Alert Network): East Timor is just north of Australia, about 420 kilometers, and it's right between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Just south of East Timor is the deepwater sealane, perfect for U.S. submarines to pass through [undetected]. There are also huge oil reserves there. One of the unique things about East Timor is that it is truly one of the last surviving ancient civilizations in that part of the world. The [East] Timorese spoke 30 different languages and dialects amongst a group of 700,000 people.

Today, less than 5% of the world's people live like the East Timorese. Basically self-reliant, they live really outside of the global economic system. Small societies like the East Timorese are much more democratic, much more egalitarian, and there's much more sharing of power and wealth. Before the Indonesians invaded, most people lived in small, rural villages. The old people in each village were like the university, they passed on tribal wisdom from generation to generation. Children grew up in a safe, stimulating, nurturing environment. A year after I left East Timor I was appalled when I heard that Indonesia had invaded. They didn't want a small, independent country setting an example for the region.

Chomsky: East Timor was a Portuguese colony. Indonesia had no claim to it and in fact stated that they had no claim to it. During the period of colonization, there was a good deal of politicization and different [political] groups developed. A civil war broke out

in August 1975, and it ended up a victory for FRETILIN, which was one of the groupings described as populist Catholic in character with some typical leftish rhetoric. Indonesia at once started intervening.

Greg Shackleton (Australian journalist): What's the situation? When did the ships come in?

Jose Ramos-Horta (FRETILIN leader): They started arriving on Monday, six or seven ships together, very close to our border. They're not just there for fun, you know? They're preparing a massive operation.

Greg Shackleton (Australian journalist): Something happened here last night that moved us very deeply. It was so far outside our experience as Australians that we'll find it very difficult to convey to you, but we'll try. Sitting on woven mats under a thatched roof in a hut with no walls, we were the target of a barrage of questioning from men who know they may die tomorrow and cannot understand why the rest of the world does not care. That's all they want, for the United Nations to care about what is happening here.

The emotion here last night was so strong that we, all three of us [Australians], felt we should be able to reach out into the warm night air and touch it. Greg Shackleton [for Channel 7 News] at an unnamed village which we will remember forever, in Portuguese Timor.

Caption insert: Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham, Malcolm Rennie, Brian Peters, Tony Stewart - Journalists slain the next day by Indonesian forces.

Chomsky: [U.S. President Gerald] Ford and [Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger visited Jakarta on December 5th, and we know that they had requested that Indonesia delay the invasion until after they left because it would be too embarrassing. Within hours after they left, I think, the invasion took place on December 7th.

Elaine Briere (East Timor Alert Network): What happened on December 7, 1975 is just one of the great evil deeds of history. Early in the morning bombs began dropping on Dili. The number of troops that invaded Dili that day almost outnumbered the entire population of the town. And for two or three weeks, they just killed people.

Carlos Alfonso (refugee from Timor) [subtitled]: And when I heard "Fire!", I dived to the ground and felt bodies falling on me - like leaves... There were screams, calls for wife, for mother - it was horrible.

Jose Ramos-Horta (East Timor Representative, United Nations): This Council must consider Indonesia's aggression against East Timor as the main issue of the discussion.

Chomsky: When the Indonesians invaded, the U.N. reacted as it always does, calling for sanctions, condemnation, and so on. Various watered-down resolutions were passed, but the United States was clearly not going to allow anything to work.

Caption insert: "The Department of State desired that the U.N. prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success." - Daniel Patrick Moynihan (U.S. representative to the United Nations).

Elaine Briere (East Timor Alert Network): So the Timorese were fleeing into the jungle by the thousands. By late-1977 and early-1978, Indonesia set up receiving centers for those Timorese who came out of the jungles waving white flags. Those the Indonesians thought were more educated or who were suspected of belonging to FRETILIN or other opposition parties were immediately killed. They took women aside and flew them off to Dili in helicopters for use [as sex slaves] by the Indonesian soldiers. They killed children and babies. But in those days, their main strategy and main weapon was starvation.

Chomsky: By 1978, it was approaching really genocidal levels. The Church and other sources estimated about 200,000 people killed. The United States backed it all the way; the U.S. provided 90% of the arms. Right after the invasion, arms shipments were stepped up. When the Indonesians actually began to run out of arms in 1978, the Carter Administration moved in and increased arms sales. And other western countries did the same - Canada, England, Holland - everybody who could make a buck [monetary profit] was in there making sure they could kill more Timorese.

There is no Western concern for issues of aggression, atrocities, human rights abuses, and so on if there's a profit to be made from them. Nothing could show it more clearly than this case. It wasn't that nobody had ever heard of East Timor. It is crucial to remember that there was plenty of coverage in The New York Times and elsewhere before the invasion. The reason was that there was concern at the time over the breakup of the Portugese [colonial] empire and what that would mean. There was a fear that it would lead to independence, or Russian influence, or whatever. After the Indonesians invaded, the coverage dropped. There was some [coverage], but it was strictly from the point of view of the U.S. State Department and Indonesian generals, never a Timorese refugee. As the atrocities reached their maximum peak in 1978, when it really was becoming genocidal, coverage literally dropped to zero in the United States and Canada, the two countries I've looked at closely.

All this was going on at exactly the same time as the great protest of outrage over Cambodia. The level of atrocities was comparable. In relative terms, it was probably considerably higher in Timor. It turns out that right in Cambodia in the preceding years, 1970 through 1975, there was also a comparable atrocity for which we [the United States military] were responsible. The major U.S. attack against Cambodia started with the bombings of the early-1970s. They reached a peak in 1973 and they continued up until 1975. They were directed against inner Cambodia. Very little is known about them because the media wanted it to be secret. They knew it was going on, they just didn't want to know what was happening. The CIA estimates about 600,000 killed during that five year period, which is mostly due to either U.S. bombing or the U.S.-sponsored war. So that's pretty significant killing. Also the conditions in which it left Cambodia were such that high U.S. officials predicted that about a million people would die in the aftermath, just from hunger and disease because of the wreckage of the country.

There is good evidence from U.S. government sources and scholarly sources that the intense U.S. bombardment was a significant force, maybe a critical factor, in building up peasant support for the Khmer Rouge. Before the bombings, the Khmer Rouge were a marginal element. Well, that's just the wrong story [for the mainstream media to follow]. After 1975, atrocities continues, and that became the right story because now they're being carried out by the "bad guys" [a government not supported by the U.S.]. Well, it was bad enough. In fact, the current estimates vary.

The CIA claim 50,000 to 100,000 people killed [by the Khmer Rouge] and maybe another million or so who died one way or another [starvation, disease]. Michael Vickery is the one person who has given a close, detailed analysis, and his figure is 750,000 "deaths" above the normal. Others, such as Ben Kiernan, suggest higher figures but so far without a detailed analysis. Anyway, it was terrible. No doubt about it. Although the real atrocities were bad enough, they weren't quite good enough for the purposes needed. Within a few weeks of the Khmer Rouge takeover, The New York Times was already accusing them of "genocide." At that point maybe a few thousand people had been killed. From then on, it was a drumbeat, a chorus of "genocide."

The big bestseller on Cambodia, on Pol Pot, is called "Murder of a Gentle Land." Up until April 17, 1975, it was a "gentle land" of peaceful, smiling people, and after that date some horrible holocaust took place. Very quickly, a figure of two million killed was hit upon. In fact, what was claimed was that the Khmer Rouge boast of having murdered two million people. The facts are very dramatic. In the case of atrocities committed by the official enemy [of the U.S.], an extraordinary show of outrage, exaggeration, no evidence required, faked photographs are fine, anything goes. Also, a vast amount of lying. I mean an amount of lying that would have made Stalin cringe. It was fraudulent. And we know that it was fraudulent by looking at the response to

comparable atrocities for which the United States was responsible. Early-70s Cambodia and East Timor are two very closely-paired examples. Well, the media response was quite dramatic: The New York Times index for Timor (1975-1979) was 70 column inches; The New York Times index for Cambodia (1975-1979) was 1,175 column inches.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): Back in 1980, I taught a course at Tufts University. Well, Chomsky came around to this class, and he made a very powerful case that the press underplayed the fact that the Indonesian government annexed this former Portugese colony [of East Timor] in 1975, and that if you compare it for example with Cambodia, where there was acreage of things, that this was a "communist" atrocity whereas the other was not a communist atrocity. Well, I got quite interested in this and I went to talk to the then Deputy Foreign Editor of The New York Times , and I said, "You know, we've had very poor coverage on this" and he said, "You're absolutely right. There are a dozen atrocities around the world that we don't cover. This is one, for various reasons." So, I took it up.

Arnold Kohen (journalist): I was working as a reporter and writer for a small, alternative radio program in upstate New York, and we received audio tapes of interviews with Timorese leaders and we were quite surprised that given the level of American involvement that there was not more coverage, indeed practically any coverage of the large-scale Indonesian killing in the mainstream American media. We formed a small group of people to try to monitor the situation and see what we could do over time to alert public opinion to what was actually happening in East Timor.

Chomsky: There were literally about half a dozen people who simply dedicated themselves with great commitment to getting this story to break through. They reached a couple of people in Congress. They got to me, for example, I was able to testify at the U.N. and write some things. They kept at it, kept at it, kept at it. Whatever is known about the subject, mainly comes from their work. There's not much else.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): I wrote first an editorial called "An Unjust War in East Timor." It had a map and it said exactly what had happened. We then ran a dozen other editorials on it. They were read, they were entered into the Congressional Record, and then several Congressmen took up the cause, and then something happened was done in Congress because of this.

Arnold Kohen (journalist): The fact that the editorial page in The New York Times on Christmas Eve published that editorial put our work on a very different level, and it gave a great deal of legitimacy to something that we were trying to advance for a long time, and that was the idea and the reality that a major tragedy was unfolding in East Timor.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): If one takes literally the various theories that Professor Chomsky puts out, one would feel that there is a tacit conspiracy between the establishment press and the government in Washington to focus on certain things and ignore certain things, so that if we broke the rules, we would instantly get a sharp reaction from the overlords in Washington. They would say, "Hey, what are you doing speaking up on East Timor? We're trying to keep that quiet." We didn't hear a thing. What we did hear, and this was quite interesting, is that there's a guy named Arnold Kohen, and that he became a one-person lobby.

Arnold Kohen (journalist): I appreciate the nice things Karl Meyer said about me in his interview, but I object to the notion that a one-man lobby was formed or anything like that. I think that if there weren't a large network composed of the American Catholic Bishops Conference, composed of other church groups, composed of human rights groups, composed of simply concerned citizens, and others, and a network of concern within the news media, I think it would have been impossible to do anything at all at any time. And it certainly would have been impossible to sustain things for as long as they have been sustained.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): Professor Chomsky and a lot of people who engage in this type of press analysis have one thing in common. Most of them have never worked for a newspaper. Many of them know very little about how newspaper work. When Chomsky came around, he had with him a file of all the coverage The New York Times, the Washington Post , and other papers had of East Timor. And he would go to the meticulous degree that if, for example, the London Times had a piece on East Timor, and then it appeared in The New York Times , that if a paragraph was cut out, he'd compare, and he'd say, "Look, this key paragraph right near the end which is really what tells the whole story, was left out of The New York Times version of the London Times article."

Chomsky: There was a story in the London Times which was pretty accurate; The New York Times revised it radically. They didn't "just leave a paragraph out"; they revised it and gave it a totally different cast. It was then picked up by Newsweek , giving it The New York Times cast. It ended up being a whitewash, whereas the original was an atrocity story.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): So I said to Chomsky at the time, "Maybe you're misinterpreting ignorance, haste, deadline pressure, etc. for some kind of determined effort to suppress an element of the story." He said, "Well, if it happened once, or twice, or three times, I might agree with you. But if it happens a dozen times Mr. Meyer, I think that there's something else at work." I said, Professor Chomsky, having been in this business, it happens a dozen times. These are very imperfect institutions.

Chomsky: It's not a matter of it happening one time, five times, a hundred times, it happens all the time. When they did give coverage, it was a whitewash of the United States. Now, that's not an error. That's systematic, consistent behavior. In this case, without even any exception.

Karl E. Meyer (Editorial writer, The New York Times): This is a much more subtle process than you get in the kind of sledgehammer rhetoric of the people that make an A to B equation between what the government does, what people think, and what newspapers say. Sometimes what The New York Times does can make an enormous difference. At other times, it has no influence whatsoever.

Elaine Briere (East Timor Alert Network): So one of the greatest tragedies of our age is still happening in East Timor. The Indonesians have killed up to a third of the population. They're in concentration camps. They conduct large-scale military campaigns against the people who are resisting; campaigns with names like "Operation Eradicate" or "Operation Clean Sweep." Timorese women are subjected to a forced birth control program.

In addition, they're bringing in a constant stream of Indonesian settlers to take over the land. Whenever people are brave enough to take to the streets in demonstrations or show the least sign of resistance, they just massacre them. If we [the international community] allow the Indonesians to stay in East Timor, they will simply digest East Timor and turn it into a "cash crop."

Chomsky: This is way beyond demonstrating the subservience of the media to power. They [the media] have real complicity in genocide in this case. The reason that the atrocities can go on is because nobody knows about them. If anyone knew about them, there would be protests and pressure to stop them. So therefore by suppressing the facts, the media are making a major contribution to probably the worst act of genocide since the Holocaust.

David Frum (journalist on "Ideas" CBC radio, Canada): You say that what the media do is to ignore certain kinds of atrocities that are committed by us and our friends, and to play up enormously atrocities that are committed by them and our enemies. And you posit that there is a test of integrity and moral honesty which is to have a kind of equality of treatment of corpses in that every dead person should in principle be equal with every other dead person.

Chomsky: That's not what I say at all. In fact, what I say is the opposite. What I say is that we should be responsible for our own actions primarily.

David Frum (journalist on "Ideas" CBC radio, Canada): Because your method is not only to ignore the corpses by "them" but also to ignore the corpses created by neither side, but which are irrelevant to your ideological agenda.

Chomsky: That's totally untrue.

David Frum (journalist on "Ideas" CBC radio, Canada): Well, let me give you an example. One of your own causes that you take very seriously is the cause of the Palestinians. And a Palestinian corpse weighs very heavily on your conscience. And yet, a Kurdish corpse does not.

Chomsky: That's not true at all. I've been involved in Kurdish support groups for years. Just ask the people who are involved in Kurdish support groups. I mean, they come to me, I sign their petitions, and so on and so forth. If you look at the things we've written, [you will see this]. I mean, I'm not Amnesty International. I can't do everything. I'm a single individual person, but if you take a look at the book that Edward Herman and I wrote on this topic [The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume 1 and Volume 2], in it we discuss three kinds of atrocities. What we call "benign bloodbaths" (which nobody cares about), "constructive bloodbaths" (which are the ones we [the U.S. government and its allies] like), and "nefarious bloodbaths" (which are the ones that the bad guys [enemies of the U.S.] do.

The principle that I feel we ought to follow is not the one that you stated. You know, it's a very simple ethical point: You're responsible for the predictable consequences of your actions. You're not responsible for the predictable consequences of somebody else's actions. The most important thing for me and for you is to think about the consequences of your actions. What can you effect? These are the things to keep in mind. These are not just academic exercises. We're not analyzing the media on Mars or in the 18th century or something like that. We're dealing with real human beings who are suffering and dying and being tortured and starving because of policies that we are involved in. We, as citizens of democratic societies, are directly involved in and are responsible for. And what the media are doing is insuring that we do not act on our responsibilities, and that the interests of power are served, not the needs of the suffering people, and not even the needs of American people who would be horrified if they realized the blood that is dripping from their hands because of the way they are allowing themselves to be deluded and manipulated by this system.

What about the Third World? Well, despite everything, and it's pretty ugly and awful, these struggles are not over. The struggle for freedom and independence never is completely over. Their courage, in fact, is really remarkable and amazing. I've personally had the privilege, and it is a privilege, of witnessing it a few times in villages in Southeast Asia and Central America, and recently in the occupied West Bank, and it is astonishing to see. It's always amazing, at least to me it's amazing, I

can't understand it, it's also very moving, and very inspiring, in fact, it's kind of awe-inspiring. Now, they rely very crucially on a very slim margin for survival that's provided by dissidence and turbulence within the imperial societies. How large that margin is, is for us to determine.