Chapter 2
America as Ambivalent Superpower in Recent Mexican, Australian, and Chinese Media: Re-Examining The Revenant, Desierto, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, Fury Road, and Flowers of War

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ABSTRACT
America as a superpower is alleged to be able to set the news agenda through framing devices that even foreign media often mimics. A noteworthy theory explaining how this agenda is set is given by E.S. Hermann and Noam Chomsky in their propaganda model (PM). The PM model would assume educated elites in the US and in other comparable states (like China) will simply reiterate the framing narrative given by a state. Five films from non-American directors are selected and several issues the state has a consensus on are used (immigration, Iraq) to test the PM. In only three cases was the PM confirmed and even in those not for the reasons given by Hermann and Chomsky. In two cases the PM was moderately disconfirmed. While the PM is a valuable model, it needs refinement by taking more seriously how ideas by social groups in society such as feminism and gender equality complicate the agenda of the state. The conclusion makes recommendations how the PM can be better built to examine how non-Americans view America through film and the mass media.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9312-6.ch002
INTRODUCTION

America is widely considered the most powerful state in the world. Discussions have revolved around whether such power is abnormal in world politics or normal. However, even those considering US hegemony problematic assume that US power is essentially good (Chomsky 1992, p. 1).

Almost no major dissenting voices are allowed that question the foundations of US policy. During planning stages of the Iraq War from 2002 to early 2003, some dissent was allowed but only within the tactical abilities of the US military. Questions revolved around whether there was sufficient power to invade Iraq or whether alliances might be damaged as a result of the invasion. But few questions were raised whether interventionism was itself justified.

This essay will look at how non-American filmmakers perceive US hegemony. It will make use of the propaganda model Noam Chomsky and E.S. Hermann outlined and argue the model is too deterministic and does not allow for a range of (admittedly) weak challenges to the state agenda. In essence, the propaganda model would predict virtually all producers of media commit self-censorship.

However, looking at the films selected as a sample, self-censorship also occurs among makers of foreign, non-US media. While some criticism of US policies was slightly stronger as the model would predict, the model is not able to answer why there is any criticism whatsoever. Recently, media companies, especially film companies, have become more and more centralized. The propaganda model would predict a decline in any dissent among the elite media. But some dissent – albeit tiny – does exist.

Therefore ideological norms such as feminism and human-rights have had some impact. The PM model is thus largely correct that the news media simply repeats the elite consensus that the government gives out. But this consensus is not monolithic and some divergence from the consensus does occur.

Various terms being used will be defined more clearly to facilitate discussion of the propaganda model. Key terms like hegemony, power, elite consensus, framing, and ideology will be defined before detailing the PM model by Chomsky and Hermann. According to Samuel Huntington, “the United States was the hegemonic power in a system of world order” (Chomsky 1992, p. 1). The late military analyst William Odom and Robert Dujarric go so far as to label the US an empire and when all US bases and alliances and key allies are combined, US power accounts for “70 percent of the world gross product” (2008). The US has over 730 military bases throughout the world (Johnson, 2006, p. 278).
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