

# Understanding Media Propaganda in the 21st Century



# Understanding Media Propaganda in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

*Manufacturing Consent  
Revisited and Revised*

By  
Simon Foley

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“Simon Foley’s *Understanding Media Propaganda in the 21st Century: Manufacturing Consent Revisited and Revised* offers an excellent and much-needed critical examination and analysis of how the mainstream media function as a vehicle for official propaganda in our increasingly corporation-dominated post-Cold War world. Covering Russia-gate, the Trump-as-Literal-Hitler narrative, the Skripal affair, the Syrian gas attacks, the official COVID narrative, among other subjects, it is a welcome reappraisal of Herman and Chomsky’s Manufacturing Consent and an essential tool for anyone interested in understanding the production of official ideology and propaganda today.”

—C.J. Hopkins

Award-winning playwright, novelist, and political satirist

“This timely book sets out and then tests Chomsky’s propaganda model through careful analysis of the reporting of seven complex events of international relevance by two left/liberal newspapers: The Guardian and The Irish Times. Foley does not tell you what to think about the events themselves and offers no right/wrong verdicts. Instead, he systematically demonstrates how we can subtly be denied the tools to see beneath the presentational surface, to entertain alternative ways of thinking, and so have more open debates. He exposes and explains how the reporting consistently falls short of ostensive aims to speak truth to power. The mechanisms employed include selection, omission, conflation, and contradiction, as well as the persistent use of interpretation masquerading as fact. Foley shows the ongoing value of the propaganda model, some revisions, and a clear-eyed application.”

—Professor Alison Edgley

Author, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*

“Simon Foley’s *Understanding Media Propaganda in the 21st Century* is a worthy successor to Herman and Chomsky’s Manufacturing Consent. The book meticulously traces the origins and arcs of recent instances of “fake news” such as Russia-gate, the gas attacks allegedly perpetrated by the Syrian government and the alleged poisoning of the Skripals in order to demonstrate how the new media propaganda system works, and the role it plays in perpetuating political and economic power relationships. The result is an illuminating and important study of the contemporary media landscape.”

—Dr George Szamuely

Journalist; author of *Bombs for Peace: NATO’s Humanitarian War on Yugoslavia*

“Simon Foley professionally and systematically critically tackles the issue and effect of mass organised persuasive communications by elite political establishment politics on global publics. This is a must-read book for those in need of a critical evaluation and analysis of the contemporary level of cognitive deception and manipulation presently used in Western democracies. The book is every bit as frightening as it is illustrative in its findings. The engineering of public consent is laid bare for the reader.”

—Professor Greg Simons

Author, *The What, How, and Why of Fake News*

“Great to see this wonderful new book by Simon Foley examining the media as vehicle of elite propaganda question. In line with Herman and Chomsky’s methodology the case studies chosen by the author are suitably taboo-breaking. Similarly, the analysis Foley engages in, via his augmented application of the Propaganda Model, throws up an array of fascinating and illuminating insights into the propaganda role played by the contemporary mainstream media.”

—Dr Matthew Alford

Author, *Union Jackboot: What Your Media and Professors Don't Tell You about British Foreign Policy*

“Challenging liberal assumptions, especially in the media, is always a valuable exercise. Here Simon Foley turns the Herman/Chomsky propaganda thesis round from its more usual targets and deconstructs the Irish Times and the Guardian’s coverage of recent foreign policy controversies. Some of the conclusions about, for example, Syria will ruffle feathers. This book provides a counterpoint to challenge lazy thinking about who is right and who is wrong on coverage of some of the most controversial foreign policy issues of the last decade. Even if I do not agree with many of Simon Foley’s conclusions it had made me reassess the rigour of my own thinking. A most interesting use of the Herman and Chomsky model.”

—Dr Paul Lashmar

Head of the Department of Journalism, University of London; investigative journalist; author of *Spies, Spin, and the Fourth Estate*

“Simon Foley’s *Understanding Media Propaganda in the 21st Century: Manufacturing Consent Revisited and Revised* provides a tour-de-force of the numerous propaganda narratives of the last five years, ranging from Russia-gate to Syria and COVID-19. If you’ve ever wanted to see corporate press narratives debunked and thoroughly analyzed as to the how and the why of their operation and intent, look no further. Foley provides a bird’s eye view of multiple hot-button issues and dissects the operation and motive behind multiple propaganda campaigns of recent memory: that he does so effectively, without engaging in partisanship, is a testimony to the quality of his analysis.”

—Elizabeth Vos

Investigative journalist; co-host of Consortium News Live

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As with most nominally individual achievements, the writing of a book does not take place in a social vacuum. The book you are now reading is no exception to this particular sociological cliché.

To this end I would like to thank Carolyn Foley for providing a much-needed place of refuge from the ongoing Kafkaesque nightmare my children and I became ensnared in during 2020. Regarding the latter, although powerless to alleviate their suffering, this book is a small token of my infinite and undying love for my daughter Sofia and my two sons, Cillian and Oisín.

Apropos how to respond to such ‘drowning not waving’ moments in a humane fashion, this book is also dedicated to Professor Katy Hayward of Queens University Belfast. As my PhD supervisor Katy taught me how to think better. As my sexual mentor Katy taught me how to love better. It’s only because of Katy’s dedicated and dogged tutelage, her unerring flexibility, and her absolute refusal to take no for an answer that I find myself in the lucky position I currently occupy. Namely, the father of the aforementioned three beautiful children and author of this book. Thank you, Katy.



# INTRODUCTION

Why another academic book on the issue of propaganda and fake news? Hopefully, the prospective reader will not be asking themselves this question. However, if they are, my response takes multiple forms. Firstly, I do not think one can have enough books on this vital, and still, from certain perspectives, underexplored subject matter. Secondly, unlike most of the currently available work on this subject, this book examines the liberal media as vehicle of ideology question by investigating its coverage of mainly foreign policy issues involving a so-called official enemy.

Another factor that distinguishes this book from similarly titled competition, at least since the election of Trump, is that its subject matter is neither the low hanging fruit of the establishment right-wing media nor its online counterparts. Rather, staying true to the Herman/Chomsky remit, its central focus is on whether some of the pre-eminent agenda-setting liberal media organizations are deserving of their current trusted fourth estate status.

## **What is propaganda?**

There are numerous definitions of this much contested term. However, for the purposes of this book – due to its accessibility and conciseness – the definition underpinning its analysis is that provided by Ryan and Switzer. They state: “propagandists typically serve someone’s narrow agenda, make claims that are not evidence-based, spread lies and deception, supply incomplete or misleading information, serve authority figures, and deny or hide their own interests and prejudices. Journalists who are committed to an objective approach do none of these things” (2009, 49). This will be supplemented by Jowett and O’ Donnell’s recapitulation of what has become a truism within the critical analysis of media output. This is the contention that:

Typically in Western media, propaganda does not announce itself as such but, as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky among many others have argued, achieves the purposes of propagandists through the ways in which issues are framed; emphasis and omission; privileging of certain sources, perspectives, information over possible alternatives; and in the uses of

language (verbal and visual) that assist these effects (Jowett and O' Donnell, 2015, 12).

## **Aims and objectives**

It is because knowledge and responsibly active citizenship are mutually constitutive that truth is such a prized commodity in today's political world. Unfortunately for said citizen, such knowledge cannot be acquired via a Cartesian-like journey into one's inner psyche. Rather, the information required to make an informed decision and/or hold an informed opinion about a political matter comes to us in a mediated fashion courtesy of the media. This is particularly the case for the subject matter of this book. In other words, and as noted by Professor Stephen Walt:

If the economy is in free fall and millions of people are losing their jobs, if roads and bridges are crumbling, or if government agencies bungle a disaster relief effort, ordinary citizens can see this for themselves. But few Americans have independent information about Al Qaeda's inner workings, the details of U.S. trade agreements, the history of Iran's nuclear research program, the scope and impact of U.S. drone operations, or whether Russia did in fact hack the Democratic National Committee's computers in 2016. For these and countless other international topics, citizens have to rely on what the government officials or well-connected experts tell them, and the media that reports on these issues depends on these same sources for information as well. As a result, people inside the foreign policy community have considerable latitude to shape what the public thinks about key issues (Walt, 2018, 139).

However, according to the mainstream media (hereafter known as the MSM), all is not lost, as even in this age of so-called "fake news" there still exist reliable sources of accurate information that can answer the basic journalistic questions regarding the "who", "what", "where", "when" and "why" of a given event. Conversely, if such definitive judgements cannot be proffered – due to insurmountable pragmatic and/or epistemological hurdles – then citizens can rest assured that the journalistic equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath i.e. "do not claim knowledge of something you cannot possibly know" will not only be adhered to but such qualifications will also be made explicit to the audience in question. One of the primary aims and objectives of this book is to establish whether this is indeed the case.

The first chapter will provide an overview of the critical approach to understanding why MSM output takes the form it does. In addition, it will

demonstrate how and why such output is overtly propagandistic in its coverage of so-called official enemies of the Western military-industrial complex. The second chapter explains the methodological approach utilized by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*. Using the compare and contrast approach I will then explain the methods I am using to analyze the primary data this book has collected. Finally, I will explicate the rationale behind my choice of media institutions and case studies.

Chapter 3 is where we begin our analysis of the case studies that make up the bulk of this book. The first case study under the microscope is the Russia-gate affair. The foundational claim underpinning Russia-gate is that Trump conspired with Putin to become US President. This claim was first advanced by anonymous officials in the US intelligence services – particularly, the FBI and CIA. This chapter is devoted to examining how *The Irish Times* and *The Guardian* covered (via its “fact-based reporting” and editorials written) key events of the Russia-gate narrative. In addition, this chapter will also focus on whether and how these media institutions treated the “Trump is a victim of a Deep State coup” counter narrative.

Chapter 4 examines what has become the ultimate third rail journalistic issue. Namely, did the Syrian government use chemical weapons against its own people or not. Since the election of Trump there have been two allegations that the Syrian government used chemical weapons against its own citizens. During his term as President the dominant narrative propagated by the MSM was that Trump was a lying fascist. This may well have been the case. However, in this instance both media institutions under investigation took what this lying fascist said regarding the Syrian government’s culpability at face-value. This chapter, which focuses on the *Irish Times*’s editorial response to the two alleged attacks, details how they justified such behavior.

As with so many of the case studies this book deals with their analysis takes place in the wake of the weapons of mass destruction (hereafter known as WMD) debacle. After it was demonstrated that the claim that Iraq had WMD was Western propaganda much of the MSM (including *The Guardian*) issued a metaphorical *mea culpa*. Furthermore, *The Guardian* issued a retrospective promise that they – and by extension their readers – won’t get fooled again. Chapter 5 examines how *The Guardian* covered an issue which in many respects resembles the WMD claims. This is the British government’s assertion that the Russian state attempted to assassinate Sergei Skripal – a double agent for British intelligence – on British soil via the use of a highly toxic nerve agent. This chapter’s objective is to establish

whether *The Guardian* did in fact keep its promise to its readers to not take its government's claims about the actions of an "official enemy" at face value.

In chapter 6 the case study under examination is the allegation that Russia offered a bounty to the Taliban to kill members of the US military currently occupying Afghanistan. As with all the case studies this book is investigating, the publication of this story ushered in its wake yet another predictable "get Trump" media frenzy amongst the MSM. Even though the original story was wholly reliant on anonymous sources within the US intelligence services, the American MSM failed to ask the basic journalistic question regarding whether the story was in fact true. Although journalistically reprehensible, from a critical perspective, this is not surprising. As will be explained in more detail anon, when it comes to certain issues, the critical position argues that MSM journalism should be seen as synonymous with power-elite propaganda. This state of affairs is compounded by two key facts which apply to all the case studies this book examines. First, the power elite who control the MSM in the US despised Trump and didn't want him reelected in 2020. Second, the American MSM influences how American citizens vote in American elections. This is not the case for either *The Guardian* or *The Irish Times*. Neither of these papers had any influence over how American citizens voted in the 2020 American election. Consequently, one of the key questions this chapter will answer is whether either of these media institutions deviated in any way from their US counterparts in their coverage of this story.

In *Manufacturing Consent* Herman and Chomsky devoted much space to their distinction between "worthy and unworthy victims." Chapter 7 of this book extends this concept to encompass the idea of worthy and unworthy whistle-blowers. To this end, it compares the coverage given to the CIA whistle-blower at the heart of Ukraine-gate with the scientists who investigated the alleged Syrian gas attacks while working with the OPCW. According to Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model because the CIA official is propagating a dominant power elite narrative, the coverage should be extensive and fawning. Conversely, because the OPCW whistle-blowers are disputing a dominant power elite narrative, the coverage should either be non-existent or extremely negative in nature. The aim of this chapter is to establish whether in this instance the Propaganda Model's predictive powers were either verified or falsified.

The assertion made by hand-picked members of the US intelligence services – mostly from the FBI and CIA – that Russia hacked the DNC emails is the

foundational claim of the Russia-gate saga. A key epistemological question the fourth estate journalist must ask, particularly in relation to such serious charges, is the “how do you know what you claim to know” question. Chapter 8 explores whether either paper under investigation ever asked this basic question when reporting/opining on the claim that Russia did indeed hack said emails.

In clear violation of the intellectual copyright fallacy the American MSM managed to construct a narrative that only Trump-loving racist white supremacists take issue with the pro-lockdown response to the Covid-19 pandemic. To test the hypothesis that a pro-lockdown approach to Covid-19 has become a new “liberal” orthodoxy, chapter 9 examines how both *The Irish Times*, and *The Guardian* covered the anti-lockdown side of the debate on Covid.

Chapter 10 is titled “Why did *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times* cover the case studies the way they did, and can the Propaganda Model explain the nature of the output in question?” As this title indicates, this is where we test the Propaganda Model’s epistemological bona fides regarding the subject matter at hand. If on examination its explanatory reach is found wanting, this chapter will also proffer a number of theoretical suggestions regarding what revisions are needed to fill any theory/praxis gaps.

Chapter 11, as the conclusion chapter, is where we sum up the books empirical and theoretical findings. In addition, it will also offer the reader some suggestions to help them distinguish the informational wheat from the proverbial chaff.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE CRITICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING MEDIA OUTPUT

When embarking on a genealogy of the critical social scientist many scholars locate its origins within the Marxist framework or the neo-Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School. Whether this is true or not is essentially a moot point as what it means to be a critical social scientist in contemporary society and the role they perform – exemplified by the likes of Michael Parenti, Pierre Bourdieu, and Noam Chomsky – is no longer parasitic on a wholesale adherence to any given meta-narrative. Rather, as a natural ally of excluded groups and subjugated knowledge, the sensibility that unites the disparate theoretical affinities that characterize modern-day critical social science is a commitment to some broader hermeneutics of suspicion devoted to unmasking the lies and illusions the oppressors tell the oppressed (Swartz, 2013).

The legacy of Marx remains however in that the critical social scientist adheres to an “us and them” conflict theory typology in relation to how Western “democratic” societies are structured when it comes to the distribution and exercise of political and economic power. However, while the monopoly of force is with the few their favored means of controlling the many is not via the use or threat of overt violence. Rather, their concern is with the manipulation of hearts and minds. This need on the part of the ruling classes to induce a sense a false consciousness amongst the “masses” regarding the true nature of political reality stems from the fact that:

Those at the top understand that the corporate political culture is not a mystically self-sustaining system. They know they must work tirelessly to propagate the ruling orthodoxy, to use democratic appearances to cloak plutocratic policies (Parenti, 2007, 52).

It is this concern that brings us to the alleged fourth estate role of the media in holding the powerful accountable primarily through a willingness to combat their propaganda. A succinct but accurate definition of this fourth estate mandate in action is offered by award winning journalist Robert Fisk



when he states that the role of the journalist is “to challenge authority – all authority – especially so when governments and politicians take us to war, when they have decided that they will kill, and others will die” (Fisk, 2005, 2). As should be evident, the propositional content of Fisk’s definition of the fourth estate journalist is encapsulated within the standard conception of what journalists do. Namely, the primary role of the journalist is to “speak truth to power.” As a means to this end, two key methods are employed. First, the journalist, without fear or favor, attempts to establish the “who”, “what”, “where”, “when” and “why” of a given political event. This dedication to empirical research is in turn complemented by a particular attitudinal approach. We can call this the fourth estate journalistic mindset. This entails a commitment on the part of the journalist to maintain a critical distance from the events they are reporting on and dispassionately evaluate the evidence they are working with. In other words, what a reporter personally feels about X should not influence what they write about X. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the constitutive question on the tip of every genuine fourth estate journalists’ tongue is the “what’s the evidentiary basis for that claim” question.

As implied above, the reason that citizens need the journalist to play this role is predicated on the verified belief that those in power have a predisposition to lie about what they are doing and why they are doing it. In effect, because the fourth estate subject position is parasitic on the “why is this lying bastard lying to me” principle, the genuine fourth estate mindset entails an extreme skepticism on the part of the journalist when tasked with examining power elite claims (Leigh, 2005).

While there is a convergence between the critical tradition and the MSM regarding the need for a fourth estate they differ in answering the question as to whether the latter performs this function. Consequently, while the conventional wisdom propagated by the MSM is that it does indeed represent a fourth estate whose *raison d’être* is to speak truth to power, from a critical media studies perspective this comforting narrative is disputed. For example, according to Professor Boyd-Barrett:

Democratic theory presupposes a public communications infrastructure that facilitates the free and open exchange of ideas. No such infrastructure exists. Mainstream media are owned and controlled by a small number of large, multi-media and multi-industrial conglomerates that lie at the very heart of U.S. oligopoly capitalism and much of whose advertising revenue and content is furnished from other conglomerates (Barrett, 2019).

In a similar vein, according to Professor McChesney:

Professional journalism is arguably at its worst when the U.S. upper class—the wealthiest 1 or 2 percent of the population, the owners of most of the productive wealth, as well as the top corporate executives and government officials—is in agreement on an issue. In such cases (for example, the innate right of the United States to invade another nation or the equation of private property and the pursuit of profit with democracy), media will tend to accept the elite position as revealed truth and never subject the notion to questioning. The classic example of this phenomenon today is the virtual blackout of media coverage of the CIA and of the military budget (McChesney 2016, 150).

Given the role played by the CIA in most of the case studies this book examines, the above quote by Professor McChesney regarding “the virtual blackout of media coverage of the CIA” should be internalized forthwith as it illustrates a foundational critical principle regarding the oligarchical nature of most Western “democracies” and the role played by the MSM in maintaining such configurations of power. For example, in response to a “whether the public can handle the truth” type of question regarding the documented behavior of this singularly unaccountable nexus of power, famed US liberal journalist/author David Talbot states the following:

My last book, *The Devil's Chessboard*, wasn't even reviewed by *The Washington Post* or *New York Times*. They blackballed it. In fact, the editor at *The Washington Post* told my publicist that they wouldn't touch my book with a 10-foot pole. This is *The Devil's Chessboard*, which was about Allen Dulles, the former head of the CIA and the rise of America's secret government and their involvement in these terrible crimes. I've worked in newsrooms. I see the pack mentality that develops editorially. People are afraid to stick their neck out in something controversial. The press can be very timid. Also, unfortunately, I think the mainstream press, the establishment press, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the major TV networks are very tied to the national security state. Just watch CNN every night and MSNBC, see how many of their guests are former CIA guys, FBI, high level national security think tanks. I mean half their guests are from the national security state. How can they report independently on this? (Talbot, 2019).

As implied, the critical approach takes issue with the MSM's self-image as the key mechanism in the production of an informed citizenry. Instead, it argues that one of their primary objectives is to construct narratives that reproduce pre-existing power relations. That is, by attempting to naturalize dominant political discourses as objective, rational, common-sense explanations they – in their role as ideological gatekeepers – manufacture popular consent for power-elite policies which may otherwise not gain widespread popular support. In effect, and this is another key point for the

reader to imbibe, a constitutive precept of the critical paradigm is the view that “the ruling class in any state views the people it rules as lesser beings to be manipulated, coerced, and exploited. The rulers institute all manner of systems – which function as protection rackets – to assure their class prerogatives” (Valentine, 2016).

This appearance/reality distinction regarding how a given Western power elite views the majority of its domestic population as an enemy which needs to be controlled is a fundamental principle underpinning the critical approach. The point is that when it comes to certain fundamental policy issues – especially those which impinge on foreign policy – Western democracies can be likened to the proverbial exclusive club which has denied membership to the majority of the population. Hence, the need to carefully police the parameters of permissible debate in order to preempt the possible occurrence of any dangerous seditious-like epiphanies on the part of the proles. To see what constitutes a dangerous seditious-like epiphany read the following quote by the iconic American satirist George Carlin:

Forget the politicians. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything. They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought and paid for the senate, the congress, the state houses, the city halls, they got the judges in their back pockets and they own all the big media companies, so they control just about all of the news and information you get to hear. They got you by the balls. They spend billions of dollars every year lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want. They want more for themselves and less for everybody else. But I'll tell you what they don't want: They don't want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don't want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They're not interested in that. That doesn't help them. That's against their interests. That's right. They don't want people who are smart enough to sit around a kitchen table to figure out how badly they're getting fucked by a system that threw them overboard 30 fucking years ago. They don't want that.

It is within this critical milieu that many critical theorists believe the foundational work on critical media analysis was born. This of course refers to Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, first published in 1988. A primary objective of this book was to provide a coherent analytical framework as a means to understanding why Western media output, particularly when it comes to its coverage of “official enemies” – both internal and external – takes the misleading form it does. To this end the authors formulated what they called the “Propaganda Model” of the MSM.

The Propaganda Model posits five filters that news has to pass through before we get to read, hear, or see it. These filters, by shaping the incentives, resources, and worldviews of the people who report the news, construct an ideological consensus between rank-and-file journalists and political and economic elites that is antithetical to the fourth estate remit. It is important at this stage to note that Herman and Chomsky are not stating that the Western power elite constitute the proverbial homogenous blob who agree on everything. Rather, they are explicitly stating that you will indeed find vigorous debate on an array of power elite issues in the MSM. The propagandistic issue concerns the narrow ideological parameters determining the acceptable limits of such debate. They state:

Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate. But views that challenge fundamental premises will be excluded from the mass media even when elite controversy over tactics rages fiercely (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, 35).

For the purposes of this book one example of a fundamental premise which we can expect to be excluded by the MSM in its coverage of the relevant case studies under examination is the fact that the CIA has a documented record of trying to undermine US Presidents who disagree with its view of how foreign policy should be conducted.

According to Herman and Chomsky the following are the five filters the MSM's dissemination of political information must pass through before reaching our eyes and ears:

- (1) The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms
- (2) The reliance on advertising as a primary source of income
- (3) The sourcing problem. This is the contention that the media is over reliant on access to information provided by governments, business and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power.
- (4) The use of "flak" as a means of disciplining the media. Flak is defined as "negative responses to a media statement or program." In operational terms flak typically involves a given journalist/editor/ or owner of a media institution being subjected to various kinds of pressures – smear campaigns/petitions/threatened legislation/advertising boycotts – to tow the proverbial party line.

- (5) The existence of a dominant “us versus the other” divide and conquer official enemy-type ideology (previously subsumed under the “anti-communism” label) which functions as a control mechanism.

## CHAPTER 2

# METHODOLOGY

While the “critical analysis” term has various connotations, my usage of the term is informed by Chomsky’s contention that it is the responsibility of critical-minded academics “to speak the truth and to expose lies” (Chomsky, 2007, 215). That being said, given the academics penchant for aligning themselves with academically respectable labels, the methodology underpinning the analysis of the data this book has collected can be subsumed under the critical discourse analysis umbrella term. The use of this “umbrella term” label is carefully chosen as it helps us address the oft asked “what is critical discourse analysis” question.

Critical discourse analysis is an umbrella term as there is no consensus amongst those who identify as critical discourse analysts regarding what constitutes the “appropriate method” one needs to use in order to appropriate this particular nomenclature. Rather, the methods used by critical discourse analysts will vary depending on the subject matter and the objective of the analysis. In other words, critical discourse analysis (hereafter known as CDA) does not refer to a method but is rather conceived of as a common perspective. In the words of one of its founders, Ruth Wodak:

CDA cannot be regarded as a discrete academic discipline in any traditional sense, with a fixed set of theories, categories, assumptions, or research methods. Instead, CDA can be seen as a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research program, subsuming a variety of approaches, each drawing on different epistemological assumptions, with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda. What unites them is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice and political-economic, social, or cultural change in our globalized and globalizing world and societies. The roots of CDA lie in rhetoric, text linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, sociopsychology, cognitive science, literary studies and sociolinguistics, as well as in applied linguistics and pragmatics (Wodak, 2015, 46).

So, what are the necessary and sufficient that have to be met in order to call yourself a CDA analyst. To answer that question, it is helpful to unpack what the C, D and A in CDA denote. Regarding the “critical” term,

according to Fairclough “critical approaches differ from non-critical approaches in not just describing discursive practices, but also showing how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies (Fairclough, 1992, 12). Thus, a CDA analysis attempts to extrapolate from the text to the ideological, from the abstract to the material. This analytical strategy is based on the precept that the sentence can only tell us so much.

To be explicit, when going beyond the sentence to make a normative claim or a subjective interpretation you are drawing an inference based on what the sentence does or does not say. However, this is not meant to imply an anything goes approach to interpretation. Rather, if the inference is based on the explanatory concept underpinning your investigations – in this instance our definitions of propaganda – then both logically valid and theoretically valid inferences can be drawn. Thus, the critical in critical discourse analysis entails that the analyst is engaged in a form of social/political critique of the status quo. For the subject matter of this book, this will entail an attempt on my part to locate a particular statement made in a particular media text in its wider social and political context.

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, discourse refers to “communication in speech and writing” and “a speech or piece of writing about a particular, usually serious, subject.” CDA retains this component of the term but also expands it considerably. For instance, as explained by Wodak:

CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of ‘social practice’. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectic relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationship between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people (Wodak, 2015, 260).

According to the *Merriam Webster dictionary* the term “analysis” entails embarking on “a detailed examination of anything complex in order to understand its nature or to determine its essential features.” For the purposes

of this book, the primary objects of analysis are media texts generated by two very influential mainstream “liberal” newspapers. These media texts take the form of news reports – which are meant to be unbiased and solely fact based – and editorials. Both these genres of news output are meant to adhere to certain journalistic principles. The primary objective of my analysis is to ascertain whether they do in fact adhere to the principles in question.

In addition, if on analysis it is determined that some of these principles are violated, then it is my role as critical analyst to posit a sociopolitical explanation as to why this is the case. As we have seen, the attempt to extrapolate from the text to the ideological, from the abstract to the material is an integral component of the CDA approach. How do I do this? The method I employ is the same method most academics employ when tasked with the process of analyzing a given subject, grading a student’s essay, determining whether a PhD should be awarded, determining whether X rather than Y should be hired as a lecturer and so on. Despite the attempt by some intellectually insecure academics to make you believe otherwise, this process is neither mysterious in nature nor does it take a singular intelligence to embark on it. For example, Chomsky, who does possess a singular intelligence – evident in his work in linguistics – has stated that everything he has written on social and political issues could have been written by somebody else. He goes on to explain that unlike his work in linguistics:

Critical analysis in the ideological arena seems to me to be a fairly straightforward matter as compared to an approach that requires a degree of conceptual abstraction. For the analysis of ideology, which occupies me very much, a bit of open-mindedness, normal intelligence, and healthy skepticism will generally suffice (Chomsky, 2007, 10).

He then makes a point which has since become central to the consciousness raising movement within academia more generally. Namely:

One must be careful not to give the impression, which in any event is false, that only intellectuals equipped with special training are capable of such analytic work. In fact, that is just what the intelligentsia would often like us to think: they pretend to be engaged in an esoteric enterprise, inaccessible to simple people. But that’s nonsense. The social sciences generally, and above all the analysis of contemporary affairs, are quite accessible to anyone who wants to take an interest in these matters. The alleged complexity, depth, and obscurity of these questions is part of the illusion propagated by the system of ideological control, which aims to make the issues seem remote from the general population and to persuade them of their incapacity



to organize their own affairs or to understand the social world in which they live without the tutelage of intermediaries (Chomsky, 2007, 12).

A similar point is made by Parenti regarding this vexed – in some people’s minds at least – question of the “proper methods” one should employ in order to analyze media propaganda. In explicating what should be obvious, he invokes the power of logical deduction. To wit he states:

One component of logic is consistency. Without doing any empirical investigation of our own, we can look at the internal evidence to find that, like any liar, the press, and the officialdom it serves are filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. Seldom held accountable by the news media for what they say, policymakers can blithely produce information and opinions that inadvertently reveal the falsity of previous statements, without a word of explanation. We can point to the absence of supporting evidence and the failure to amplify. We can ask why assertions that appear again and again in the news are not measured against observable actualities. And why are certain important events and information summarily ignored? (Parenti, 2007, 51).

Chomsky, then goes on to explain what most adults – not just academics – already know. Hence his reference to common sense. Namely, to analyze something one needs first and foremost a criterion/metric/conceptual framework which tells you what to look for in order to find the answers to the questions which form the basis of your analysis. For the purposes of this book, which is concerned with identifying propagandistic properties encoded within the texts under scrutiny, the criterion/metric/conceptual framework which informs my analysis is provided by the previously referenced definitions of propaganda. To recap, according to Ryan and Switzer: Propagandists typically serve someone’s narrow agenda, make claims that are not evidence-based, spread lies and deception, supply incomplete or misleading information, serve authority figures, and deny or hide their own interests and prejudices. Journalists who are committed to an objective approach do none of these things (Ryan and Switzer, 2009, 49).

In addition, the previously mentioned “Journalistic Hippocratic Oath” heuristic device I have constructed for this book is another key concept informing the analytical decisions I make. The chief method I have employed in the gathering and analysis of the data collected for this book mirrors the chief method used by Herman and Chomsky to analyze newspaper texts in *Manufacturing Consent*. This involves me critically engaging with the source material – via the use of reason and knowledge of empirical reality – to establish whether the texts in question serve someone’s narrow agenda, make claims that are not evidence-based, spread

lies and deception, supply incomplete or misleading information, serve authority figures, and deny or hide their own interests and prejudices.

As we will see in a future chapter, editorials constitute a distinct genre within the journalistic field which allow for the expression of subjective/normative views. However, as suggested by the current *Guardian* editor who has stated “our commentary must also be based on facts” such editorials must also adhere to journalistic standards (Viner, 2017). Consequently, when it comes to my analysis of editorials, the aim is not to take issue with any subjective views expressed per se. Instead, the primary concern is to establish whether the editorial is the product of journalistic due diligence in the sense that both the Journalistic Hippocratic Oath and the paper’s fourth estate remit have been adhered to.

As recommended by Professor Berger (2017), this form of reproducible textual analysis involves the following stages: Firstly, the editorial is read systematically to identify the central thesis. Secondly, the arguments are systematically abstracted from their conclusions to identify the explicit and implicit reasons underpinning a given truth claim. Thirdly, the arguments are systematically analyzed for their logical validity. This entails establishing whether the conclusions follow from their premises, if the arguments advanced in a given editorial are free from logical fallacies and so on. Finally, the conclusions are systematically analyzed to assess whether they are underdetermined or falsified by contrary empirical evidence (Berger, 2017).

## CHAPTER 3

### RUSSIA-GATE

#### **The Political Context**

In his July 29, 2019, essay for *Consortium News* titled “Russia-gate as Organized Distraction” the renowned critical media scholar Professor Oliver Boyd-Barrett makes the following acute observation:

For over two years Russia-gate has accounted for a substantial proportion of all mainstream U.S. media political journalism and, because U.S. media have significant agenda-setting propulsion, of global media coverage as well. The timing has been catastrophic. The Trump administration has shredded environmental protections, jettisoned nuclear agreements, exacerbated tensions with U.S. rivals and pandered to the rich. In place of sustained media attention to the end of the human species from global warming, it’s even more imminent demise in nuclear warfare, or the further evisceration of democratic discourse in a society riven by historically unprecedented wealth inequalities and unbridled capitalistic greed, corporate media suffocate their publics with a puerile narrative of alleged collusion between the 2016 Trump campaign and Russia (Boyd-Barrett, 2019).

The foundational accusations of what has become known as “Russia-gate” involves the following charges:

- 1- Russian President Putin ordered the hacking of Democratic National Committee e-mails and their public dissemination through WikiLeaks in order to benefit Donald Trump and undermine Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election.
- 2- Trump and/or his associates colluded with the Russian government in this “attack on American democracy.”
- 3- Trump as President was thus beholden to Russian President Vladimir Putin and tried to implement US foreign policy accordingly.

As a result of these allegations Trump was subjected to covert investigations by organs of the American state while running as a candidate. On becoming President these investigations then became overt, primarily through the Muller investigation. The purpose of these investigations was to, nominally at least, establish whether the alleged collusion occurred. The nominal qualification is a necessary one to make as there are legitimate epistemological reasons which transcend partisan politics to question whether any of the key actors behind said investigations ever believed such collusion occurred in the first place. Rather, the argument has been advanced by many on the liberal/left continuum that they were being used as a pretext to achieve two outcomes. First, to prevent Trump from becoming President. Second, to prevent Trump as president from actualizing the foreign policy commitments he campaigned on. Namely, to radically transform the pre-existing bi-partisan consensus regarding how US foreign policy should be conducted. Of particular concern in this regard was stopping Trump normalizing relations with Russia (Boyd-Barrett, 2019).

Within the genuine fourth estate journalistic field the initial skepticism towards the official account of Russia-gate stems from a number of factors, these include the following:

- 1- Many fourth estate journalists believed it was journalistic malpractice to privilege unverifiable allegations (which was how much of the official narrative was propagated) over evidence-based claims which the journalist can themselves either verify or falsify via a scrutiny of the relevant evidence.
- 2- Many fourth estate journalists were uncomfortable with the fact that the three protagonists (Trump, Putin, and Assange) all just happened to be “official enemies” of Western power elites.
- 3- Many fourth estate journalists were uncomfortable with the fact that the foundational documents – the Steele dossier and the CrowdStrike analysis of the DNC servers – nominally justifying Russia-gate were paid for by the Democratic Party.
- 4- Many fourth estate journalists were uncomfortable with the fact that the official explanation for embarking on a surveilling of the Trump campaign (as opposed to simply alerting the candidate outright) seemed to be self-evidently disingenuous. The official explanation, in fact there are two, involved the alleged behavior of two low level “foreign policy advisors” to the Trump campaign – Carter Page and George Papadopoulos, respectively.

The first official account claimed that the FBI, using information contained in the so-called Steele dossier (compiled by former British spy, Christopher Steele), obtained a warrant from the extremely secretive FISA court to surveil Page (and by extension the Trump campaign as a whole) after he visited Moscow in June 2016. This story changed when it was revealed in 2017 that the Obama justice department withheld from the FISA court the facts that the Clinton campaign was behind the dossier and that Steele had been terminated from the investigation for lying to the FBI. The second official account states that the investigation was initiated when George Papadopoulos told Australian diplomat Alexander Downer, in May 2016, that he had been told from a “Kremlin-connected” academic, Josef Mifsud, that Russia had thousands of emails potentially damaging to Clinton. The skepticism on the part of the fourth estate journalist increased exponentially in early 2017 when it was revealed that Page had previously worked with the CIA, Alexander Downer had arranged for a \$25 million donation from the Australian government to the Clinton Foundation, and Josef Mifsud had ties to western intelligence services (McCarthy, 2018).

In other words, prior to the completion of the Mueller report in April 2019, the American state, and by extension the MSM, had provided no evidence to substantiate any of the above charges. Meanwhile, at the time of writing in June 2021 there still exists no publicly available evidence to verify the assertions that Putin ordered the hacking of the DNC e-mails, that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks are Russian “cutouts,” or that the emails were actually hacked as opposed to being downloaded in situ. However, despite the panoply of reasons over and above one’s basic journalistic duty to scrutinize the official narrative, the US MSM systematically failed to do so. Rather, as stated by left-wing journalist Branco Marcetic in his March 25, 2019, article titled “Closing the Russia-gate” for *The Jacobin*:

The idea that Trump ‘colluded’ with Russia was considered virtually a foregone conclusion for the past two years by the majority of the political and media class, feeding in its wake a constant stream of breathless, often irresponsible, and misleading, media coverage (Marcetic, 2019).

In his August 12, 2017, piece for the left leaning *Medium.com* site titled “Anyone Who Questions the Russia Narrative Is A Conspiracy Theorist” Michael Tracey describes this dismal state of affairs when he states:

In the eyes of much of the media and political establishment, questioning any of the premises undergirding the Russia Mega-Narrative is now tantamount to either treason or unhinged, unreconstructed conspiracism. None would dare contest the sacred findings of the Intelligence Community,

even though what limited findings have actually been produced to the public are conspicuously flimsy, the motives of the Community Officials responsible for widespread leaking and narrative-juicing are highly suspect, and the terminology used to describe what is being alleged (interference, meddling, etc.) is kept purposely vague. No matter. The foundational assumptions of the ‘Russia Narrative’ are so ingrained that every single day, politicians spout them without challenge, and the compliant media dutifully follow suit (Tracey, 2017).

However, with the publication of the 2019 Mueller report and Mueller’s less than authoritative appearance before congress, the collusion story has been disproved and thus seems destined to disappear down Orwell’s memory hole. For example, on publication of the much-hyped Mueller Report, left-wing Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Chris Hedges in his March 25, 2019, piece titled “Mueller report Ends a shameful period for the Press” states:

Mueller’s categorical no collusion statement ends one of the most shameful periods in modern American journalism, one that rivals the mindless cheerleading for the Iraq War by most of the press. It further erodes and may prove fatal to the credibility of a press that has steadfastly rendered most of the country invisible and functions as little more than an array of gossiping courtiers to the elites.’ The charge that Russia stole the 2016 presidential election, that Vladimir Putin has secret “pee tapes” of Trump cavorting in a Moscow hotel with prostitutes or that Trump has been a longtime “Kremlin agent,” repeated by reporters whose work I admired in the past, is demagoguery as pernicious as the vile taunts and racist tropes that come out of the White House (Hedges, 2019).

The problem alluded to by the likes of Hedges et al involves nominal members of the fourth estate abdicating their journalistic responsibility to systematically examine the competing narratives about Russia-gate, and to demand evidence accordingly. For example, Donald Trump has no intellectual copyright on his claim that he was a victim of an attempted deep state coup. Consequently, the fact that he repeatedly made this assertion does not in and of itself invalidate its epistemological status. In reality, the deep state concept (or synonyms such as the “military-industrial complex,” “shadow government,” “power-elite nexus,” the “national security state” and so on) has long been invoked by political scientists, political sociologists, and foreign policy experts to describe individuals and institutions who exercise power independent of and sometimes over civilian leaders. Regarding what forces the Deep State concept refers to, Parenti explains it thus: