Book Review


Edited by Gerald Sussman, this recent title contains seventeen different academic writings on topics related to media and communications. Sussman is a professor of urban and international studies at Portland State University, where he teaches graduate courses in international development, political economy, and political communication. Sussman has authored a number of books, with two of his most recent being Branding Democracy: U.S. Regime Change in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe (2010) and Global Electioneering: Campaign Consulting, Communications, and Corporate Financing (2005).

The latest of his editorial works, The Propaganda Society, contains four sections, titled (1) “Propaganda in the Media,” (2) “Propaganda in Public Culture,” (3) “Propaganda for Global Hegemony,” and (4) “Propaganda and the State.” Sussman expresses the goal of the book as making the reader “come to recognize the nexus of the neoliberal economic base to public practices in the networked sphere of business, communications, mainstream media, and the affairs of state” (p. 5). This book completes its goal by incorporating a host of different scholars undertaking a variety of studies.

The first section focuses on the media and new techniques of persuasion. The topics that are covered range from advertising techniques, the rise of corporate power, reality TV formats, interactive television programs, audience fragmentation, integrated marketing communications, Web 2.0 marketing techniques, to concentration of ownership. This section goes to great lengths to demonstrate how systems of control and manipulative features are forming out of new technologies and organizational capabilities within the state and corporation.

The second section investigates the ways in which certain tropes as general narratives and media feeds are maintained or discarded within western society. The issues the authors address include environmental themes, public relations, neoliberalism, celebrity culture, and the cultural role of pornography. These essays investigate selective social issues and the way the media reinforces a specific social narrative.
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The third section offers a general global outlook. It begins with analyzing the language associated with the “Global War on Terrorism,” as well as the election between proxy and foreign regimes in Latin America and the Middle East. In addition, the section explores a continuous and powerful public relations industry, and the elaborate ways in which media structures are maintained and consent is manufactured.

The final section delves into the corporatist state endorsed by finance. The first essay considers high finance and the support systems that surround it. This section also considers the media’s portrayal of the working class in the midst of the 2008 economic crisis, and, later, the ideologies of the market that guide politics. The final essay in the section investigates control in Canadian media. This essay distinguishes between direct and indirect methods of media censorship and control, while chronicling the integration and use of public policies and techniques since the late nineteenth century.

The Propaganda Society provides quality studies from a number of notable academics. In a compilation of works such as this, the reader is exposed to a topical variety, curious material, and probing analyses. Themes of considerable interest center on the public relations industry, technological innovation in marketing, and corporatist structures of media control. Those essays, capable of combining systemic analyses with a particular interest, prove most effective at providing a penetrating look into the complicated power relations operating within the modern industrial system.

The primary frustration I have with this work is not so much with the book itself, but with the context and social role of the book. Sussman (p. 14) seems fully aware of the frustration it causes, and this is expressed through his citing of a Bush Administration’s senior advisor:

[People like you journalists/intellectuals] believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. That’s not the way the world really works anymore. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study, too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

Unfortunately, this adviser has a point. Intellectuals, among other professionals, no longer have the influence they once wielded. It seems to me that these groups, as well as most facets of society, have been subdued by power, typically expressed as a corporate hegemony. In his Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men (1918), Thorstein Veblen first observed these tendencies of subjection, which should have engendered a particular impression on the actions of intellectuals. So, where is the academic praxis among professionals and intellectuals? Do theory and action remain separated in academia, reducing people to specialists at the hands of the machine process? A critical and well-read institutionalist would know Veblen’s answers to these questions.
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This book contains exceptional material and academic analyses critical of the neoliberal program and the “media entertainment military industrial complex.” However, there are differing views between and among the authors, likely related to political consciousness and social awareness. In some of the more technical works, public-opinion polls are cited in at least two essays. How could a book focusing on “systemic propaganda” and indirect control rely upon public-opinion polls as a source? This sends a mixed message. In addition, there is no mention of the recent joint ventures between the CIA and Google. One such program is entitled, “Future Recorded.” Maybe this does not fall under the rubric of propaganda. Nevertheless, programs such as “Future Recorded” may be what social media offers for those holding different values and practicing alternative lifestyles – that is, those less inclined to consume and participate in the neoliberal project.

In spite of this critique, this is a book of quality. I recommend that it be read by anyone who is a consumer and can read at a moderate to high level. The studies and lessons presented in this book prove useful. For those engaged in academic inquiry, this book effectively explores subjects pertaining to public relations, neoliberalism, and techniques of marketing.

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