

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE IDEOLOGICAL *OTHER*: EVIDENCE FROM *NEWSWEEK* AND *ECONOMIST*

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ABSTRACT

Assumption that the Western news media play a participant role in reporting about an ideological "Other" has been examined. Data were gathered on the coverage given to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the peak of the Cold War era. Extent and the nature of the coverage given to the event by *Economist* and *Newsweek* in the first twelve weeks of the event were studied. It has been found that although the coverage has been quite extensive, the magazines have "negativized" the ideological "Other". The findings were discussed in terms of the assumptions of Herman & Chomsky's "Propaganda Model".

INTRODUCTION

Early models of the communication process accorded a passive or what is known as *channel* role to media in reporting or shaping events (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The *channel* idea suggests that the media are nothing more than pipes or conduits through which bits of information flow; i.e., neutral transmitters of messages, linking senders to receivers (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The *channel* role of news is unmistakable in the Lasswell 1948 model of the communication process, and also in the Westley and MacLean 1957 model. Both the models, the latter being more specific, posit media as *channel roles* serving "as the agents" of audience members in selecting and transmitting *non-purposively* the information they require. *Non-purposive* messages are those transmitted without any intent by the communicator to influence the audience (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

Similarly, the neutral journalist theory that is founded on journalistic ethics of professionalism, conceptualizes the role of an "ultimate journalist" as a "disinterested, totally independent, all-seeing, and ever-present observer and recorder who never makes a mistake" (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Such a professional journalist is non-partisan, subscribes to an "ideology of objectivity", and, thus presents an accurate and representative portrait of reality (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). For example, during the Iran hostage crisis of the

early 1980s the famed Walter Cronkite, the former anchor for the CBS Evening News, would end his news program with a curt statement "*and that's the way it is*", implying that the version of reality presented is an objective one and is shorn of reporters' bias and opinions.

However, the empirical evidence comparing "mediated reality" with the "world outside"; i.e., the actual reality, point to the opposite. Ever since Walter Lippmann's 1922 classic work, many studies have documented the manipulative role of the media (Lang and Lang, 1971). That is, far from being passive conduits of information, the news media are active participant in the process of social reality construction in the minds of the audience members. News accounts are slanted and specific structures of mediated reality constructed through verbal and narrative manipulation (Daniel, 1995), visual manipulation (Gitlin, 1980), camera perspectives (Kepplinger, 1982), and through sourcing news (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996), and more broadly through media framing (Severin and Tankard, 2001).

Media scholars consider the concept of framing as a more useful paradigm of studying news coverage than the usual "objectivity and bias" of media (Severin and Tankard, 2001). A frame is sometimes defined as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (Severin and Tankard, 2001). Communication