

Manufacturing consciousness

Nancy Seghers, 30 December 2006



I am an optimist. Or at least that is what I am trying to be in a world where former US vice president Al Gore urges us to draw our swords against global warming, warning us that if we do not take up the hatchet very soon, the apocalypse will loom ahead. Luckily he is an optimist too. His documentary is not just an abyss of despair, but rather a wake-up call. Unfortunately not all top sawyers think that positive. People like Noam Chomsky (*Manufacturing Consent*), Neil Postman (*How to Watch the TV News*) and Jack Zipes (*The Cultural Homogenization of American Children*) often make me wonder why, for Pete's sake, I am trying to raise a child in these terrible times.

Take Noam Chomsky, for instance. In the documentary *Manufacturing Consent* he talks about the stupidity of Mr Average and says that thought control marginalizes and suppresses the public so that it stays in line. It does not really matter what people think, as long as they follow the right direction, the one set by the elite media who select and filter the topics we watch on the news, or read in the newspapers. They curtail and control the information we get to see because it is not the audience that is important, the advertisers are: they are the ones that pay the bills. In other words, we only get to see what they want us to see. It is not all

trouble and affliction, though. Even Chomsky states that “people have the capacity to see through it, but they have to do an effort to do so”.

The late Neil Postman confirmed Chomsky’s statement: “In fact, the news is more often *made* rather than gathered. And it is made on the basis of what the journalist thinks important or what the journalist thinks the audience thinks is important or interesting”. It looks like we do not have a choice here; we have to see what they (read: the advertisers, the multinationals) offer us. Luckily also Postman left some elbowroom by saying that “Answers [on the question What is news?] are to be found in your ideas about the purposes of public communication, and in your judgement of the kind of society you live in and wish to live in”.

Personally, I believe that we do have a choice, even more than one. I must admit that I am one of the few people who are not married to their remote control, so advertisements are thrown away on me. But this very fact proves that there is a choice here. As far as I know, watching television is not obligatory at all, and if we do decide to watch, we certainly are not obliged to view any commercial whatsoever. Nobody forces me into anything and I zap away if it gets too measly. Yes, I watch the news, but that is my own choice. I also prefer to shrug reality shows off, but again, that is my own, very personal choice.

Admittedly, I sometimes have a slight little problem talking to other people, often asking me if there is life on Mars. Indeed I do not know who was outvoted in the latest *Big Brother* episode, nor should you ask me who won *Survivor*. Sometimes I am forced to remain silent but usually I respond to this kind of questions by saying that if there would happen to be life on Mars, I would certainly be the first one of our group to know so, because while they were looking in on other people’s lives, I was probably watching the news.

Of course, there is always the other side of the coin. I will not deny that some form of manufacturing consent does exist, maybe even *has* to exist. I have found that to my own cost ever since I am receiving an academic education to become a translator. I used to be what people call (because the news pigeon-holes it that way?) a genuine racist. After four years of training and courses, I have moved drastically to the moderate left, not specifically because of the courses and lessons themselves but rather because of the school's ideology of being tolerant of each other, an ideology that seeps through the different lectures of the distinctive subjects. Personally, I am not holding the school responsible for such a shift; I rather blame the institutions behind it.

The author Jack Zipes, professor of German at the University of Minnesota, endorses to my viewpoint although he sees it all a bit darker than I do. In his book *Sticks and Stones, The Troublesome Success of Children's literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, his essay *The Cultural Homogenization of American Children* confirms, for example, that

“Some schools in the Minneapolis area have business partners that obligate the school to fulfil their programs if the schools are to receive financial help. Thus television sets and computers have been donated to schools with the provision that children must watch certain programs that advertise the products of the donors, who then take a tax write-off for their altruism”.

I acknowledge that this is an American story, and I am certainly not accusing my school of such practices, but the fact remains that it is again a sort of evidence that ‘manufacturing consent’ does exist. Of course, the Americans are always far ahead of us (or at least they pretend to be) and maybe it will not get that bad at this side of the water, but sometimes I do fear that the rise of Chomsky's twenty percent of indoctrinated intellectuals is imminent, even

over here. I consider myself to be part of the eighty percent ‘morons’, but feel that my own, personal experiences do count for something. I believe the myth of liberty, equality and fraternity to be an empty one, but that does not mean there is no possibility, no chance of improvement. I am myself the perfect example of the fact that you can take your life in your own hands and go through some changes over the years. Undoubtedly, the fact that I am quite a few years older than my fellow students gives me the opportunity to ‘see through it’, as Chomsky put it, but unfortunately I have to endure the ignorance of the younger people, who apparently do not seem to see through it.

Accordingly, there is still a lot of work to be done, certainly if we want to accomplish bigger changes than just the personal ones. The response to the RTBF’s fake newscast about the unilateral independence of Flanders expressed very well the reaction of the swarms of people who actually believed what their tube told them. Thousands of people called the crisis centre out of fear they would not be able to cross the border to visit their families on Christmas Eve. Totally out of their normal selves, afraid to be compelled to switch from trolley to taxi to do their Christmas shopping. The newspaper *De Standaard*, surely a quality paper, even wrote:

“Het ‘extra journaal’ van de RTBF was een misplaatste stunt. De geloofwaardigheid van de Franstalige publieke omroep én van de toneelspelende politici is zwaar gehavend. Bovenal schetsen media en politici in het zuiden van het land een karikuraal beeld van Vlaanderen”.

(Free translation: “The ‘special report’ from the RTBF was a misplaced joke. The authority of the Walloon public network and of the play-acting politicians is badly battered. Above all the country’s southern media and politicians paint a caricatured picture of Flanders”.)

Surely it was a stunt, only I would not exactly call it out of place or misplaced, rather just fictitious. What I find most incredible in this whole soap opera (believe me, this show will be on for some years to come) is that not only the RTBF sends its apologies to the terrified and hoodwinked viewers, but that also the Walloon premier Elio Di Rupo begs to be excused for the bad behaviour of the journalists and politicians involved. This game is certainly not worth the candle. People should think a bit more for themselves instead of becoming so TV-addicted that they can be caught napping. Come on, everyone, wake up, and come to your senses: this is television, a box, a tube, a piece of furniture in your house. You may call it what you want but it certainly is not an oracle, it does not show us the plane naked truth. Reality is to be found off-screen. Thought is free and if we would have all thought hard enough, we would at least have gotten the joke.

Maybe the media should change course, but I believe that our way of thinking is priority number one here. We all have the right to think, say and do what we want. Freedom of speech, of thought, of expression is priceless and does not only exist for the twenty percent of so-called 'intellectuals'. Mr Average, as well as the moron, the idiot, the numbskull, the insignificant, the fool, the nitwit, the ignorant, and even the dumb blonde are entitled to speak. I like to consider myself rather as 'smart' than as 'dumb', but I am blonde and in my opinion this common herd (according to 'arguably the best known intellectual alive' [dixit *The New York Times*] eighty (80!) percent of the world's population) unarguably has the right to freedom of expression too. We should not just follow other people's actions or thoughts, but only the dictates of our own conscience. Our consciousness is not just an epiphenomenalism; it is real, pure reality. So we ought to stop complaining about everything that is going wrong and start doing something about it. Instead of following that new TV-series or the latest reality show, we should make our own programme.

The new means of communication, particularly on the internet, sites like *You Tube* and *My Space*, all the new personal blogs arising every day: they all show that this is certainly possible and that everyone has a voice that can be heard (or at least read). I suggest we all start using our voice. Like Mumble, the unfortunate penguin in *Happy Feet*, there will always be some people who do not have the voice to sing loud or clear enough to reach an audience, but I am sure everyone has the possibility to at least learn to tap-dance, a very underestimated art, I would say. Just make a movie out of your attempts to get the knack of it and put it on the Internet surrounded by your own thoughts, poems, feelings, ..., anything you would like the rest of the world to know. Surely there are enough people 'manufactured' to watch your own, homemade little reality soap. The fact that *Time* magazine has chosen YOU (and me, of course) as person of the year, is self-explanatory.

I believe in this age of technology this is the most interesting way to spread your own ideas around the globe. The elite might not like what you are trying to do, but they will have to learn to live with it anyway. If we all stick together and try to 'manufacture consent' ourselves, we might succeed to turn our fifteen minutes of fame into their inconvenient truth.

Now, let's all chant folks, of course in unison, just as we learned at school: Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, ... You surely know the rest of it ☺

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