

Chomsky's Discourse on US Foreign Policy, Media and Human Rights Interface: Implications to Indian Media

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Abstract

The United States (US) is usually thought of as a nation representing freedom, democracy and human rights. However, as shown by Noam Chomsky and a few others, the US has turned out to be the most dominant imperialist nation as it is a 'super power' with immense political and economic clout. The US has been involved in human rights' violations, Chomsky claims, with an intention of capturing markets for its goods and services, but has been successful in veiling it by shaping popular consciousness through its hegemony over popular media.

Chomsky argues that the US has been preparing the ground for human rights' violations by the use of 'Propaganda Model' which 'filters' reality in such a way as to give the 'news' that is perverted to serve the needs of the ruling elite. For instance, in many of the 'news' reports the weapons of mass destruction used by the US are attributed human traits while the citizens of the enemy nation are presented as nameless "aggressors" or "terrorists".

The relevance of the paper rests on working out the implications of Chomsky's perspectives on the use of media by the US to serve its propagandist model and the implications of such tendencies to nations like India. The

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paper also tries to work out the possible way out of this impasse.

Keywords: Culture of terrorism, human rights, media, propaganda model, US imperialism

Introduction

The general impression of the people regarding the United States (US) is that it is a country that upholds the values of liberty and equality: the basic tenets on which the edifice of the Declaration of Human Rights rests. It is also thought of as a nation practicing and ardently promoting the values of democracy. However, Chomsky and a few other thinkers have argued that the dominant US policy has been that of promoting a "Culture of Terrorism" and not the values of democracy or human rights. The US is able to do this without spoiling its positive image, Chomsky and Edward Herman argue, because of the use of "Propaganda Model" which "filters" reality in such a way as to give the 'news' that is perverted to serve the needs of the ruling elite. They believe that the US does it in order to achieve its economic and political interests; so that it can remain a 'super power' forever.

Noam Chomsky is one of the prominent critics of the US foreign policy. Through his consistent writings and speeches he has shown how the successive Presidents and governments of the US have followed an "imperial grand strategy" which is aimed at dominating the world in a permanent manner through various coercive methods including war. The paper intends to delineate Chomsky's analyses of use of the media for propaganda by the US to strengthen and extend its imperialism so that we could draw certain implications for Indian media, which seems to be influenced by similar forces.

Chomsky on US and Human Rights

Beginning with his analyses of the US war against Vietnam, Chomsky has held that the US foreign policy has been responsible for furthering imperialism and resulting in the violation of human rights (Chomsky, 1970, 1973a, & 1973b). He opines that the US foreign policy is full of double standards as although it advocates

democracy and freedom as the supreme values in various documents and forums, in reality it has been allying with non-democratic and repressive governments and organizations. This is made evident in its support extended to states such as Chile under Augusto Pinochet. These acts of the US, Chomsky contends, have resulted in considerable human rights violations for many decades now (Chomsky, 1991).

Chomsky opines that the collapse of the Soviet Union made way for unipolar world order in which the US has found an opportunity to shape the economic and political decisions at various levels to suit its ulterior motives (Chattopadhyay & Chaudhuri, 2001). The real motives of the US are similar to that of any superpower, argues Chomsky. Superpowers, in general, make every effort to reorganize the systems and processes of the world in accordance with their priorities, predominantly by using their military and economic power. In Chomsky's analysis, to understand the framework of US foreign policy it is important for us to know the priorities that determine the political agenda and economic goals of the US. In Chomsky's opinion the priorities of the US governments are primarily two: i) domestic dominance of US business interests, and ii) enhancing the sway of the state-capitalist system (Chomsky, 2000).

One might argue that the US has repeatedly intervened in the internal affairs of countries like Guatemala, Laos, Nicaragua, and Grenada in which it has neither economic nor safety interests and hence, Chomsky's thesis that the underlying the US has strong economic or safety interests in its foreign policy is untrue. Chomsky, however, believes that this tendency of US is perfectly consistent with its foreign policy as this is based on its practice of suppressing the "threat of a good example". The 'threat' here refers to the possibility of any country successfully developing outside the US supported model of development. This tendency of the US has been elaborately dealt with in his work, *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (1992).

'Experts' on the Cold War period want us to believe that the US governments' Cold War policies were primarily 'ideological' in their orientation and were shaped by anti-Soviet paranoia. Chomsky finds this explanation very superficial. In his book

Deterring Democracy (1991) he argues that Cold War policies of the US too were aimed at safeguarding its ideological and economic interests. This belief of Chomsky is based on his thesis that to truly understand a nation's foreign policy one must examine its domestic politics. This is because, according to Chomsky, the underlying motives of a country's foreign policy are dictated by the goals of the domestic elites in that country. In the case of the US the goals of its elites are furthering of neoliberal ideology that creates conducive environment for successfully chasing their business dreams in every corner of the world (Chomsky, 2006).

Chomsky argues that the belief that with the end of the Cold War there is a drastic change in the US foreign policy is misled. He says that only the pretexts for it have changed. This, according to him, explains its consistently escalating military budgets. He further states that the US is aware that globalization processes spearheaded by it have deeply polarized the handful of the rich and the multitude of the poor worldwide. As this widening gap between the rich and the poor has created an ever rising tide of discontent against the forces of neoliberal ideology, the US has been using its military systems to keep the poor nations in control ("The Rediff Interview with Professor Chomsky", 2001).

Chomsky has strong reservations regarding the US claim that it is fighting terrorism to maintain world order and peace. He says that the tendency of the US to lead the group of rich and powerful nations against the sovereignty and interests of smaller nations is nothing short of terrorism. International Court of Justice has strongly condemned the US for perpetuating terrorism in Nicaragua. Chomsky reminds the readers of the role played by the US in creating and nurturing the Islamic terrorist organizations in the world. He says that the Central Intelligence Agency has been aiding and assisting terrorist groups across the world for safeguarding and furthering its strategic and economic interests (Ibid.).

There are many who argue that the US is not alone in its "war on terrorism". The agenda of fighting terrorism finds a place of primacy in the foreign policy of many other nations too that are the supporters of the USAs an answer to this objection Chomsky states that many countries support the US in its "war on terrorism" not

for the wiping out terrorism but for their own varied strategic interests. This partly explains the support extended to the US by many countries to the US cause in Afghanistan. Also, India and Pakistan have been trying to win over the US mainly to obtain its support in their contention on Kashmir. Russia's support to the US needs to be understood in the background of its intention of getting US administration's approval of its interventions in Chechnya. China too wants US support to legitimize the massacre of Muslims in western China. Thus, the powerful nations have realized that it is in their interest to rally round US not to make the world a better place but to pursue their own strategic and economic interests (Barsky, 1997).

Thus, Chomsky goes on to argue that it is not "fight against terrorism" but the "culture of terrorism" which is the dominant US policy. "Culture of terrorism" refers to the imperialistic tendencies of the US to define and use terrorism in an arbitrary but concealed manner. Chomsky provides piles of evidence to prove that despite the US projecting itself a nation respecting freedom, democracy and human rights it has constantly engaged itself in proxy state terrorism (Roy, 2003). Finally, Chomsky successfully demonstrates that the culture of individualism, consumerism, competition and covert violence that the political economy of the West propagates through the Mass Media is seen quite acceptable and even noble due to the subtle dynamics of the cultural imperialism which functions more at the unconscious level than the rational one. Hence, 'cultural imperialism' could be seen as a pre-condition to maintain an unwritten justification for the 'culture of terrorism' which in turn helps the imperialistic state to maintain its political and economic hegemony on the 'non-conformist' states, in which the mass media plays a dominant role (Chomsky, 2005).

Propaganda Model

Chomsky and Edward Herman's work titled *Manufacturing Consent* published in 1988 effectively unveils the relationship between the media and foreign policy. This work provides substantial evidence for his general thesis that in Western society the key institutions, such as media, safeguard the interests of the elite rather than providing an objective critique of the same. The work shows how

the news media is closely linked to elite interests and that the belief that the journalists seek and disseminate information that demands the elites and governments to be accountable to people is a myth. On the contrary, the analysis of the US media coverage of its foreign policy clearly demonstrates how it serves elite interests and undermines democracy. Herman and Chomsky argue that the media achieves this mainly by following a recruitment process that selects and rewards only those prospective journalists who are trained to suit their world-view. This ensures that there need not be a vigilant censorship system as the news produced by such journalists is always congenial and unchallenging to elite interests.

According to Herman and Chomsky, there are basically five filters that determine news media output. The first is the corporate filter. Media has many common interests with major corporations, banks and government and hence this shared interest couple with corporate ownership and profit orientation make it corporate friendly rather than a watchdog of the elite (Herman & Chomsky, pp. 3, 14). Consequently, only the news stories that are consistent with the ideology of the corporate world find a place in the media and those found contrary to it are either not written at all or are effectively kept out by this filter.

The second filter is that of advertising. It is a known fact that the media relies heavily on advertising revenue. This makes it necessary for the media to ensure that no news item is produced that is in contradiction to its sponsors' interests. Thus there is a clear link between the interests of commerce and the news media. This link makes it necessary for the media output to in tune with the tastes of the affluent consumers who are seen to be potential buyers by the advertising agencies. This also screens overly critical and supposedly controversial news items as the advertisers believe that very complex and controversial news disturbs the "buying mood" of the audience (Herman & Chomsky, p. 17). Thus the advertising filter through its money power not only determines the nature of 'news' but also decides what should not be part of that 'news'.

The practice and pattern of sourcing of the information required for the media introduces the third filter. Journalists are made to supply 'important' news stories in a consistent and rapid manner. In such

a situation the vast public relations machinery of the government and the corporate world is seen to be an important source of 'news' by these journalists. Thus, they construct news based on the inputs provided to them by public officials and corporate representatives. Thus the very process of defining the news agenda is influenced by elite interests.

Criticism from individuals connected with powerful interests is the fourth filter. Certain individuals and institutions which are linked to corporations and the government attack the media that airs controversial material with heavy criticism (Herman & Chomsky, p. 17). Such criticism serves as a deterrent as most editors and journalists are afraid of such an organized and militant attack by well-established individuals and institutions.

The final filter is that of ideology. Herman and Chomsky argue that the ideology of 'anticommunism' that was effectively created through public relations of the government and corporations during the Cold War period continues to be used as a control mechanism. This ideology continues to shape the worldview of the journalists and this in turn determines how they 'understand' global events. Thus, anyone whose understanding and analysis is not in tune with this ideology is perceived to be unpatriotic (Herman & Chomsky, p. 29). Although by now most Communist states have collapsed there is a great amount of ideological orientation which continues to control journalistic standards and procedures. This is because the ideology of 'anti-communism' is part of the neoliberal agenda that is interested in furthering free market access for the capitalists and ensure the massive state subsidies made available to private corporations. Even the current propaganda in favour of 'war on terrorism' is a continuation of the same ideological bias. Thus, the ideological filter created during the Cold War era continues to be used by the media to counter any challenge to the US foreign policy which serves only the elite interests.

Implications to Indian Media

In India, the media has played a crucial role in creating public opinion even during pre-Independence period. Mahatma Gandhi

through his *Harijan* and Jawaharlal Nehru through *National Heraldset* high journalistic standards and used the media for creating critical consciousness among its readers regarding the domestic and international oppressive forces and their dynamics. They saw in the media an opportunity to inculcate among the people love for freedom, equality and democratic values. Thus, the media was used as an educative and empowering tool that paved the way for a nation state based on democratic principles despite the prevailing sway of the oppressive feudal structures. They achieved all these in spite of the efforts of the British government to ban their papers and convicting them on charges of sedition.

In Independent India the emergency imposed in the mid-eighties created the ground for the birth and growth of many independent news magazines like *India Today*, *Sunday*, and *Onlooker* which stood for freedom of expression and independence of the press. They grew outside the control and influence of the wire services like PTI, UNI, and *Samachar* and sourcing information independently by making their correspondents engage in fieldwork of high standard.

The Press Council Act -1978 intended to “preserve the freedom of the press and also for maintaining and improving the standards of newspapers and news agencies in India” has helped the Press to be transparent and accountable to some extent. However, in this era dominated by electronic media the Act has become outdated and in a way redundant.

The tendencies of the media outlined by Chomsky are quite evident in Indian media too. For example, it is a common experience that blatant violations of policies and legislation by the private corporations in acquiring land for hazardous industries and providing compensation to the owners is rarely reported in an objective manner as this would lead to their losing corporate patronage.

Indian media has undergone a sea-change with opportunities provided to it by the neo-liberal era. Editor has become more of a ‘manger’ with the job responsibility of ensuring that news items are ‘produced’ not only in keeping with the taste of the consumers by also the government and the corporate world. News is presented

more as part of entertainment than a piece of information for further analysis and civic action. Marketing department of the media is given powers to decide what kind of news should get prominence and what should be just glossed over. Human rights violations are neglected both in coverage of the issues but also in the production and presentation of news stories with scant regard to the privacy and dignity of the individual.

In such a scenario, the opening up of Indian market to the global capitalist market has given a fatal blow to credibility and nobility of Indian media. After the onset of Structural Adjustment Programme, India has been more openly following the American, capitalistic developmental model. For example, the Indian elite have collaborated with the US in its capitalistic agenda because it suits them. However, they have not allowed any substantial change to take place in the unequal socio-economic relation based on caste-class-gender so that their traditional privileges are not sacrificed while compromising on the sovereignty and welfare of the country. In fact they have added other dimensions to this fragmentation – religion, language and region. Political and social analysts have observed that a conscious attempt is going on in India to accelerate the process of growing fragmentation of the proletariat by social and political forces of various kinds. This is giving rise to the emergence of new identities in the name of multi-religious, multi-caste, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural reality of India. This is a replica of what we find in the US Paul Sweezy (1995), while referring to the US reality, observed that the working classes were 'divided' between black and white and later into many ethnic and immigration groups.

A Document on 'Indo-US Trade and Economic Cooperation' mentions that traditionally, India has never been a favourite destination for the US foreign investors ('Document/US Foreign Investment', 1995). However, with the collapse of USSR and India's willingness to join to open Indian economy to the reform prescriptions of IMF and its sister institutions India's relation with the US grew in both affinity and cooperation. For instance, the US investment increased from \$22.38 million in 1986 to \$1135.41 million in 1993. This was 39 percent of the total FDI approved in that year (Bhambhri, 1996).

Looking back on the foreign policy initiatives of the Bush administration with Indian government it is quite clear that it had strategized to make India its special ally in the region to suit its neoconservative agenda. After 9/11, Israel and India were considered by many senior American officials to be the most important allies of the US in its global war against terror. It is with this intention in mind that the US gave its consent to Israel for selling its highly sophisticated weaponry to India. This partly explains the present position of Israel as the top weapons supplier to India in the place of Russia. Also, India has signed many multi-billion-dollar defence and aviation deals with the US India has been collaborating closely with the US administration in the fields of intelligence and surveillance in the recent past. During past decade the chiefs of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have visited India several times to network with their counterparts in the country. The high level of hospitality extended to them during these visits makes it clear that partnership with these US bodies is valued very highly by Indian Home Ministry (Koshy, 2005).

Chomsky opines that India would not benefit much from the series of diplomatic exchanges with the US government. He shows, for example, how the US had branded Pakistan as a rogue state in August 2001 and how, as soon as it declared war on Afghanistan, it warmed up for a friendship with Pakistan for well-known strategic reasons. Thus, the US has a long history for shifting positions on a continuous basis to suit its strategic interests. Hence, Chomsky believes that it is unwise on the part of India to engage in any serious strategic or economic relation with the US (Chattopadhyay & Chaudhuri, 2001).

However, it is a sad fact that Indian elite are religiously following the US model of governance and economy. This process of India's cooption and cooperation with the US has had negative impact not only on human rights protection and the National Sovereignty of India but also on Indian media. This is because the larger political and economic interests have started to overtly follow the US' capitalistic model because it suits their traditional tendencies to keep the masses under subjugation. It has provided them an effective model of giving the people the filtered news and ready

analyses which helps them build an elite class of academics and educated who even while seeming to be critical are in reality parroting the manufactured 'truths', which are insensitive to democratic issues and human rights violations. Hence, it is not very difficult to see that Chomsky's analyses of the relationship between the US foreign policy and the media have great implications to Indian polity and media as well.

Conclusion

Lal and Nandy (2005) delineate the major features of the 'new world order' set in motion by the US imperialism in the following words:

The 'new world order' is no longer framed by explicit contrasts - between the colonizers and the colonized, superior and inferior races, not even perhaps the developed and the underdeveloped - though residues of these distinctions, as well as claims about the moral responsibilities of the advanced countries, are still encountered in the pronouncements of the leaders of the 'free world'. The new world order is defined by a more nebulous set of contrasts - between those who speak the language of laws and the language of universal human rights, and whose lexicon has found new uses for 'caring', and those who would not or cannot subscribe to the new ground rules of universal political conduct. As a consequence, the rights to punish and kill are now drawn from the re-identification and nomination of entire states as 'rogues' or 'outlaws', invite retribution by allegedly stepping outside the place of the law or by disowning what the North American and West European politicians define as the 'international community' (p. xvi-xvii).

In such a context, it is an irony that the Indian political leadership is aligning with the US to become a global player when in reality it is already an economic power (Purkayastha, 2007). The implications of such a stance and tendencies are not limited to Indian foreign policy alone. It has serious repercussions to Indian media as within a democratic setup it has a far greater role and responsibility,

especially in protecting and promoting human rights. Hence, we need to understand that our blind imitation of the development model propagated and practiced by the US has led to human rights violations under the garb of promoting and safeguarding democracy. The 'culture of terrorism', as practiced by the US and venerated as a great model, has helped many in India to maintain a strange contradiction regarding human rights violations: to decry the violence in the borderlands and extol the programs such as the one that took place in Gujrat in 2002. Hence, we need to realize that as long as we, the concerned and educated citizens, harbour even some mild affinity to the culture of divisions and violence we would continue to be guilty of allowing the 'culture of terrorism' to be perpetuated in our homes, neighbourhoods and the nation. In order to initiate a change for the better we need to first make an effort to understand the relationship between the nature of capitalism today and its tremendous sway on the media to manufacture the consent for the 'big brother' as well as its 'partners in crime' such as the Indian elite. Reading and debating Chomsky's writings on the world order in general and media in particular would be a good place to begin such an urgent and important enterprise.

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