

Assignment 3  
Case Studies on Information Seeking Controls

Nicole Cignoli  
[cignolin1@owls.southernct.edu](mailto:cignolin1@owls.southernct.edu)

Information Seeking Behavior  
ILS 537-S70  
Spring 2011

Eino Sierpe, Ph.D.  
Department of Information and Library Science

Submitted May 9, 2011

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### **Case Studies on Information Seeking Controls**

An comparative analysis by Group Two (Angell, B., Cignoli, N., Reeve, J. & Schneider, R., 2011) of Achbar and Wintonick's (1992) documentary film, *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* to the media coverage of two recent news stories supports Chomsky's arguments of thought control in a democratic society, as presented in his propaganda model, and provides for expansion of existing information seeking behavior models. Chomsky posits that U.S. mass media is owned and controlled by a small, power elite. Mass media employs editorial bias in news reporting to distort accuracy for profits and to create 'necessary illusions' to indoctrinate the political elite and divert, marginalize, and control the mass population. The first case study analyzed net neutrality's principles and proposed legislation that could reverse current U.S. government orders to maintain open and free access to the Internet. The second case study investigated Wachovia Bank's laundering of Mexican drug cartels' money in violation of the U.S. Bank Secrecy Act. Although Wachovia settled with the U.S. Department of Justice and paid \$100M forfeiture and \$50M, individual bankers have not been charged.

After research and debate, group consensus identified three of Chomsky's arguments shared by both cases: ownership, concision, and diversion. Ownership by the few influences media to use concision to limit the breath and depth of discussion and to employ diversion to focus people's interest and attention on matters than those that could be of importance to them. Although in full agreement with the theories documented in the group report, there are areas that can be further analyzed and additional arguments included to support Chomsky's propaganda model.

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### **Expansion of existing analysis**

Group Two's analysis of the two case studies agrees with Chomsky's argument that U.S. mainstream media is owned by a small power elite that shapes the information landscape and places profits over accuracy in news reporting, public interest, and free access to information.

The net neutrality bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in April 2011 could enable broadband providers to institute a tiered usage and pay schedule for accessing the Internet through their networks. While agreement that this bill would affect how people receive information, there are additional instances to support Chomsky's theory. By offering preferential treatment to affiliated companies or business partners, the broadband carrier and its affiliates will have a monopoly on services and access, increasing the digital divide. Without net neutrality legislation, ownership by the few could censor or filter information to discriminate one view over another in support the power elite's position. Or ownership could discriminate access as community media groups accused AT&T of doing in March 2009 to local, public, educational, and government access channels because accessing these channels was through a complex navigation process (Goodman, 2009). This example supports the group's research that controlling information is a violation of the First Amendment in Chomsky's argument. Although the net neutrality bill passage is pending (Wyatt, 2011), the potential for the power elite to buy position and weed out the competition will leave a monopoly of providers from which businesses and consumers must choose from uncompetitive services and prices. This perspective has yet to be reported by mainstream media.

During the Wachovia debate, Group Two concurred that mainstream media underreported the largest violation of the U.S. Bank Secrecy Act; \$387 billion of Mexican drug cartels' money was laundered equaling one-third of Mexico's gross national product (Fincen,

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2010). Further discussions led to agreement that Wachovia was a prominent bank player at the time and, made greater by Wells Fargo's buyout, was the probable reason for mainstream media's sporadic coverage since 2006. Also, the occurrence of other financial news could have overshadowed reporting this event. This action supports Chomsky's theory that the political and powerful elite are agenda setters as agreed by the group. Further analysis of the possible reasons for the delay in reporting the situation supports another Chomsky theory that mainstream media ignore the bad doings of friends and allies. Since *The Wall Street Journal* first reported the story in April 2008, mainstream media did not report that Wachovia loaned the Republican party \$8M while getting bailed out by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and Wells Fargo (Browning, 2008) or about the personal and political ties from Wachovia to the investment firm Goldman Sachs and to President Obama (Freire, 2011). Perhaps the most revealing support for the theory is that the Mexican cartel money had been supporting the global financial markets and then, once the investigations started in 2007 and the illegal money transfers ceased, the global economic crisis began (DoseNation, n.d.). These major corporations, who are concerned with their bottom line, are invested with the government and are unlikely to report suspicious activities like Martin Woods, an anti-money laundering expert at the London branch of Wachovia, did to the U.S. government (Vulliamy, 2011). One dissenting voice, Republican Congressman Ron Paul (2011), 2008 Presidential-candidate, raised the questions about the money laundering and the Federal Reserve:

There is something fishy about the head of the world's most powerful government bureaucracy, one that is involved in a full-time counterfeiting operation to sustain monopolistic financial cartels, and the world's most powerful central planner,

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who sets the price of money worldwide, proclaiming the glories of capitalism.

(Chan, 2010).

As the group agreed in the report, the complexity of each case study requires much time to research and evaluate, which the mass population is unable or unwilling to invest, so the power and political elite are able to control and distort information.

In addition, Group Two found both case studies exemplified Chomsky's concision argument. As each case study was complex, concision was used to reduce articles to fit in the space between advertisements, framing the news. Without complete and accurate information, the population is influenced not to understand or care about a topic to formulate their own opinion and perhaps take action. While there was agreement on these points, other actions by the media can exacerbate the public's apathy as when *USA Today* columnist, Rhonda Abrams (2011) wrote, "Net neutrality sounds really geeky... (para.2). Inadvertently, her choice of words set the tone that this is a technology article that the public is not expected to understand so the public meets that expectation by not caring to read her educational article, reinforcing elite's engineered apathy to the situation.

Chomsky describes diversion as when news sources use one story to distract the information seeker from another. Both case studies revealed media coverage coincided with critical events (e.g., the federal government averting shutdown when the net neutrality bill passed and the financial crisis for Wachovia) that affected the mass population's health and well being. At the time, mainstream media placed these stories into their respective niche sections: financial and technology. As agreed, the analysis also found that articles on net neutrality seemed to focus on politics rather than the issue and its affect on the audience. While in agreement with these findings, another example adds support that diversion limits coverage which would show

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supporters of net neutrality principles are not political, but range from the Christian Coalition, Microsoft, to the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica, AT&T shareholders (Pepitone, J., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Group Two's analysis of the two case studies substantiate Chomsky's arguments in his propaganda model and provide the opportunity to develop information seeking models. Although in agreement with the group that media, by using the techniques discussed, indoctrinates and transforms the active information into a passive participant in the search process, there is stronger belief, like Chomsky, that people will acknowledge the unreliability of mainstream news and search for alternative media sources of information. Cultural norms are factors and information seekers are shifting to alternative media for convenience and for a particular point of view that satisfies their needs. Being public owned with public participation in the financing, editing, reporting, alternative media could afford to report on complicated stories with accuracy and host debate and discussion without political or financial ramifications. The public as the stakeholder will encourage and foster political awareness and participation in government.

Information seeking behavior models are designed to be highly interactive and to provide the seeker flexibility and control of the search process. Chomsky's theories of freedom of access and a system where a community and its members run things in a democratic fashion are available in social media services. Social media (e.g., social networking sites and web logs) provides the flexibility for people to express their creativity, give their input to government, and challenge authority. Community action is the direct result of the people finding their voice in alternative media. By putting the welfare of the society above individual pursuits and gain, the people will answer Chomsky's directive to overturn the elite and regain control of their future.

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