

## Reply to Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang

EDWARD S. HERMAN and NOAM CHOMSKY

We will try to answer as briefly as possible some of the Langs' major criticisms of our propaganda model, which we described in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988, 2002), as well as a few other points relating to Chomsky alone. First, their statement that Chomsky has "a communication model that concedes no legitimacy to state authority and certainly none to any kind of violence even when used to counter something far worse" is completely erroneous, and seems to be an unjustifiable blending of their own (entirely inaccurate) perception of Chomsky's political views with our communication model. As they themselves describe the propaganda model and its filters, and in reality, there is absolutely nothing in the model or the way the authors have used it that has the slightest implication about the legitimacy of state authority or the merits or demerits of violence.

Second, the claim that our proofs of systematic bias are in general based on anecdotal evidence, and lack information on sampling, coding procedures, and so forth, does not withstand scrutiny. They mention our study of media treatment of elections in Central America in *Manufacturing Consent*, but seem to have missed our three tables detailing how the media treated 31 separate topics in elections in two U.S. client states and in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. The coding and sampling procedures are clear, and the results could be easily checked. These are not anecdotes. The Langs also fail to mention our tabulation of the media treatment of *Worthy and Unworthy Victims* (Table 2-1), a centerpiece of the book, in which we compared the media attention to the murder of a priest in Communist Poland with their treatment of the murder of 100 religious victims in U.S. client states in Latin America. This information is also clear as to coding and sampling and is not anecdotal. It is supplemented by a follow-up detailed analysis including a comparison of the *New York Times'* treatment of the savageries inflicted on worthy and unworthy victims (Table 2-2) that gives more meaning to our basic quantitative findings. The same is true throughout, in this book and many of our other publications.

The Langs also mention our discussion of the concurrent massacres of Pol Pot in Cambodia and Indonesian forces in East Timor. There we did not provide a tabulation because it would have been superfluous in the light of our comprehensive review of the

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sharply different media treatment in the two cases. There is nothing anecdotal in this procedure. We also showed that the *New York Times*' coverage of East Timor fell to zero in 1977 and 1978, at which time Indonesian killings reached their maximum level. This is not anecdotal evidence.

The Langs state that "The introduction to the revised edition of *Manufacturing Consent* takes a further step towards more rigorous quantitative analysis" by a tabulation of the media's usage of the word "genocide" in selected cases. As can be inferred from our previous two paragraphs, the implication that there was no rigorous quantitative analysis in the earlier edition is entirely false. The Langs then criticize the further step in which we showed that the word "genocide" was applied lavishly to describe Serb actions in Kosovo in 1998–1999, and to Iraqi attacks on the Kurds in the 1980s (regularly failing to mention that this was a time when the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein), but very infrequently to Turkey's murderous and destructive actions against the Kurds or Indonesia's invasion and occupation of East Timor leading to the death of perhaps one third of the population, in both cases relying throughout on decisive U.S. military and diplomatic support, as we have documented. By the most elementary journalistic standards, these U.S.-backed atrocities were of the greatest importance, if only because they could have been mitigated or terminated by withdrawal of U.S. participation, had the facts reached the public.

The Langs argue that if we had taken into account the total amount of coverage in these cases, it is possible that the results would be different, but this point fails to recognize that the total coverage would almost surely be biased in the same direction (the *New York Times* would not have used the word "genocide" in the case of East Timor in 1977 and 1978 when its coverage of those unworthy victims fell to zero). But their more important point is to challenge our use of the term "genocide" in all of these cases: They imply that the usage of the term for the Serbs was justified given their deliberate ethnic cleansing, whereas it might not be applicable in the cases where the U.S. media did not use it.

The Langs' political bias here is striking and correlates extremely well with the media's own biases, but it does not survive examination of the facts, which we actually provided in the text associated with our tabulation. The Langs seem to suggest that the Serbs deliberately killed on a large scale, while the Turks didn't deliberately kill Kurds nor did the United States knowingly kill in its sanctions against Iraq. This is untenable. The Serb killings in Kosovo in the year before the 78-day NATO bombing were estimated by scholar (and NATO-war supporter) Nicholas Wheeler at 500 (*Saving Strangers*, 2000), with many more than that apparently killed by the Kosovo Liberation Army according to Western sources. The expulsions during the bombing were war related, and the killings were on the order of 5,000. The Turkish killings of Kurds in the 1990s exceeded this total by better than fivefold, and were associated with the destruction of some 3,000 villages and the generation of as many as 3 million refugees, all hardly inadvertent, and also associated with massive U.S. arms supply. The mainly U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iraq were estimated by Karl and John Mueller to have killed more people than all of the weapons of mass destruction in human history (including Hiroshima and Nagasaki) ("Sanctions of Mass Destruction," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1999), and they were also deliberate. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright admitted as much when asked by Leslie Stahl about the 500,000 dead Iraqi children attributed to the sanctions, replying that "the price was worth it." And there is other evidence that the deadly effects of specific U.S. actions as the sanctions developed were quite well known and therefore deliberate (Thomas Nagy, "The Secret Behind the Sanctions: How the U.S.

Deliberately Destroyed Iraq's Water Supply," *The Progressive*, September 2001; Joy Gordon, "Sanctions as a Weapon of Mass Destruction," *Harpers*, November 2002; Eric Herring, "Between Iraq and a Hard Place: A Critique of the British Government's Case for UN Economic Sanctions," *Review of International Studies* 28, 2002).

In all of these cases, killings were deliberate, but the Serb totals in Kosovo were the smallest, those of the sanctions in Iraq far and away the largest. East Timor was possibly the most extreme case, with one third of the population dead, and thus best deserving the term "genocidal." Because the media gave great attention to the worthy victims of the Serbs, an official enemy, but scant attention to comparable or much worse cases in which the United States was decisively implicated (Turkey, Iraq, East Timor, Central America, and many others), it is easy for the man-in-the-street to see the Serb actions as genocidal and the others not all that troublesome. The Langs fall into this trap.

Third, the Langs claim that the Chomsky methodology "sounds scientific except that Chomsky selected his cases (and his data) to make a political point." But the authors have used the propaganda model on a numerous and diverse array of cases, as the Langs themselves admit, including coverage of the Indochinese wars, elections (and not just those in El Salvador and Nicaragua), the assassination attempt against the Pope in May 1981, terrorism, the Middle East conflict, and Cambodia versus East Timor, among others. If our method works well in these cases, it has proved its value, whatever our process of selection. But our political points followed from a careful and replicable testing of the propaganda model in cases that were very important in themselves and that were prominent in media coverage (though filtered in the manner we described), not by a searching out of promising cases.

Fourth, the Langs assert that in using his model based on a one-way flow of content, Chomsky reveals himself remarkably unconcerned with the "facts." "He does not inquire into how events become news, preferring to work with the alternate assumption that the information screened out of the system already exists in a transmittable format." Analysts of the media, they argue, "have to be concerned not only with news flows but with how newsworthy facts are located to begin with, then correlated with other facts, evaluated, and interpreted." The Langs support this line of criticism with a quote from our book *After the Cataclysm* that says we were not mainly concerned there with establishing the actual facts but in seeing how the available evidence passed through the filters of the propaganda system.

The Langs are correct that we are mainly concerned with how the available evidence is treated by the media, but by definition, this, rather than establishing the true facts, is the province of media analysis. Since we focus on how the *available evidence* was selected and interpreted, we were very definitely concerned with how newsworthy facts are located, who the media rely on as sources, how critically they treat them, what forces determine what is newsworthy in the first place—and how stories are inflated, repeated, or dropped, and how politically convenient fabrications may survive and even become institutionalized. Our model deals with these matters explicitly in describing sourcing processes, flak, ideology, and other matters. But we put our main emphasis on the empirical results of media selection processes, which are crucial facts about the media.

In our analyses of major stories, such as that on Cambodia from which the Langs extract a few sentences, we followed media coverage in detail from the first report on to the repetitions: the 2 million killed fabrication, the fake photographs, the mythical Khieu Samphan interview, and many others, all reported enthusiastically, and after refutation (even conceded in the case of the 2 million and the photos) still enthusiastically and

endlessly repeated, as we documented in detail. Then the media bitterly condemned Vietnam for ousting the Khmer Rouge in 1978–1979, and had little to say about the U.S. aligning itself with the formerly worse-than-Hitler regime for the next decade and a half.

The Langs quote the authors' statement that the U.S. media produce a propaganda result that a totalitarian state would be hard put to surpass, a judgment which they say "strains credulity." But if one looks at the page from which this quote is taken, it can be seen that it is not a generalization but a reference to a specific illustration (*in the case of the 1984 elections*, the "propaganda result is one that a totalitarian state would be hard put to surpass," which is exactly correct). That same conclusion would apply to the Cambodia case and many others, but not all, and a critic of the propaganda model and our analyses should obviously recognize this simple truth.

We believe that our focus on media performance as opposed to journalists' thoughts and practices is fully justified. If a reporter deals entirely differently with an election supported by his or her government and one opposed by it, we do not feel that it is urgent to try to find out what goes on in that reporter's (or the editor's) head in following this dichotomous agenda; those facts speak for themselves and the reporter's explanations and rationalizations are of far lesser interest. The Langs say "Most stories survive only as long as they appear timely and until displaced by other and more interesting or important happenings." Who says they are timely, interesting, and important? Why was the U.S.-supported Turkish ethnic cleansing in the 1990s not timely, interesting, or important? Why were the Indonesian massacres in occupied East Timor in early 1999, considerably exceeding Serb killings in Kosovo before the bombing war, not timely, interesting, and important? The propaganda model can throw light on such matters as these; the Langs' remarks give no indication of how they would address these questions, clearly the central ones.

### **Addendum by Chomsky**

The Langs object to my references to Walter Lippmann in informal talks to which they restrict attention. Their first objection is that Chomsky refers "with apparent satisfaction" to Lippmann's phrase "manufacture of consent," but "gingerly avoids any mention of its author's concern about the refinement that the art of propaganda had undergone during and after the First World War"—which, in fact, I bring up prominently when discussing Lippmann's account of "a 'revolution' in 'the practice of democracy' as 'the manufacture of consent' has become 'a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government'" (*Deterring Democracy*, 1991), also referring to his own experience on Wilson's state propaganda agency (the Committee on Public Information), which achieved great success and inspired, among others, Edward Bernays's conception of "engineering of consent" in the same years (*Cleveland State Law Review* 44.4, 1996, and elsewhere). The Langs also object that I do not discuss Lippmann's "search for ways in which public opinion could nevertheless remain effective," which is correct, because the search scarcely exists: He had virtually nothing to say about the topic, as he would surely have agreed; it was not his primary concern.

Their next objection is that in a Web site—a valuable resource, though I had nothing to do with it—Lippmann's reference to the population as a bewildered herd is quoted incorrectly, demonstrating that this part of my work "has to be considered propaganda." To correct the Web site error, they "quote in full just as it reads"—except that they seriously misquote it, omitting the phrase here italicized: "The public must be put in its

place, so that it may exercise its own powers, *but no less and perhaps even more*, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd” (Rossiter and Lane, *The Essential Lippmann*, p. 91; from *Phantom Public*, p. 155). Like others who discuss Lippmann, and Lippmann himself, I concentrate on the “even more” important cases of the doctrine, namely those that apply to “popular government,” in which the “executive men” who direct it, “defending and promoting the public interest” (Lippmann’s standard and unargued assumption), must live free of the interference of the bewildered herd. True, other cases fall under the doctrine too, and Lippmann mentions some in passing, for example, painters (*Public Opinion*, p. 172). But there is a good reason why the collection the Langs cite is subtitled *A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, not *for Painting*, or *for Backyard Barbecues*, which also are covered by the doctrine quoted: Democratic governance is the crucial case to which it applies, Lippmann’s primary concern, and that of those who discuss him seriously.

With regard to this crucial case, Lippmann’s views are as I described them, quoting from his writings accurately and appropriately; there is no need to repeat. The Langs entirely avoid what I wrote, instead criticizing the Web site that I had nothing to do with for alleged omissions. They also offer odd and unsourced speculations about whether I would accept any government authority as legitimate, and tell us that they prefer to side with some remarks of Lippmann’s that are irrelevant to what I discussed and are so superficial that it is hard to see who could question them or care about them.

That exhausts their critique, though for clarification, I should perhaps point out that their opening paragraph is misleading. Citing some meaningless numbers from a Library of Congress database, they imply that 80% of my writings have to do with media. A look at content would quickly reveal that critical analysis of media is far from my primary concern, and even that, in large measure, only as part of a more general interest in the dominant intellectual culture, including social sciences.