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Manufacturing Consent in Practice: How Capitalist Governments use News Media for Political Propaganda — A Socio- Legal Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how capitalist governments co-opt mass media to manufacture political consent, blend state and market power to shape news narratives, and thereby influence public opinion and democratic processes. Drawing on the political-economy framework of Manufacturing Consent, media-ownership analyses, regulatory and doctrinal sources, and recent case studies (with particular focus on India), the paper describes the mechanisms of capture ownership concentration, advertising/state revenue dependence, regulatory pressure, legal coercion, and platform manipulation and documents the socio-legal consequences: erosion of deliberative democracy, targeted marginalization of minorities, normalization of disinformation, and weakened institutional checks. The final sections evaluate existing legal tools and propose regulatory, institutional, and civil-society reforms to restore pluralism and the media's watchdog function. All authorities are cited in 19th edition Bluebook format.

Keywords: *Democratic deliberation, Disinformation and misinformation, Media capture, Ownership concentration, Political propaganda, Press freedom (India), Propaganda model.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Free and independent media are widely understood as core institutions of liberal democracy: they inform the electorate, scrutinize power, and provide a shared factual basis for public deliberation. Yet across many capitalist polities the media landscape has become deeply intertwined with corporate and political power, enabling governments and allied private actors to shape news agendas in ways that manufacture consent rather than facilitate critical scrutiny. The phenomenon is not merely normative; it has tangible socio-legal consequences from distorted policymaking and weakened institutional accountability to social polarization and rights violations against vulnerable groups. This paper asks: by what mechanisms do capitalist

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governments harness news media for political propaganda, and what are the socio-legal impacts? How adequate are existing regulatory and legal frameworks, and what reforms are needed?

I use a mixed doctrinal and political-economy approach. The paper synthesizes foundational theory (the propaganda model), empirical research on media ownership and regulatory change, legal statutes and policy documents, and illustrative case studies drawn from recent events and investigative reporting. While the analysis uses India as a focal case because of its large media market and contemporary salience, the conceptual framing and many mechanisms apply broadly.

(A) Literature review: Political economy and the propaganda model

Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* remains foundational: the authors argue that commercial media operate under structural pressures—ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anti-communist (or more generally, ideological) filters—that systematically shape news content in favor of elite interests.¹ Since then, media scholars and political economists have refined and tested aspects of this model, emphasizing ownership concentration, market incentives, and state-corporate alliances as drivers of editorial alignment with power.²

Recent scholarship documents media capture in democracies by means of ownership consolidation, cross-sector corporate influence, and regulatory design that privileges incumbents.³ International press-freedom monitors and investigative projects have found that concentrated ownership combined with political ties produces measurable declines in critical reporting and increased propaganda-like coverage around major policy decisions and electoral cycles.⁴

(B) Methodology

This paper uses: (a) doctrinal analysis of statutory texts and policy documents relevant to broadcasting and press regulation; (b) review and synthesis of academic and NGO reports on media ownership and editorial bias; and (c) case studies drawn from investigative journalism and official reports illustrating mechanisms and socio-legal impacts. The legal component focuses primarily on Indian statutory frameworks as a worked example; comparative references illustrate broader applicability.

II. MECHANISMS: HOW CAPITALIST GOVERNMENTS LEVERAGE THE MEDIA

1. Ownership concentration and cross-ownership

When a few conglomerates or billionaires control large swathes of news outlets, editorial

independence is weakened. Owners with political allegiances or business interests exercise direct and indirect influence over news framing, personnel decisions, and resource allocation. The Reporters Without Borders/Media Ownership Monitor documented high consolidation in India, noting that a handful of business groups control leading television and print brands.⁵ Concentrated ownership facilitates coordinated narratives supportive of government policy and hostile to government critics.⁶

2. Economic capture: advertising, state spending, and market incentives

Commercial imperatives create strong incentives for news outlets to avoid antagonizing advertisers or the state. Governments can leverage advertising spending, public-sector contracts, and regulatory favors to shape coverage. Media outlets dependent on advertising revenue particularly from government sources or state-adjacent corporations face subtle or overt pressures to align reporting with state interests.⁷ Empirical reporting during crises (e.g., pandemics or national security events) shows a pattern of deferential coverage when outlets perceive economic risk from antagonizing the ruling coalition.⁸

3. Regulatory and legal pressure (regulatory capture)

Regulatory frameworks intended to ensure pluralism can be repurposed to punish dissent. Licensing, broadcast permissions, and fines can be used discriminatorily. Draft regulatory changes that centralize power over broadcasting can increase the executive's leverage over news outlets. In India, debates over broadcasting regulation and the Draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill highlight how regulatory design affects editorial freedom.⁹ Where regulators lack independence, enforcement becomes selective and punitive.

4. Information manipulation: sourcing, curated narratives, social media amplification

State actors and allied private firms use official sources, managed leaks, and social-media networks to seed narratives. News outlets relying on official sources for timely coverage are structurally vulnerable to government framing. Simultaneously, coordinated amplification through bots, influencer networks, and sympathetic channels can manufacture an apparent consensus, crowding out dissenting voices in the attention economy.¹⁰

5. Political-legal coercion and harassment

Legal tools (defamation law, sedition statutes, criminal contempt, tax enforcement, and other regulatory investigations) can intimidate journalists and independent outlets. Investigations or prosecutions, whether merited or politicized, raise the cost of critical reporting. Journalists and editors facing legal harassment often self-censor, further aligning news output with ruling

interests.¹¹

III. CASE STUDY: INDIA

India provides a revealing illustration because of its large, diverse media market and documented instances of ownership change, regulatory initiatives, and pressured journalism.

Ownership consolidation and the NDTV case

Recent corporate activity including high-profile acquisitions by major industrial groups has altered ownership patterns of previously independent outlets. Reporting has highlighted the takeover of a major independent broadcaster by an industrial conglomerate perceived close to the ruling party, raising questions about editorial independence and diversity of perspectives.¹² Scholars and press-freedom monitors flagged such takeovers as weakening the ability of media to hold power to account.¹³

Coverage during crises: COVID-19 and deference

Analyses of pandemic coverage revealed initial patterns of uncritical amplification of government messaging in several mainstream outlets, with delayed scrutiny of policy failures and health-system collapse in hard-hit regions. Time magazine and others criticized mainstream outlets for failing to sustain investigative intensity during the pandemic's acute phases.¹⁴ Such coverage dynamics reinforced governmental narratives and reduced immediate public pressure for remedial policy action.

Regulatory debates and the Draft Broadcasting Bill

Legislative initiatives and draft bills that reframe regulatory control over broadcasting can materially affect independence. The Draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill and associated proposals prompted debate about whether regulatory powers would enable selective enforcement or favoritism.¹⁵ If enforcement discretion is concentrated without institutional checks, regulators can serve as tools to reward favorable outlets and punish critical ones.

IV. THE ASSASSINATION OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS IN INDIA

While ownership capture, regulatory harassment, and economic pressure are subtle mechanisms of controlling media, at its most extreme, media suppression in capitalist democracies manifests in physical violence against reporters. In India, several high-profile assassinations of independent journalists highlight the deadly consequences of exposing state malpractice or challenging dominant political narratives.

One of the most internationally known cases is the murder of **Gauri Lankesh** in 2017, a fearless

editor and activist who consistently critiqued government corruption, communal polarization, and authoritarian tendencies. She was gunned down outside her home in Bengaluru by assailants linked to extremist networks; her death sent shockwaves across the global press community. International watchdogs, including Reporters Without Borders, described her killing as emblematic of the “toxic environment” for independent journalism in India.

The killing of **Shujaat Bukhari**, the founding editor of *Rising Kashmir*, on 14 June 2018 in Srinagar, stands as one of the starkest reminders of the dangers faced by independent journalists in India who challenge dominant state and capitalist narratives. Bukhari, a seasoned journalist with over two decades of experience, had long been a critical voice advocating for peace in the Kashmir Valley. His writings emphasized dialogue, reconciliation, and the protection of human rights in one of the most militarized regions of the world. Bukhari’s assassination was not an isolated act of violence; it was a targeted silencing of dissent

These cases reveal the stark **socio-legal paradox**: even though India’s constitutional framework guarantees freedom of speech and press, the failure of the criminal justice system to protect journalists or prosecute perpetrators effectively creates a climate of impunity. Killings of reporters not only eliminate individual voices but also foster widespread self-censorship, as surviving journalists internalize the risks of challenging entrenched state and corporate interests.

V. SOCIO-LEGAL IMPACTS

The co-option of media by state and allied corporate actors produces multiple socio-legal harms.

(A) Democratic deliberation and the public sphere

A plural, contested public sphere presupposes trustworthy channels of information. When mainstream outlets converge on pro-government narratives, the informational basis for democratic deliberation becomes impoverished. Citizens lack reliable, contestable facts, undermining reasoned voting and civic contestation. The legal ethos of democracy — accountability, transparency, and checks on power — is thereby weakened.

(B) Polarization and targeted marginalization

Manufactured narratives often frame political opponents, minorities, or social movements as threats. Such framing can legitimize discriminatory policy measures and social exclusion, and in the worst cases catalyze violence. Journalistic framing that normalizes dehumanizing tropes against minorities has immediate legal implications, including increased hate crimes, selective enforcement, and erosion of minority rights protection.

(C) Erosion of legal accountability

Investigative journalism historically plays a central role in uncovering official malfeasance. When newsrooms are captured, fewer investigations proceed, and legal accountability through public exposure diminishes. Cases that once triggered judicial inquiries or legislative oversight may remain uninvestigated, depriving victims of remedies and enabling impunity.

(D) Institutional trust and rule of law

When media are perceived as propaganda instruments, citizen trust in institutions including the judiciary, enforcement agencies, and the press itself declines. A delegitimized information ecosystem increases cynicism and may encourage extrajudicial forms of political mobilization.

VI. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR LIMITS

Most liberal democracies possess some combination of statutory protections (free-speech guarantees), regulatory bodies (communications commissions), press councils, and common-law remedies (defamation, contempt). However, three recurring limits reduce effectiveness.

1. **Constitutional guarantees vs. practice.** Free-speech protections often coexist with broad public-order and national-security exceptions that can be invoked to constrain reporting. Where state actors control enforcement, the functional protection of discourse narrows.
2. **Regulatory independence.** Effective oversight requires regulators insulated from executive direction. Where appointments and funding are politicized, regulatory discretion becomes a tool of capture.
3. **Market law limits.** Competition law and transparency rules can in principle address ownership concentration, but enforcement may lag and fail to account for cross-sector influence (e.g., when industrial conglomerates own news outlets and other sectors tied to state procurement).

In India, constitutional free-speech guarantees are robust on paper, but the statutory and regulatory environment together with politically charged enforcement (e.g., tax and corporate investigations) has constrained independent reporting in practice. Statutes regulating broadcasting (e.g., the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995) and draft proposals (e.g., Broadcasting Services Bill) shape the architecture of oversight and thus matter profoundly in practice.¹⁶

VII. REMEDIES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To restore media pluralism and protect the public sphere, policy reform should be multipronged.

(A) Regulatory and institutional reforms

1. **Independent, transparent regulator.** Establish or reform broadcasting regulators with insulation from executive control: fixed-term appointments, bipartisan selection, and transparent funding.
2. **Ownership transparency and anti-concentration rules.** Mandatory disclosure of beneficial ownership of media entities; enforceable limits on cross-sector concentration that could subvert editorial independence.
3. **Public interest funding models.** Support noncommercial public service journalism through transparent, arm's-length funding mechanisms (e.g., independent public broadcasters, journalistic endowments) that reduce dependence on state advertising or oligarchic financing.

(B) Legal safeguards and due process

1. **Narrow and precise limits on speech exceptions.** Recalibrate statutes (defamation, sedition, public-order laws) to reduce chilling effects on reporting; require judicial authorization for severe censorship actions.
2. **Anti-strategic-lawsuit provisions.** Restrict abusive legal action (e.g., SLAPP suits) via fast-track dismissal mechanisms and cost shifting to deter frivolous harassment of journalists.

(C) Platform accountability and information integrity

1. **Transparency in platform-amplification.** Require disclosure of paid promotion, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and platform algorithms that overwhelmingly promote a concentrated set of channels.
2. **Support for investigative journalism.** Tax incentives or grants for investigative reporting, plus whistleblower protection laws that ensure documents and sources can reach journalists safely.

(D) Civil-society and media literacy

Civil society must be empowered: NGO monitoring of ownership, financial transparency tools, and public media literacy campaigns can immunize citizens against manufactured consent.

VIII. DISCUSSION: TRADE-OFFS, RISKS, AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Reform must balance free expression with preventing undue concentration and political capture. Heavy-handed regulation risks substituting one form of control for another. Therefore, reforms should emphasize procedural safeguards, transparency, and institutional pluralism rather than content control. A free press requires not only legal protection but economic pluralism and resilient civic institutions.

IX. CONCLUSION

Capitalist governments can through ownership alliances, economic leverage, regulatory instruments, and legal coercion convert news media from adversarial watchdogs into instruments that manufacture consent. The socio-legal consequences include impaired democratic deliberation, marginalization of vulnerable groups, weakened accountability, and erosion of institutional trust. Restoring media's democratic function requires a comprehensive agenda: regulatory independence, ownership transparency, legal protections for journalism, platform accountability, and robust civil-society infrastructure. The stakes are existential for democratic governance: without reliable, pluralistic media, the rule of law and democratic legitimacy face serious peril.

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