

❖ **DiMaggio, Anthony R. *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and The Limits of Dissent* New York: Monthly Review 2010 (pp. 288) ISBN-10: 1583671994**

Reviewed by Teodora-Crisia Miroiu — University of Sydney

Anthony DiMaggio's latest book, *When Media Goes to War*, is an admirable contribution to the study of media's coverage of international conflicts and crisis, using the Iraq War and the U.S. confrontation with Iran as main study-cases. The book represents an innovative research in the field, both by the topics it discusses and the methodology it uses. Therefore, focusing on media coverage of the Iraq withdrawal question, DiMaggio offers a comparative analysis of the United States and United Kingdom's reporting (chapters 1 and 2).

The analysis includes *New York Times* and *Independent* of London in the U.K. and the NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN channels in the U.S. Also, addressing the lack of comparative studies on cross-national media, DiMaggio's book features a careful examination of 13 English and Spanish languages newspapers around the world (from Australia and Asia, to US, Europe, South America and South Africa).

Another similar studies focus on the analysis of media coverage of Iran and its nuclear program (chapter 5, co-written with Paul Fasse), and of human rights violations (chapter 3). Such researchers include the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Chicago Tribune* and *News Week* and the NBC and CNN channels in the United States, and the *Guardian*, *New Statesman*, and *The Economist* in the United Kingdom.

The comparative studies that *When Media Goes to War* offers have a strong quantitative dimension, but also a powerful qualitative one. For instance, discussing American and British media coverage of the Iraq withdrawal question with the 2005-2007 time frame, DiMaggio uses a detailed quantitative research to support his conclusions. He takes into account various aspects such as the average numbers and percentages of stories mentioning the Iraq War and the issue of withdrawal as well as the numbers and percentages of the types of sources quoted by the news outlets examined. Also, the author closely examines the content of newspapers' editorials, analyzing the substance of the commentaries offered on withdrawal by major papers, such as *The New York Times*. On several occasions, the author's attention focuses on particular cases that he is carefully discussing, such as American media's coverage of the 15 September anti-war protest.

The book uses various theoretical approaches to support its research and conclusions and often critically discusses competing academic theories. Thus, DiMaggio argues how various theoretical approaches would function once they are applied to the necessities and realities of

media coverage. For instance, the author carefully analyses Todd Gitlin and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's arguments and examines their consistency with media's actual tendencies and developments. However, such studies would be used to reinforce or to reject some of the theories discussed as they are able or do not account for media's contemporary realities. For instance, while DiMaggio's conclusions are closer to the points of view adopted by Herman and Chomsky, he reiterates the views of some of their main critics. He also distances his conclusions from Gitlin's approach as he argues this fails to adequately describe the contemporary realities and tendencies of modern reporting.

The aspects with which DiMaggio's analysis is concerned includes the similarities and differences in media's monthly fluctuations in reporting on the withdrawal question, "the openness of American and British media to criticism of the Iraq war" (p. 31), and media's independence from official sources. The conclusions reached emphasize the strong similarities and uniformities of American media in its month-to-month fluctuations in reporting on the Iraq War to the public (90% compared with 65% overlap in the British press, for instance).

Also, the study suggests a profound lack of criticism by the US news outlets in relation to American involvement in the Iraq War, while British news outlets strongly criticized their governments' intervention in the conflict. The very few critics featured in American media never addressed substantive anti-war claims, adopting an orientation rather pragmatic approach. The United States intervention was at most, questioned in relation to its strategic approach or criticized as unwinnable or too costly. Moral and procedural arguments and "major criticisms of the American occupation as terrorist, imperialist, illegal or driven by lies and a lust for oil are omitted from the news" (p. 68), observes, the author, "in favour of pro-war claims." Analysis of specific case studies argues that American media is so unwilling to engage in criticism of the U.S. government, that this "distorts the news and conveys serious misinterpretations of the reality on the ground" (p. 63). Therefore, the 15 September anti-war protest where tens of thousands of anti-war and one thousand of pro-war activists gathered, was presented as a major pro-war event, where anti-war protestors were a 'minuscule' group.

However, such findings are related to and, eventually caused by, a third conclusion: unlike other news outlets examined, American media is highly reliant on official propaganda (Iraq news reporting is dominated by official sources). Thus, U.S. media would be described as 'parochial'. For example, it quotes only domestic officials while UK media, which is more 'cosmopolitan', focuses equally on foreign sources – international voices, non-states actors and so on. Such conclusions, reached within the first couple of chapters of the book, are reinforced by the results of the research undertaken within the following sections. The topic of media's reliance on, and dissemination of, official propaganda is actually a recurrent theme, discussed throughout the entire study. Also, these conclusions are consistent with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model.

The comparative research on media coverage of Iran and its civilian nuclear program in American and British news outlets supports the idea of American media's dissemination of official political propaganda and also reinforces Herman and Chomsky's approach. Despite the fact that no evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran was found, U.S. political leaders continue to consider Iran as a danger to American security and United States media align its reporting to such a trend, not criticizing US political leaders and propagandistically suggesting that Iran is developing (or it may be developing) a weapons program. "Media reporting on Iran is extraordinarily similar to that of reporting on Iraq – thoroughly reliant on official propaganda," concludes DiMaggio and Fasse (p. 146). This corresponds with the way United Kingdom media is distinguishing itself from the United States as the analysis of media coverage on Iraq emphasized: British media will offer a larger range of views, being more open to progressive criticism against government policies.

A similar conclusion is reached by the analysis of media coverage of civilian casualties. Thus, U.S. media stays highly propagandistic when it comes to highlighting human rights violations, failing to provide equal treatment to all victims of terror and violence – this is related to the empirical basis for Herman and Chomsky's theory of "worthy and unworthy victims". While victims of state instituted violence of the various enemy states receives a lot of attention in the media, victims of the U.S. and its allies are generally ignored.

The comparative study of national and cross-national outlets undertaken on media coverage of the Iraq War (chapter 6) is also built around the topic of pro-war propaganda's dissemination, but focuses on aspects that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model left unaddressed. DiMaggio argues that coverage by media outlets is "a function of corporate ownership and national origin" (p. 166), suggesting that a better understanding of the international reporting on Iraq would be favored by an examination of the place media outlets occupy within the global media system and the capitalist order.

Thus, the review of the manner in which newspapers from 13 countries around the world reported the Iraq War underlines the point that the international criticism toward U.S. intervention in Iraq is inversely proportionate with various countries places within the capitalist hierarchy and their own involvement in the conflict as U.S. allies. In addition, the issue of news outlets' ownership is addressed, as newspapers owned by multinational conglomerates, even though located in poor countries, will allow less room for moral criticism of the Iraq War.

DiMaggio's study follows an independent path by suggesting that American propagandistic coverage of international conflicts is due to phenomena of socialization and indoctrination of journalists. A new comparative analysis of British and American media framing of foreign policy issues would highlight differences between journalistic norms in conflict coverage. Also, another explication will focus on the nationalistic pressures that limit dissent during times of war, meeting a famous position: "impartial coverage of wars in America can sometimes be interpreted as anti-Americanism."¹

The last two chapters address issues left unexplored by Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, such as the manner American media actually influences public opinion. One of DiMaggio's conclusions correlates the level of education with the indoctrination process, arguing that higher education graduates are more easily indoctrinated by mass media. However, the conclusion is not supported by evidence and is not rooted in a strong quantitative study. Another weak conclusion would be the one regarding the way celebrity gossips divert citizens' attention from political news.

Such flaws do not by any means overshadow DiMaggio's significant contribution. As the product of extensive research, *When Media Goes to War* is essential reading for those seeking a powerful analysis of the way media reports international conflicts.

1 Nick Higham interviewing Richard Sambrook with the occasion of the 50th anniversary of BBC television news, news.bbc.co.uk.

About the Reviewer

Teodora-Crisia Miroiu is a MA by Research student at the University of Sydney, Department of Media and Communication. She is interested in conflicts analysis and media. Her research was presented in the *Journal of East-European and Asian Studies* and at several conferences. She is associated with several think-tanks and non-government organisations and writes for various literary publications.

