

**The ideological dimension of the Propaganda Model –
A case study of public service broadcasting and the War on Terror**

Flood, C.G.^a, Nickels, H.C.^a, Hutchings, S.^b, Miazhevich, G.^b

Preliminary Draft

DO NOT QUOTE

Paper presented at the conference:

20 YEARS OF PROPAGANDA?
Critical Discussions & Evidence on the Ongoing
Relevance of the Herman & Chomsky Propaganda Model
May 15-17, 2007
University of Windsor, Communication Studies,
Windsor,
Canada.

^a Department of Political, International and Policy Studies
University of Surrey
Guildford
Surrey GU2 7XH
United Kingdom
c.flood@surrey.ac.uk
h.nickels@surrey.ac.uk

^b Department of Russian Studies
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
Stephen.Hutchings@manchester.ac.uk
Galina.Miazhevich@manchester.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper examines the ideological dimension of the Propaganda Model, analysing television news coverage of Islamism and the War on Terror in public service broadcasting. The focus of the analysis has particular relevance and pertinence to the current geopolitical context of extreme tension and upheaval characterised by asymmetrical warfare, civil disturbance and international terrorism in many parts of the world. A linking thread between many of these conflicts is the presence of Islamism and religiously sanctioned violence as factors which interact with other sources of civil and political upheaval. Much political and media discourse in the West is phrased in terms of an Islamist Threat, accompanied by an implicit assumption of a *clash of civilisations* in the Lewis (1990) and Huntington (1993) mould.

The research carried out in this paper emerges from a larger project examining television news representations of Islam as security threat in Britain, France and Russia. Each of these countries has strong historic connections with Islam, is host to large Muslim populations, has been involved in military campaigns defined as part of the “War on Terror” and experienced Islamist terror at first hand. The present paper makes reference to Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model. While much has been written on the commercial media from the perspective of the Model, public service broadcasting (PSB) has been somewhat neglected. For that reason, the paper focuses on PSB, paying particular attention to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a source of inspiration and a model for public broadcasting corporations across Europe. Original case studies of news stories relating to Islamism and the War on Terror will be used as a means to investigate the nexus between Establishment ideology and media ideology in the broader framework of an ideological filter of anti-Islamism.

The BBC: guarantor of the public interest and moral arbiter

The BBC is arguably the most respected and prestigious PSB organisation in the world. Its remit is and has always been to inform, educate and entertain. Its values are to remain “independent, impartial and honest” (BBC, 2007) and to respect the diversity of British culture. The BBC actively strives to be independent from both political and commercial pressures. Crucially, for the interests of the Propaganda Model:

The BBC is financed by a TV licence paid by households. It does not have to serve the interests of advertisers, or produce a return for shareholders. This means it can concentrate on providing high quality programmes and services for everyone, many of which would not otherwise be supported by subscription or advertising. (BBC, 2007)

While the government sets the annual cost of the licence fee, it has no say in how that money will be spent. It is conceivable that the government could pressure the BBC by threatening to reduce the cost of the licence fee, but the current fee is set to increase by 3% in the next two years. In 2005, revenue from the licence fee exceeded £3 billion (BBC, 2006), which accounts for 99% of its income. Furthermore, as is the case with civil servants, employees of the BBC are not replaced when a new government comes into power. The ownership and advertisement filters would not appear to apply to the BBC.

The financial independence of the BBC allows it to focus its attention on defending the public interest and the values associated with it: Truth, Freedom, Liberty, Equality, Tolerance, etc. For that reason, strict editorial guidelines are implemented at the BBC, and these are reviewed on a continued and ad hoc basis. For instance,

The suicide bombings in London on 7 July sparked an intense public debate on the BBC use of the word ‘terrorist’. The BBC’s published *Editorial Guidelines* do not ban use of the word ... In the light of this public debate, management reviewed the published guideline. They decided not to make any change to the guideline but to publish a guidance note for BBC programme makers providing additional context on the value of precision and consistency of language. (BBC, 2006, p.18)

The editorial guidelines effectively act as a binding code of ethics.¹

Despite its financial and ethical independence, the BBC is part of both the Establishment and the fabric of British society. It can also be subjected to pressure to censor itself through its own internal processes or be placed under other forms of direct or indirect coercion if a government feels threatened by it in a way that can be construed as transgressing its proper role (the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the lead-up to the Iraq War both gave rise to cases in point). However, its PSB remit gives the BBC a degree of freedom to be critical of the Establishment – within limits – in defence of the public interest. Effectively, the PSB remit makes the BBC the moral arbiter of both the Establishment and British society. However, because of its obligations towards preserving impartiality, fairness and balance, criticism of government or of other established elites is often expressed in ‘constrained discourse’, even when news coverage assumes a more editorial tone, as the case studies outlined in this paper illustrate.

The ideological filter in the post-Communist era

The operationalisation of the ideological filter in the Propaganda Model assumes a working definition of ideology without spelling it out. The model of ideology applied by Herman and Chomsky (1988, 2002) approximates to the dominant ideology thesis in Marxist thought, in that it assumes a definition something like this:

The thesis argues that in all societies based on class divisions there is a dominant class which enjoys control of both the means of material production and the means of mental production. Through its control of ideological production, the dominant class is able to supervise the construction of a set of coherent beliefs. These dominant beliefs of the dominant class are more powerful, dense and coherent than those of subordinate classes. [...] The dominant ideology functions to incorporate the working class into a system which is, in fact, operating against the interests of labour. This incorporation in turn explains the coherence and integration of capitalist society. (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1980: 1-2)

This paper is not concerned with drivers of ideology but with its political and policy-oriented articulations in media discourse, focusing on how ideological colouring is evidenced in the news. We work with a neutral, inclusive conception of ideology, according to which ideologies are ‘sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order’, as Martin Seliger defines them in his classic study (1976: 14). The defensive-aggressive anti-Communism ideological filter that served in the Cold War years as a support of capitalist democratic systems is now largely obsolete. However, it has been replaced by other ideological constructions that “exploit public fear and hatred of groups that pose a potential threat, either real or imagined” (entry on the Propaganda Model in Wikipedia, 2007). Among these constructions are what could be termed anti-anti-globalisation, anti-terrorism and anti-Islamism. Of these, anti-Islamism figures strongly on current political and news agendas. The Violent Muslim Extremist Other (e.g. Osama Bin Laden) has emerged as an important contemporary counterpart to the Communist Other, a construct against which liberal Western values now define themselves. The Muslim extremist is portrayed as being part of a set of forces alien and hostile to the progressive Western way of life and its values, institutions, economic practices, etc.

Exploring the space between the Propaganda Model and the public service ethos

This paper explores the space between the Propaganda Model and the PSB ethos through an examination of the BBC’s coverage of news stories relating to a number of court trials concerning Islamism and the War on Terror. This type of story was chosen for analysis because such trials are at the nexus of political, judicial and public interests. Furthermore, trials are an expression of how the Establishment chooses to deal with deviance from the norm. The period of analysis extended from 1 November 2006 to 31 January 2007.² The news sample was drawn from the main evening newscast

¹ In line with the transparency advocated by the BBC, these editorial guidelines are available in full on their website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide>

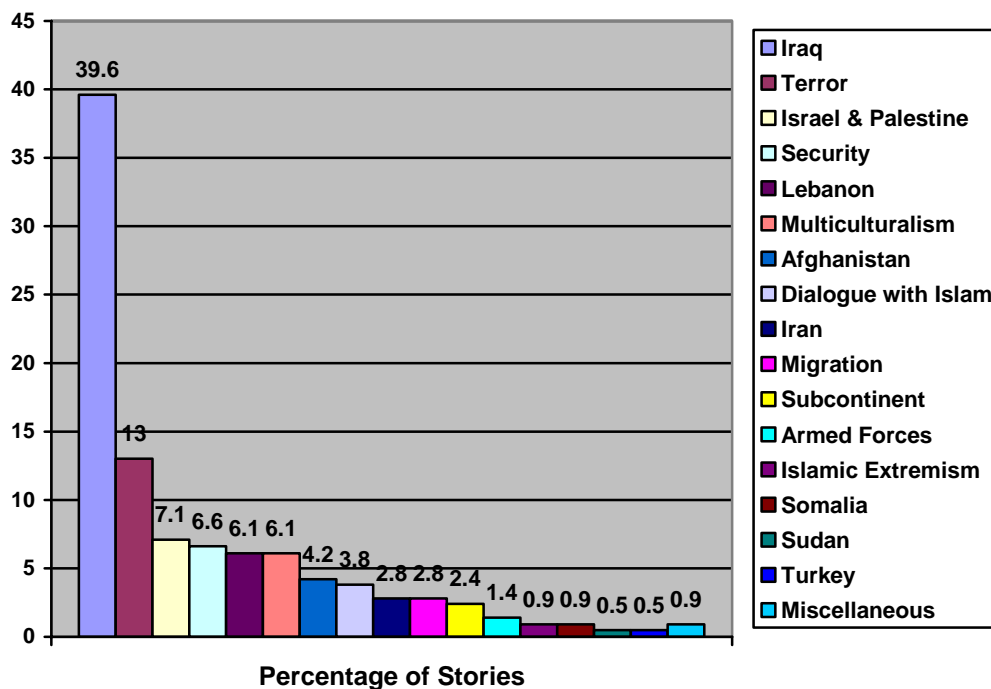
² Due to a technical failure, the newscast for 1 January 2007 could not be retrieved, and is not part of the sample.

on the BBC, the *Ten o'clock News*. 29 relevant news stories were identified, 14 of which related to the sentencing of Saddam Hussein, 11 to trials of presumed terrorists, and four to abuses of free speech. All 29 stories were subjected to a frame analysis, based on theoretical and empirical insights into framing theory from Entman (1993), Gamson (1992), Gitlin (1980), Goffman (1974), and Nickels (2007). This bottom-up frame analysis was primarily concerned with identifying ideological colourings that can be directly imputed to the BBC. This allowed for an evaluation of the degree of impartiality of news coverage, as well as for an examination of the possible operation of an anti-Islamism ideological filter.

Statistical Overview

Islam is an issue of great importance to the BBC, with the *Ten o'clock News* devoting 28.3% of its total news time to it between 1 November 2006 and 31 January 2007. News stories relating to Islam were also significantly longer than other news stories, with an average length of 2:41 minutes for the former, compared to 2:19 minutes for the latter. 212 news stories out of a total of 779 were devoted to Islam, with stories relating to the situation in Iraq dominating the news agenda, accounting for almost 40% of all Islam news stories, as can be seen in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Typology of Islam News Stories



64.3% of Islam news stories adopted an international perspective, against 35.7% adopting a national perspective. This is indicative of the prioritisation of Islam in BBC news. International Islam news stories related mainly to the situation in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and tensions in Lebanon. National Islam news stories related mainly to the situation in Iraq, security, multiculturalism and terrorism. This distribution of news stories provides indirect evidence for the operation of an anti-Islamism ideological filter, with many stories positing and emphasising a Violent Muslim Other.

Table 1, below, lists the Top 15 Actors, Issues and Locations mentioned in Islam news between 1 November 2006 and 31 January 2007, providing a glimpse of the BBC's news coverage of Islam. Table 1 reveals that UK, US and Iraqi actors are mentioned most in the news, further reinforcing the perceived importance of the situation in Iraq. The Top 15 Issues covered in the news reinforce the perceived Violent Muslim Other, with issues relating to death and destruction dominating news coverage. Finally, the Top 15 Locations mainly reflect hotspots where Islam-related trouble

flares up. All in all, this provides further indirect evidence for the operation of an anti-Islamism filter in the *Ten o'clock News*.

Table 1: Top 15 Actors, Issues, and Locations Mentioned in the News

	Actors^a	Mentions	Issues^b	Mentions	Locations^c	Mentions
1	PEOPLE	255	WAR	226	IRAQ	416
2	GOVERNMENTS	225	KILLING	170	BAGHDAD	156
3	BRITISH	214	ATTACKS	143	USA	145
4	PRESIDENT	212	BOMBS & BOMBINGS	110	BRITAIN	143
5	MINISTERS	183	VIOLENCE	110	IRAN	113
6	AMERICANS	178	SECURITY	108	STREETS	95
7	TROOPS	169	CONTROL	97	LEBANON	81
8	IRAQIS	166	FIGHTING	96	WASHINGTON	79
9	SADDAM HUSSEIN	158	TERRORISM	92	WORLD	73
10	PRIME MINISTER	147	NEEDS	87	LONDON	71
11	MUSLIMS	141	WORK	84	AFGHANISTAN	69
12	GEORGE BUSH	130	POLITICS	83	ISRAEL	63
13	POLICE	122	EXECUTION	80	SYRIA	62
14	TONY BLAIR	117	POWER	80	BEIRUT	53
15	SOLDIERS	115	DEATH	78	CITIES	50

^a 526 different actors mentioned 6845 times

^b 477 different issues mentioned 6849 times

^c 264 different locations mentioned 2992 times

Table 2, below, summarises who is given a voice in Islam news, showing the distribution of actors quoted directly and indirectly. The first thing to note is that legal representatives are quoted most, whether directly or indirectly. However, the nature of the stories that were chosen for analysis dictates that this should be the case. Nevertheless, the establishment still appears to be quoted most in the news.

Table 2: Quotation Patterns in the News

	Direct Quotes	Indirect Quotes	Total
Legal Representatives	24	20	44
Governmental Actors	12	11	23
Vox Populi	6	4	10
Security Apparatus^a	7	1	8
Political Parties^b	6	2	8
Terrorists	3	-	3
Experts^c	1	1	2
Imams	1	-	1
Think Tanks^d	1	-	1
Total	61	39	100

^a Security Apparatus: Police Forces: 4 direct, 1 indirect – US Military: 3 direct

^b Political Parties: BNP: 5 direct, 2 indirect. – Conservative Party: 1 direct

^c Middle East Analyst

^d Royal United Services Institute, security and defence think tank

With regard to quotation patterns of legal representatives, it is perhaps surprising to note that the *Accused* are quoted as much as *Judges* and the *Prosecution*, as can be seen in Table 3. Most of these quotes, however, are from Saddam Hussein, who was repeatedly portrayed as defying courts

and haranguing judges. That the prosecution is quoted significantly more than the defence can be attributed to the fact that the stories in the sample only covered time periods when the prosecution made their case.

Table 3: Quotation Patterns of Legal Representatives

	Direct Quotes	Indirect Quotes	Total
Accused	5	7	12
Judges	11	1	12
Prosecution Lawyers	4	7	11
Witnesses	3	3	6
Defence Lawyers	1	2	3
Total	24	20	44

Case Studies

The analysis of the news stories relating to the sentencing and hanging of Saddam Hussein revealed that the BBC's coverage is not strictly impartial. Indirect and implicit criticisms of the American, British and Iraqi authorities in the news provide evidence for this, as the following excerpts illustrate:

John Simpson, World Affairs Editor, 6 November 2006: *“It's been an undeniable achievement to put one of the worst dictators of modern times on trial in his country for crimes against Humanity. But like the other big achievements of the American and British invasion of Iraq, the holding of democratic elections here, the net effect of it has been to harden all the differences and divisions between Iraqis, and make them worse. So, putting Saddam on trial hasn't sorted out anything here. If anything, it's made the problems even harder.”*

Andrew North, Baghdad Correspondent, 15 January 2007: *“It's as if the Iraqi Government can get nothing right. After all the criticisms surrounding Saddam Hussein's execution, they were determined that these hangings would be by the book. Instead, they had to summon journalists to explain why the former dictator's half brother was decapitated.”*

Such indirect criticism of the policies of the British and American governments appears to go against what the Propaganda Model would predict, in that the position of the powers-that-be is not supported by the BBC, although the model does tolerate divisions within the Establishment. In effect, the BBC's position does not challenge the fundamentals of neo-liberal capitalism or of the political systems of the West. Instead, this criticism can be interpreted as the BBC echoing significant sections of British liberal (and even some conservative) opinion which judges the Bush administration's hard-right/neo-conservative international political agenda – abetted by the Blair government – to have been clumsy, ineffectual and counterproductive. The exacerbation of sectarian divisions and sectarian violence that resulted from the trial, sentencing and hanging of Saddam Hussein is repeatedly portrayed in the news as the ultimate expression of the counterproductive nature of the military campaign in Iraq, as well as of the ill-preparedness of the American-British intervention in / invasion of the country.

In the initial stages of the BBC's coverage of the sentencing of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein was unambiguously portrayed in a negative light. The news emphasised the brutality of his regime and his contempt for the court trying him for crimes against Humanity. In this context, it is then perhaps surprising to note that quasi-positive evaluations of Saddam Hussein emerged in the news around the time of his hanging. Not only did such evaluations emphasise his dignity in the face of death, but it could be argued that they also constituted indirect criticisms of the way in which the American, British and Iraqi authorities dealt with the situation in Iraq, as the following news excerpts illustrate:

John Simpson, World Affairs Editor, 30 December 2006 *“When Saddam Hussein was first captured three years ago hiding in his hole by the river side, there was quite a lot of contempt for him here for not putting up any kind of a struggle, but slowly, as he made his spirited performances in court, that started to change and now his calmness in the face of death will certainly add to the Saddam legend.”*

Major General William Caldwell, US Army, 3 January 2007: *"He [Saddam Hussein] was dignified as always, he was courteous as he had always been to his US Military Police guards. His characterisation did change at the prison facility when Iraqi guards were assuming control of him. But he was still dignified towards us. And then we had absolutely nothing to do with any of the procedures or any of the control mechanisms or anything from that point forward."*

News coverage of the aftermath of the leaked mobile phone images that showed Saddam Hussein being taunted by his executioners provides a case in point here. On top of criticisms of the Iraqi authorities for allowing such images to be filmed in the first place, the nature of this coverage suggests that the mismanagement of the hanging of Saddam Hussein was compounded by his dignity in the proceedings: here we have a man who is very calm in the face of death being confronted with executioners that are taunting him and a government that cannot keep its charges in check. This opposition of Dignity vs. Chaos emphasises the perceived incompetence of the Iraqi authorities. The US and UK authorities are not being spared either. Quoting Major Caldwell, above, the BBC appears to criticise the US military for washing their hands of any responsibility in the matter, passing all blame to what has now been established as the incompetent Iraqi authorities. Tony Blair is also portrayed as not accepting his responsibilities and being detached from a situation he contributed to creating:

John Simpson, World Affairs Editor, 6 November 2006: *"At his monthly news conference in far off Downing Street, Tony Blair said it was up to the Iraqi courts to decide on the penalty Saddam should face."*

In fact, the BBC provides an ambiguous portrayal of Tony Blair, a man with flexible moral principles and double standards: while claiming to be utterly against the death penalty, he refuses to criticise the Iraqi authorities for applying it. This can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the BBC would appear to emphasise liberal moral principles over the barbarity of the death penalty. On the other hand, the BBC could be construed as giving implicit approval to the position of Gordon Brown (Prime Minister in waiting), who unreservedly condemned the handling of the execution. Such an instance could be predicted by the Propaganda Model: George Bush and Tony Blair are perceived as fading leaders with a lesser degree of authority and political clout – one because of the Republican Party's setbacks in the November 2006 mid-term elections, the other because of his imminent departure. Criticising them in the news then becomes more acceptable while new masters are awaited.

Both the Free Speech and the Terror Trial news stories work within the boundaries of an anti-Islamism ideological filter, emphasising a perceived Islamist Threat and a Violent Muslim Extremist Other. In these stories, Muslim extremists are unambiguously portrayed as violent people intent on destroying the West and its values, brandishing incendiary placards (e.g. *Annihilate those who insult Islam*) during demonstrations against caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, or planning bomb attacks in the UK and elsewhere. The BBC deems such hatred and indiscriminate violence as wholly unacceptable abuse of acceptable moral values: defending the public interest, freedom of speech, Liberty, Truth, and the peaceful cohabitation of peoples of all creeds and races. The BBC also does not accept such abuse coming from non-Muslim actors, as evidenced in news coverage of the trial of Nick Griffin, the leader of the British National Party, who was cleared of charges of incitement to racial hatred after calling Islam a "wicked, vicious faith". This prompted a debate on whether free speech legislation was too lax and needed to be tightened to prevent such abuses. The BBC implicitly agreed that such legislation could be tightened if people who were abusing free speech could be held to account:

Mark Easton, Home Editor, 10 November 2006: *"I think the Government is well aware that much of what Nick Griffin said in that speech will be hugely offensive to a great many people, not least of course, large numbers of Muslims who might already feel under attack, or feel alienated in our society. I think there is a fear that today's acquittal might be portrayed as evidence that Britain is almost institutionally anti-Islamic. And so, tonight we saw the Chancellor Gordon Brown tell the BBC that he thinks this trial might be evidence that we need a new law."*

The Free Speech and Terror Trial stories also emphasise an Enemy Within the Gates, the British Muslim extremist intent on destroying the host country and rejecting its values. The BBC's emphasis on some Muslim extremists being British further accentuates the perceived Islamist Threat, showing

the ideology of Islamism to be pernicious and pervasive; the danger of Islamism cannot and should not be underestimated or ignored. However, even if the Enemy Within the Gates is British, his otherness is sometimes emphasised in the news, separating him from what is truly the British spirit. For instance, this portrait was drawn of Diran Barot – a British Muslim al-Qaeda operative sentenced to 40 years in prison – in the news:

Daniel Sanford, Home Affairs Correspondent, 6 November 2006: *“Born in India as a Hindu, Barot grew up and went to school in London. But in his twenties he converted and headed for the terrorist training camps of Kashmir and Afghanistan ... He went to the jungles of the Philippines, emerging as an Al-Qaeda planner, travelling to America in early 2001.”*

British Muslim extremists like Diran Barot are portrayed as being with Us, but not part of Us.

In sum, a pattern of the BBC representing mainstream British self-perceptions and ideological values against excesses and abuses (including the conduct of policy towards Iraq, where the failure of post-invasion policy triggered the sectarian excesses of the Iraqis) emerges in news coverage of the sentencing of Saddam Hussein, free speech trials and terror trials.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed five dimensions along which news coverage of Islamism and the War on Terror is organised in BBC news:

1. Their Islamism vs. Our peace-building, liberal values.
2. Their intolerance and racial hatred vs. Our tolerance and respect for freedom of speech.
3. Their sectarianism and mutual loathing vs. Our secularism and respect for one another.
4. The Iraqi government’s juridical incompetence vs. Our judicial process.

And to a lesser extent in this sample, a nationalistically coloured perception of

5. The USA’s aggressive clumsiness vs. Our measured approach.

Each of these dimensions emphasises differences between Us and Them, between Our values and Their values, reinforcing a process of *otherisation*. Within this framework, the emphasis is implicitly put on violent and intolerant Muslims whose backward and destructive values are at odds with the liberal, progressive and constructive values of Britain and the West. In effect, the BBC cannot be said to be strictly impartial in its news coverage of Islamism and the War on Terror.

With regard to the ideological dimension of the Propaganda Model, it appears that an anti-Islamism filter does operate in BBC news. This filter postulates the Violent Muslim Extremist Other who not only threatens Britain / the West and its values, but also attacks them physically and symbolically by means of terrorism. This filter offers an approximation of the clash of civilisations, or at the very least a clash of values, where Britain / the West claims the moral high ground: Islamism is a backward, repressive ideological model with flawed morals, the expansion of which has to be stopped. In this respect, predictions of the Propaganda Model would make about the media upholding western economic and strategic interests have been verified in the BBC’s news coverage of Islamism and the War on Terror. However, it is worth noting that, while it appears that the BBC is not strictly impartial despite its strict editorial guidelines and strong public service ethos, it cannot be said to cater slavishly to the interests of the government in power. Instead, as the guarantor of the public interest, it implicitly assumes a role as Britain’s moral arbiter. In this respect it may flatter itself too much, given the constraints on its exercise of that role from its place within the Establishment. Nevertheless, it is not altogether without significance.

Bibliography

- Abercrombie, N., Hill, S. and Turner, B.S.** (1980) *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- BBC** (2006) BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2005/2006.
www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/bbcannualreport.pdf,
retrieved 15 April 2007.
- BBC** (2007) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/purpose/>, retrieved 10 May 2007.
- Entman, R.M.** (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, **43**(4): 51-58.
- Freeden, M.** (1998) *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Gamson, W.A.** (1992) *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gitlin, T.** (1980) *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goffman, E.** (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay in the Organisation of Experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Herman, E.S. & Chomsky, N.** (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Herman, E.S. & Chomsky, N.** (2002) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Huntington, S.P.** (1993) The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993: 22-49
- Lewis, B.** (1990) The Roots of Muslim Rage. *The Atlantic Monthly*; **266**(3): 47-60.
- Nickels, H.C.** (2007) Framing Asylum Discourse in Luxembourg, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, **20**(1):37-59
- Seliger, M.** (1976) *Ideology and Politics*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Wikipedia** (2007) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda_Model, retrieved 12 February 2007.