Book Review

Sussman, Gerald. ed. 2011. *The Propaganda Society: Promotional Culture and Politics in a Global Context*. Peter Lang Publishing. 332pp. Paperback, \$37.36 (CA), ISBN: 978-1-4331-0996-6.

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The Propaganda Society presents a series of articles that discuss the operation of propaganda and its centrality to the normalization of neoliberal infrastructure. Despite some limitations that I outline below, the book offers readers a strong analysis of different types of propaganda and an examination of how this propaganda works to the detriment of democratic principals. Sussman starts the book by defining propaganda as “highly organized doctrinal texts communicated throughout the sound and visual media in the service of state and corporate interests (and aspiring elites)...(p. 1)”. The book’s eighteen chapters give the reader a sense of how many different forms these doctrinal texts can take ranging from “branded entertainment” (chapter three) to propaganda that reinforces the West’s “rape culture” (chapter ten). While these types of propaganda vary considerably, Sussman begins each section of the book with a brief outline that provides both a summary of each article and a description of how it fits into the book’s larger goal of analyzing the promotion of neoliberalism. Still, it would be easy to critique the book for having a somewhat fragmented feel, as each of it’s articles display differing theoretical approaches to questions about propaganda. A closer read reveals that these articles are connected by related themes, two of which are discussed below. Moreover, Sussman makes room for differing theoretical approaches with his “systemic propaganda” (SP) concept. Early in the book he clearly articulates the difference between SP and traditional forms of propaganda: whereas traditional forms of propaganda focus on the sale of specific political policy, SP describes a larger network of propaganda that sells more general global neoliberal strategies of development (p. 2, p. 14). Thus the SP concept allows for different theoretical models of propaganda to exist in tandem, suggesting that each sells separate but related policies and ideologies in a larger neoliberal project. The SP concept should prove useful to future studies of propaganda as it allows scholars to move past debates about how to best define “propaganda” and raises questions about how different types of propaganda operate together in an SP network.

As noted, there are some unifying themes that connect many of the chapters in this book, two of which are worth highlighting. The first and perhaps most prominent concerns the blurring of journalism and corporate propaganda. For example, in chapter seven Sharon Beder discusses corporate efforts to influence the public’s understanding of social issues such as climate change by using the media to highlight those in the scientific community who deny global warming. Here we see the news media transforming from a supposedly objective enterprise to one that is used by corporations to direct public opinion and secure the political conditions that are best for business. Similarly, in chapter sixteen James F. Tracy discusses the news media’s presentation of America’s recession and rising unemployment numbers as an opportunity (for individuals to go back to school or find a better fitting job) rather than a social problem (p. 275). The consequences of unemployment and the voice of workers are obscured by corporate propaganda/journalism that is more concerned with presenting the recession in a positive light than

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detailing contemporary labor issues or the root causes of the current economic conditions in the West. This is a good illustration of SP as the chapters illustrate two different types of propaganda operating with two different issues in mind (climate change and labor issues) while simultaneously acting in similar corporate interests and, in doing so, reifying similar neoliberal sentiments.

A second theme that connects many of the chapters relates to a discussion of the surveillance and exploitation of the prosumer. Sussman defines the “prosumer” as a subject position born out of the blurring of the producer and the consumer (p. 10). This blurring is largely the result of the popularization of websites that allow individuals to share information and media over the Internet. According to Sussman, advertising agencies have taken full advantage of this production through data-gathering and surveillance measures that allow them to monitor prosumers. In chapter five Tim Dwyer discusses datamining, one example of such a measure that can be used to gather information about the consumer, creating new opportunities for corporations to create personalized adverts and other forms of propaganda that are embedded directly into popular websites. Dwyer recognizes that it would be simplistic to limit the prosumer’s efforts to exploitable “gift labor.” There is more to online expression than datamining. That said, many media sharing websites are built specifically with corporate goals in mind, meaning commercial advertising remains their primary purpose (p. 86). Most of the book’s discussions of the prosumer and independent media follow this logic. Baltruschat’s discussion of branded entertainment, for example, frames independent media as something that can be reappropriated by corporations for their own interests (p. 47).

Interestingly, some of the chapters in the book’s final section cite a need to support independent media as they could provide the public access to information that is less directly controlled by corporations. In chapter nine Michael Barker accentuates the need to support independent media for the purposes of uncovering exploitive corporate behavior that is being hidden by celebrity philanthropy (p. 156). At the end of chapter eleven Douglas Kellner makes similar claims about the potential for new media to provide the public with alternative sources of critical information about corporations (p. 190). Sussman also concludes his epilogue by citing the need to support independent media. Unfortunately, despite these statements about the importance of alternative sources of news and media content, the only extended discussions of independent media and user-generated content are those related to the exploitation of the prosumer. Despite hints about the importance of independent media and the inclusion of a number of theoretical tools that would be valuable to discussions of user-generated content (future studies of the prosumer could draw on Matthew P. McAllister’s “para-paratext” (p. 73) concept to explore the relationship between user-generated content and commercial propaganda), an in-depth discussion of the politics of the prosumer’s user-generated content or the agency of independent media never develops. Future studies of propaganda should attempt to answer questions about the independent media’s role in a propaganda society; how do independent media and user-generated content relate to commercial propaganda? How do we reconcile the role that media sharing websites play as spaces for both the spread of independent media including user-generated content and the spread of the corporation’s advertising? Such vital questions are not addressed in any sustained way in this book. Despite this unfilled need, *The Propaganda Society* is a satisfying read and one that could benefit those interested in studying propaganda and promotional culture.

¹ Research Interests: The Surveillance of police officers and the sharing of amateur video footage of police misbehavior on YouTube.com.