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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS: SELLING THE COLD WAR CONSENSUS

Network television news was born at the dawn of the Cold War. These two behemoths have shaped American political life during the second half of the twentieth century, and their history is deeply intertwined.

Television news portrayed the communist threat to the American way of life through the lens of consumer capitalism. In the first five years of regular network news reporting, Americans saw or heard about the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift, the Communist revolution in China, the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb, the conviction of Alger Hiss, the Korean War, and the Senate hearings on subversion conducted by Joseph McCarthy from their Farnsworth, RCA, or DuMont television sets. They learned about the fearsome new nuclear age from a medium that, between news reports, sold them toothpaste, automobiles, cigarettes, refrigerators, laundry detergent, beer, and aluminum siding. Images of annihilation were bound up with teasers for consumption.

But underlying this simple proximity of images, the institutional interests of the broadcasting networks exerted basic and powerful influence on television's portrayal of events. The networks were corporations whose purpose was to generate revenue for their shareholders. Capitalism, with its complex and sometimes contradictory impulses, set limits on the range of debate about political issues, selected the voices that would have legitimacy in national debates, and established standards for news reporting that fundamentally shaped the way Americans came to understand the world struggle.

Television became an emblem of, as well as a conduit for, the West's position in the Cold War. In its battle against communism, the U.S. prized the freedom of information – in thinking, speaking, writing, publishing, and broadcasting – as a fundamental value to be protected from totalitarian lies. Most Americans believed that the corporate owned and commercially sponsored television industry represented the freest, best, and only

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alternative to state-controlled information. The pitfalls of trading political information in a carnivalesque marketplace paled in comparison with the specter of Soviet-style enforced ideology.

Despite this faith in the superiority of a market society, the global military threat posed by communism seemed to so endanger freedom that many cold warriors did not trust that democracy would prevail in a free marketplace of ideas. The agencies comprising the national security state¹ established offices, bureaus, and services to control the flow of information both abroad and at home, to ensure that it would serve the cause of anticommunism. As so often happens in war, even in just war, truth was the first casualty.

This book tells the story of a partnership between government information officers and network news producers to report and sell the Cold War to the American public. It chronicles dozens of news and public affairs series produced in collaboration between the inexperienced federal information bureaus and the fledgling network news divisions. Much of the news about the early Cold War on television was scripted, if not produced, by the defense establishment. These programs defined American freedom as the absence of government control.

While individuals on both sides of the public-private divide held firm Cold War convictions and saw their work as the fulfillment of a patriotic duty, each set of institutions principally followed its own self-interested logic in producing these programs. Government information agencies sought to control the information reaching the public, and the networks needed extensive help from the government to produce their early news programs. As the 1950s progressed, this neat dovetailing diminished, and while government officers continued to advise the news operations, they relinquished the official role of co-producer. Yet the stunning and outright collaboration practiced between 1948 and 1954 in producing news and public affairs programs shaped the institutional relationships between the defense establishment and the television industry for decades, and it disseminated a picture of East-West relations steeped in consumer-oriented anticommunism.

Voluntarism was the hallmark of television's contribution to the Cold War mobilization. From President Truman and the network chairmen through the clerks and technicians charged with the daily release of government information and its broadcast through the air, these men believed in the freedom guaranteed by private ownership of communications facilities. Yet they worked together to use those channels principally for the distribution of official information, to indoctrinate the American public to

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support U.S. Cold War policy. It was war, and all information became military information. Public service programming, required of stations for the use of the public frequencies, became the distribution channel for federal propaganda.

The scope of this domestic U.S. effort pales in comparison with the aggressive anticommunist propaganda campaigns that the United States waged abroad, and with the thoroughgoing ideological control exerted within the Soviet Union. Even in its infancy, television provided endless information and opinion, much of it conscientiously produced, some of it admirable. Yet the story told here shows how the very routines of objective journalism supposed to guarantee freedom of information fit the needs of the national security state and embraced the specific and virulent anticommunism of the early Cold War. The belief that the American system of broadcasting was a valuable stake and a crucial weapon in the Cold War quickly transposed into the assumption that the system was actually and fully free, a belief it became nearly impossible to challenge.

The American devotion to freedom of thought limited the extent of domestic propaganda, but it also shaped the propaganda itself. The networks tailored the programs made with official guidance to look spontaneous and voluntary, and the government avoided direct association with any one network or any individual broadcaster. In effect, propaganda had to be competitive. Most officially produced shows gained the typical audience for news, and government involvement remained invisible, or at least uncontroversial. Between 1948 and 1954, what amounts to a joint public-private propaganda operation distributed defense and security information to the American public through the commercial broadcast system, and no one objected, or even seems to have noticed. As television matured, information officials grew more sophisticated at embedding Cold War messages into more popular entertainment programs, and avoided the apparent, if unremarked, impropriety of official control of news programming.

Ironically, television's commercialism suggested to homegrown ideologues that the medium was ripe for traitorous infiltration. Its frivolity, and the sheer number of artists required to fill a network schedule, suggested a dangerous softness. Anticommunist blacklists policed the broadcasting industry to prevent secret brainwashing of the viewing public by agents of the Soviet Union. The networks, due to their dependence on skittish corporate sponsors, dutifully fired suspected leftists and required loyalty oaths from their employees. Despite these fearful accommodations, the networks retained their claims to be vigilant protectors of

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freedom. It was axiomatic that private control of information surpassed state control in protecting liberty, and that belief eclipsed the broadcasting industry's vulnerability to commercial blackmail or other forms of corporate bias, including their tendency to support uncritically the defense and security establishment.

This is a story about deliberate attempts to construct what historians call the "Cold War consensus." The people involved wrestled with the hard question of how to ensure public support in a democracy for sustaining a long-term, worldwide mobilization. Sometimes they admitted that their practices mimicked totalitarian methods, only dressed up for a public invested in freedom of information. Most of the time, they professed a fierce belief that their government and private American institutions comprised the greatest counterpoint to Soviet power, and they defended their practices as necessary to democracy's survival. When they lied, they worried that exposure might harm them and their institutions, but they also believed sincerely that their lies served the ultimate interests of freedom. Such problematic exposure never came, in part because Americans overwhelmingly shared their belief in the righteousness of American institutions, and in part because they worked hard to disguise their programs. They fought to guarantee proper thought and sufficient resolve in the American public to wage Cold War.

Institutional Logics

How did these collaborations begin, why did they end, and why are they important? Government information officials saw many advantages in recruiting private media companies to sell the Cold War. The Congress and the American public would not tolerate direct government propaganda. Information officials saw programs of their own design go on the air, and through voluntary network public service, they exerted virtually all the control over content that they wanted. They avoided the political imbroglios over state control of information that had plagued the information services during World War II (described in Chapter One), and they garnered evidence for the Cold War propaganda claim that Americans supported their government's security policies freely, without totalitarian coercion. This system saved the government a great deal of money and testified to claims of business's superior efficiency.

The answer to the question of why the networks participated is more complicated. The television medium matured rapidly, both in its reach and

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in its polish. Between 1949 and 1959, Americans bought six or seven million sets each year, until eighty-six percent of homes had one. The number of stations on the air jumped from 69 to 609, with more than ninety percent affiliated with a major network. The networks posted their first profits in 1951 and cleared almost \$90 million by 1959.² But that future was by no means clear in 1948. Well into the 1950s, the news divisions had small budgets and lost more money than they made. Coverage of even the most climactic political crises always had to be (and still are) weighed in terms of profitability. Government-produced and co-produced programs filled their schedules cheaply and easily.

A second financial factor was the harsh political climate of the Second Red Scare. Network sponsors shied away from programs with independent editorial voices, particularly those that counseled restraint in erecting a security state. Government-produced programs were politically safe. If they rarely attracted direct sponsorship, they cost nothing and did not alienate sponsors from the network.

Why, then, did the networks co-produce so many programs with the Department of State, the agency most fiercely attacked by McCarthy and others for harboring secret communists? In part this collaboration reflected the close personal ties between public and private information professionals. Broadcasters knew their counterparts at the Department of State to be patriotic Americans; many were World War II veterans from the same units of the Office of War Information or the Army Signal Corps. Executives and correspondents privately (and very rarely, publicly) dismissed the accusations of mass disloyalty. State department officials invited close scrutiny from such basically friendly reporters as a way of disproving charges against the department. And getting the inside story about official government activity actually enhanced broadcasters' standing in the mainstream journalism community.

In addition, broadcasters judged the long-term goodwill of high-ranking officials and continued access to exclusive government information to be more important to the news divisions' success and to corporate stability than placating red-baiters in the Congress. By demonstrating respect for the executive branch, and by stressing their faith in the harsh light of publicity to uncover any real wrongdoing, network brass overrode any reticence about working with temporarily suspect agencies.

Why did these collaborations end? By the mid-1950s, the networks no longer had an acute need for cheap news programs. They could afford to produce or buy better quality programming to satisfy the growing and

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more demanding television audience. The news divisions produced their own programs with continued government help and approval, and they garnered the same public service return for their efforts, but these programs were no longer labeled as having been produced by or with the assistance of a federal agency. Production values improved, and problematic institutional ties grew harder to see.

The question of why these programs were important can be answered in several ways. Government information officials foresaw that television would be increasingly important to citizenship, and from the outset of the Cold War, they used television principally to sell policy. The Cold War was the most important news story of the decade, and the government was overwhelmingly the networks' most important, and often sole, source for breaking news. The routines of television news gathering were shaped and embedded in this mutual dependency. The most crucial terms for the relationship between television news and the federal defense and security establishment were set when these institutions worked in close collaboration, yet this story has never been told before.

The story is also important to counter a general misperception about the relationship between the government and the media. Most Americans construe their news media as aggressively oppositional and never see the extent to which the government controls the release of information, sells its version of events, and receives media cooperation in promoting its agenda. In the 1980s, for instance, the federal government spent a billion dollars a year on public relations programs.³ Officials tightly controlled the release of information, did so in extremely calculated ways ("spin"), insisted on the use of manageable journalistic pools in combat areas, and continually used television as a diplomatic and military tool. Far more than dissent, support of government programs by the news media was the basic pattern in the Cold War era, if not since. Although the orientation to profit drives a limited oppositionalism in news programming, the networks rarely pursue stories against their fundamental interest in corporate and social stability.⁴

And perhaps this history is most important because in the early Cold War interlude in communications history, we can see how a particular world view, representing particular interests and sometimes extreme interpretations of world events, was naturalized as objective, true, and free. Truth, as always, took on the particular cast and hue of its era. In the interest of democracy, we must continue to historicize and contextualize the truth claims of both the government and the news media.

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Introduction: The Marketplace of Ideas**7****Excavating Culture**

My purpose here is not to prove, or even to explore, a theoretical model of culture. I wish to describe a particular culture and to explode two assumptions deeply embedded in the political culture of the Cold War in the United States. These two assumptions – that the U.S. government valued a free marketplace of ideas, and that the commercial marketplace guaranteed free debate – are astonishingly resilient and, at the height of the Second Red Scare, had a quality of irrefutability. This logic held that because communists followed a preset ideological line, they were incapable of objectivity. Therefore to be objective, one could not be a communist. And because neutrality was untenable in the bipolar world, to be objective, one had to be anticommunist, which was to say, capitalist.

It does not diminish the horror of totalitarianism to say that the market-based system in the United States has not served freedom and democracy perfectly. Indeed, inasmuch as private broadcasters gave the airwaves over to state designs, they duplicated totalitarian practices.

The “marketplace of ideas” that the United States so fervently defended in the Cold War has many meanings. Proponents of free speech in the American legal tradition have used the phrase when defending the right to subversive speech. They argue that all ideas, no matter how foreign or radical, should be subject to open debate and that sound ideas will survive the fray. In this usage, the market refers not to an arena for commercial transactions but to a forum for rational argumentation and critique. Throughout most of Western history, the state has posed the principal threat to this right. The poet John Milton expressed the perennial belief that truth always triumphs over tyranny this way: “and though all the windes of doctrin were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter.”⁵

In twentieth-century American culture, this notion has fused with a more literal understanding of the marketplace. Rather than intellectual rigor, the mechanism for sifting ideas is the invisible hand of commercial exchange. If an idea has value (this equation goes), it will sell. Proponents of free enterprise assume that the marketplace acts with the same fine discrimination as protracted argumentation, and that the best ideas, often defined as the most useful as opposed to truest, will prevail after a com-

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petitive contest. They often imply that this sifter is more democratic than the elitist pursuit of rational debate. Financial rewards as well as intellectual satisfaction flow to the winner, and what could be more American than that?

Throughout the twentieth century, critics of this notion have warned that a substitution of commerce for intellectual discipline would undermine the American political system. The advent of mass media, by placing vast distances between political writers and their audiences, and by requiring large amounts of capital to distribute political information, seemed to impair the deliberative processes of democracy. In 1947, a distinguished panel of public intellectuals called the Commission on Freedom of the Press, funded principally by Time-Life founder Henry Luce, issued a report on the future of "A Free and Responsible Press." It pointed clearly to the conflict between the moral responsibility of the press to protect unpopular or even dangerous speech and the financial pressures facing mass media corporations to censor such speech.⁶ Luce, understandably, rejected these conclusions and, predictably, tried to suppress the publication of the report. He did publish it as a supplement to his *Fortune* magazine, but he hardly needed to worry. The grave concerns of Robert Hutchins, Zechariah Chaffee, Reinhold Niebuhr, and their eminent colleagues on the commission barely remained afloat in the vast ocean of enthusiasm for the rewards of consumer capitalism that swept over the nation in the decade after World War II.

The Cold War cemented the rhetorical triumph of the marketplace as the best guarantor of liberty in human relations and freedom in the exchange of ideas. Yet a deep irony remains at the heart of this triumph. Commercial broadcasters volunteered to do the ideological work of the national security state at home, and the rhetoric of the market shielded this collaboration from public scrutiny. The broadcasting industry acted as a shill for the state and set to work selling the Cold War to the American public. In a country that defined freedom as the presence of markets and the absence of government control, this requires some explanation, and that explanation begins in the dilemmas of a total fight for democracy.

Whether this effort to sell the Cold War succeeded is another question, and one that lies beyond the scope of this book. Hard-line anticommunist views unquestionably pervaded the country, but gauging the precise effects of a government information program designed to garner public support for a particular policy or even to promote a general climate of opinion is just not possible. One problem lies with the sources that chart public

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opinion. Not only are surveys notoriously selective, but Christopher Simpson has powerfully demonstrated how between 1945 and 1960 the emerging discipline of mass communications research, particularly the prominent centers for public opinion research and the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, were shaped by the direct influence of CIA, state department, and military psychological warfare programs. Perhaps because they knew this, public information officials in the state department deeply distrusted the mechanisms for measuring public opinion as unscientific.⁷

Another difficulty lies in separating the effects of one cultural source from another. How can we separate the effects of the dozens of news and public affairs programs co-produced by government agencies from those of many others produced independently by the networks, or the effects of news and public affairs programs from those of entertainment programs with Cold War plots and themes, or the effects of television news from those of films, radio, newspapers, or magazines? We cannot.

The trickiest and most interesting question in gauging the effects of these programs is how to identify preexisting public sentiment, or how to recognize genuine consent. Anticommunism certainly suffused American culture and policy well before 1947. Most Americans shared an ideological repugnance toward the Soviet experiment before and while the United States was allied with the USSR to defeat the Nazis. There was good reason for democrats to fear Joseph Stalin and to loathe the diplomatic and geopolitical outcomes to World War II in Eastern Europe. Yet we can also mark several junctures where U.S. information agencies exaggerated Soviet military aims and capabilities, usually to wrest appropriations for containment programs through a cost-conscious, isolationist Congress. We shall examine several of these junctures, notably around the passage of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan and at the time of NSC-68 and the beginning of the war in Korea. Raising the Soviet threat rarely failed to close the ranks and get the funding, but the “peddlers of crisis” often forgot that it was their own rhetoric. Any means became justifiable. U.S. Cold War propaganda, comically and tragically, became a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁸

I leave aside the question of effects to focus on institutions, and more specifically, to explore the dynamics of information production. A body of scholarship has emerged in the last few years that, taken together, shows an aggregate effort by consumer-oriented corporations to promote a particular brand of Americanism that must be reckoned with in any discussion of the postwar consensus.⁹ Individual corporations, trade associations, and business advocacy groups all engaged in energetic campaigns to

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promote a world view, as well as particular policies, tied to their own prosperity.

The rhetoric of these campaigns successfully tied corporate self-interest to notions of the broader public interest, just as the marketplace-of-ideas metaphor conflated commercial competition with intellectual debate. The most emblematic statement of this view, though one consistently misquoted, is Charles Wilson's statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee considering his nomination as secretary of defense in 1953, "What was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa."¹⁰ Beyond this equation of corporations with the nation was the notion that corporations were more efficient and politically better than government. Acting voluntarily, free enterprise could accomplish social ends quickly and easily, without the taint of totalitarian coercion.

The sources drawn on here are intoxicatingly explicit in showing how the corporate producers of culture cultivated their own legitimacy. For this reason, I sympathize with those who stress the power of institutions in recent scholarly debates about cultural hegemony. Because the subjects were themselves concerned with selling their own credibility as well as their policies, many ingredients in the hegemony recipe can be found here. I certainly do not, as this position is often misrepresented, deny the power of audiences to resist mass-produced meaning. Indeed, this book documents as many failures as successes in the attempt to mold public opinion about specific issues, or even to gain an audience for the attempt. But it seems to me that the concept of cultural hegemony, used as a descriptive tool rather than a scientific model, aids our understanding of certain moments in history, as well as certain kinds of questions about culture.¹¹

When consensus is strong, dominant institutions exert tremendous power to delineate legitimate lines of debate and exclude others. The political climate during the early Cold War, especially concerning questions of foreign policy, is perhaps the foremost example of that kind of time in U.S. history. The concept of hegemony may be a less appropriate tool when describing times more ridden by dissent or when describing entertainment genres rather than "actuality" forms like news. In the story told here, a network oligopoly worked collaboratively with the federal government to sway viewers into supporting national security policies. Furthermore, powerful political players in this era successfully defined opposition to these policies as sedition. That would certainly seem to qualify as hegemonic.

We have to ask how much of the postwar consensus is a manufactured product. This was a seductive world view full of shining goods, moral