

A Propaganda System - How Canada's Government, Corporations, Media and Academia Sell War and Exploitation

Review of Yves Engler's Book

By [Jim Miles](#)

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With the image that the Canadian government fosters, for both domestic and foreign affairs, and that "nine out of 10 Canadians think this country is a force for good", it is a serious reflection that Canada has an efficient and effective propaganda system. Yet the proof of this image propagation is strongly defined in Yves Engler's latest critique of Canadian "values" - and certainly not the undefined "values" used by all politicians - A Propaganda System - How Canada's government, corporations, media and academia sell war and exploitation.

As Engler puts it in his introduction "The idea of a benevolent Canadian foreign policy...is well grounded in structures of propaganda." And as how the emphasis is to "sell war and exploitation," Engler indicates that there are many avenues of "marketing" Canada's image, but "it is the military that has Canada's largest PR machine" as it "aggressively protects its image and promotes its worldview."

He begins quite naturally discussing "Canada's largest PR machine - The Military." The presentation of material covers a broad spectrum of influences, revealing the intertwined roles of the military with the government, academia, and the media (writ large). It shows how there is a large structure of think tanks and university courses and programs supported by the Department of National Defence (DND).

In subsequent chapters these ideas are given more definition. The following chapter "Military Institutes and Think Tanks" describes various formal organizations nominally outside of government and how they influence popular opinion and perceptions, as well as swaying politicians into line with military constructs.

Money obviously plays a large role in this. Perhaps the largest myth overall, and one frequently heard from our dominant ally the U.S. is that of the military as a necessity for an "organization of our total economy, our industrial base, towards a single objective - the defence of this country." While that single objective has not been fully realized, corporations working within the military framework offer a high percentage of the remaining living wage positions in industrial Canada.

Yet it goes further, reminiscent of Thomas Friedman's infamous remark about the U.S.

economy and trade and commerce protected by the “hidden fist of the military,” as the DND and the Molson Foundation “advocated increased military spending to defend free trade.” Say what...??? Can the authors of this and similar statements not realize how fully contradictory the idea of military control and free trade are? It’s almost mind numbing in its arrogance based on wilful ignorance.

The next Chapter focuses on “The Academic Connection” and outlines the many links between the government, the military in particular, and many of the “think tanks” that provide propaganda cover for foreign policy initiatives. Its initial focus is on the Munk Centre at the University of Toronto, being “Canada’s most influential global studies program...the brainchild of a mining [magnate] with a significant personal stake in a particular foreign policy.” That foreign policy covers many regions of the world and the program’s policies are designed to stifle resistance to the damages created by the mining interests, and the interests of Israel in relation to the Palestinians.

“Arms Lengths Institutions” continues with exposing other supposedly independent operations. Part of the emphasis is on how aid is used for appearances of doing good but “may be used to induce the underdeveloped countries to accept the international status quo.” Part of this are the IMF’s ‘structural adjustment programs’. Another part is the failed doctrine of “right to protect” “used by the powerful against the weak” as Canada has done in Yugoslavia, Libya, Haiti, Syria/Iraq and Afghanistan. For the latter the idea of supporting Afghan women “used feminism to justify imperialism.” Looking at Afghanistan now, it is obvious that too many lives and a lot of money were wasted in a bogus ‘humanitarian’ war.

Many different areas are covered in the chapter “Owning the media,” ranging from the overthrow of Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti to the corrupt use of aid to the Palestinian Authority on to Cambodia, East Timor, the global mining community, and General Motors (and the power of advertising and sponsorship). Following from the latter Engler discusses the huge influence from U.S. media, how journalists are embedded with the armed forces, and the structural biases of the media to report only the mainstream spin and ignore items that do not fit the government point of view. He ends with a quote from Chomsky and Herman writing about “manufactured consent” the idea that filters are applied that support “elite domination of the media and the marginalization of dissidents.”

In effect, if someone in media has made it into the mainstream, they are working willingly with these filters believing they are being objective, or as often promoted, using the idea of ‘balanced’ reporting.

The last two chapters are the most powerful as they bring together the ideas of propaganda from throughout the work and demonstrate how they have worked through the various wars that Canada has promoted over the course of its history. The lies, distortions, omissions, and fabrications are used by the government and the media; this “dynamic propaganda system is prepared to obfuscate, suppress and lie during war.” It could be added, in consideration of current events in Syria and Ukraine, to demonize the ‘other’, to create an evil ‘other’, an evil enemy that the government can use to focus the ignorance of the population on.

Engler’s A Propaganda System is a dense read in that it is fully referenced and puts forth many connections in a short space. It serves as a great inventory of Canadian propaganda misdeeds, a valuable compendium and resource book for anyone examining global foreign affairs in relation to Canada. In essence, it is an examination of Canada’s ‘deep state’ – the people and the institutions that truly have the power to decide on both domestic and foreign

policies. Combined with his previous volumes on the harmful nature of Canada's foreign policies, Engler has developed a strong, well referenced library of powerful information useful for and informed and critical examination of Canada and its role in the world.

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