

## **MANUFACTURING CONSENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL REGION**

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### **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM), this study examines how consent is manufactured among higher-education faculties in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region—a political union comprising six Arab states: Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Specifically, it studies the relevance of the five filters that comprise the Propaganda Model (i.e., *ownership, dependence on revenue, information sourcing, flak, and convergence in the dominant ideology*) to how GCC-based higher-education faculties engage in behaviors that filter reality to promote and shield the interests of policy makers in the region. The aim is to scrutinize how GCC faculties are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas at both the local and global levels.

**Keywords:** Propaganda model, higher education, faculty, Gulf Cooperation Council Region

## Introduction

In their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky proposed the Propaganda Model (PM), which they defined as ‘an analytical framework that attempts to explain the performance of the US media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi). Herman and Chomsky argue that ‘Among their other functions, the [American] media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them’ (p. xi). They point out that one role of the American media is to manufacture consent among journalists by leveraging propaganda to mobilize bias in favor of corporate and political elites. Consequently, most news content journalists report is oriented toward social reproduction—namely, the continuation of the capitalist system and its economic orthodoxies. Herman and Chomsky identified five editorial components or ‘filters’ that manufacture journalist consent: ownership, *dependence on revenue*, *information sourcing*, *flak*, and *convergence in the dominant ideology*. Although Chomsky (2002) suggests that the PM ‘is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences’ (p. 18), Herring and Robinson (2003) argue that the model is sidelined in academia, asserting that while the sphere itself ‘is very strongly disciplined by the operation of the filters outlined in the propaganda model’ (p. 562), these filters operate differently (Pedro, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the current study examines the relevance of the five filters inherent in the PM to the higher-education context. In particular, it relates these filters to higher education institutions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region — a political union of six Arab states: Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The aim is to examine how consent for political, economic, and social agendas is manufactured among higher-education faculties in the GCC.

This study is structured as follows. I first provide a brief note on how the PM is leveraged to manufacture consent in media while touching upon the relevant literature. Next, I briefly discuss the relevance of the PM to the context of academia before examining how consent is manufactured among GCC-based higher-education faculties. Next, I highlight spaces for divergence and dissidence and argue that these filters are not omnipotent. Finally, I provide concluding remarks.

### **A Note on the propaganda model in Media**

As mentioned earlier, Herman and Chomsky first introduced the PM in 1988 to explain the American media's performance patterns about news production. They identified five filters through which news must pass before emerging into the mainstream: *ownership, dependence on revenue, information sourcing, flak, and convergence in the dominant ideology*. These filters are spelled out in further detail in the coming section.

Herman and Chomsky argue that globalisation and privatisation have transformed the American media, leading to the creation of the first filter of the PM—namely, *ownership*. Big corporations—many of which are part of even bigger conglomerates—began to own the media, often quite literally. By virtue of this ownership, these corporations can determine the political–economic climate in the news: favourable representation, for example, can be given to political and economic parties that serve the owners’ interests (Smith, 2017), and media owners will be less likely to criticise policies that benefit them directly (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The owners’ end game is profit, so it is in their interests to push for whatever will guarantee that profit. Indeed, as Smith (2017) points out, truth is valuable only to the extent it sells more newspapers. Such forms of ownership lead to a *dependency on profits*, the second filter of the PM. Smith (2017) argues that ‘Advertising is the prevalent source of profit made by media organisations, and thus, media must endeavour to maintain a favourable marketing platform for advertisers by serving their interests’ (p. 150). In being unwilling to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’, media organisations ensure that their news content does not hinder the sales of their advertisers. Concomitantly, media organisations rely on government, corporations, political actors, police departments, and corporations as information sources when formulating their news content. This leads to the third filter of the PM—namely, *sourcing*. These aforementioned sources feed the media organisations with a continuous supply of information deemed newsworthy (e.g., official accounts, interviews with experts, etc.). Such authorised and sanctioned information features heavily in

the news, while other sources of information are marginalised (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). When journalists attempt to challenge the power structure and stray away from the consensus, they receive *flak*—the fourth filter of the PM. Flak is the outcome when journalists introduce news that challenges the dominant discourse, and it takes the form of complaints, lawsuits, petitions, and threats, among other punishments. Finally, to manufacture consent among journalists and corral public opinion, media organisations seek to identify an enemy—a ‘bogyman’—to fear. This leads to the creation of the fifth filter of the PM—namely, *convergence in the dominant ideology*. In the American media context, this enemy has taken the form of communism, terrorists, and immigrants, Islamism, among others.

According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), these filters are the most decisive factors in determining what constitutes ‘news’ in the American media. Eventually, such ‘filtered’ news serves elite interests by creating propaganda oriented towards social reproduction—that is, the continuation of capitalist society and the capitalist economy. Consequently, these filters restrict journalists from being free and independent. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the PM does not attempt to conjecture or theorise on the actual effects on, or the reception of, various audiences.

Herman and Chomsky predicted back in 1988 that their model would not gain traction in academic spheres; this prediction was, and still is, accurate. Mullen (2010) notes the presence of the PM,

however subtle, in European and North American scholarship (i.e., journals, textbooks, conferences). Even when it does appear, there needs to be more engagement and discussion with regard to its presence (Jo & Pedro, 2011). For critics, the PM connotes a conspiratorial perspective that seems to dramatize the power of the elites (Brahm, 2006) and underestimate widespread opposition to elites' interests (Lang & Lang, 2004). Critics see the PM as politically deterministic, functionalist, simplistic, and a 'blunt tool' for scientific analysis. Still, for advocates, the PM is an anti-elitist model that would be widely accepted and applied if it did not represent an attack on elite interests (Jo & Pedro, 2011). Scholars have made attempts to strengthen (Klaehn, 2003), update (Smith, 2017), expand (Boyd-Barrett, 2004), validate (Mullen, 2010) the PM, and apply it to the higher-education context (e.g., Jo & Phelan, 2005).

### **The propaganda model in academia**

Kavanagh (2012) notes that '... the idea of the university is perhaps best understood through analysing its relationship with other institutions over time' (p. 101). For him, the evolution of universities' role throughout history and across cultures is comparable to the fool's role in the medieval royal court. He argues that the fool has used masquerades to function as a storyteller addressing audiences. Universities as foolish institutions mean that, historically, they have been reconstructing their role constantly to serve one of the main five sovereign societal agencies: The State, the Church, the Nation, the Professions, and the

Corporation (Kavanagh, 2012). In this sense, the role of academics in sustaining the dominant ideology at the expense of *truth* has been flagged and criticised by anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian thinkers alike (e.g., Chomsky, 1967; Bourdieu, 1984; Said, 1996; Collini, 2012; Kavanagh, 2012; among others). It has been argued that higher-education institutions, like the media, are subject to filtering processes (Herring & Robinson, 2003). For Chomsky and Otero (2003), 'The whole education system involves a good deal of filtering... and it's a kind of filtering toward submissiveness and obedience' (p. 392). Herring and Robinson (2003) argue that the PM is side-lined in academia, as the sphere itself 'is very strongly disciplined by the operation of the filters outlined in the propaganda model' (p. 562); these filters do operate differently, however (Pedro, 2011). In such cases, Edward Said (1996) urges academics not to consolidate authority but to understand, interpret, and question it. He writes, 'the intellectual is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense' (p. 23). That is a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or ready-made clichés or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly but actively willing to say so in public. For Said (1996), this is not always a matter of being a critic of official policies, but rather of 'thinking of the intellectual vocation as needing to maintain constant vigilance, and to be perpetually willing not to let half-truths or received ideas steer individuals along' (p. 23). This assertion is precisely the focus of the coming sections.

## **Manufacturing consent in GCC Higher Education through a propaganda model**

In this section, I relate the five filters that comprise the PM to the ways through which GCC-based higher education faculties, consciously and willingly or otherwise, engage in behaviors that filter reality to promote and shield the interests of the elites in the region. I do so by discussing the filters that constitute the PM in terms of the contemporary sociopolitical and economic circumstances of the GCC region. My analysis is informed by three main sources: (1) theoretical explanations and empirical data—when relevant and available, (2) institutional reports, plans, and websites, and (3) my *professional voice* as a GCC-based higher education faculty. I argue that all of these sources are of equal importance. I am cautious not to fall into the trap of generalisation. Instead, I seek to engage in what Mignolo (2013) refers to as ‘border thinking,’ which entails ‘the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside’ (p.3). The aim is to emerge from the silence and bear witness to the ‘scarcity-thinking’ concerning the various types of propaganda in GCC higher education that seeks to manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas among faculties.

Table (1) presents a general overview of the primary filters discussed in the coming sections, along with their dimensions and implications. The ellipses indicate the possibility of adding other dimensions for each filter that would further contribute to the

development of the PM in the GCC higher education context and perhaps elsewhere.

**Table 1:** *GCC universities' filters of manufacturing consent among faculty and their implications*

<b>Primary Filter</b>	<b>Dimensions in GCC universities</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>Ownership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privatisation</li> <li>• Competition</li> <li>• Internationalisation</li> <li>• .....</li> </ul>	Faculty alienation.
<b>Dependence on revenue</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketisation</li> <li>• Commodification</li> <li>• .....</li> </ul>	Manufacturing faculty who are <i>homo economics</i> .
<b>Information sourcing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The agenda of <i>development</i></li> <li>• .....</li> </ul>	Manufacturing faculty who are working from within self-defeating development discourse.
<b>Flak</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior threat mechanism: Strategic planning.</li> <li>• Neutralisation mechanism: Evaluation systems.</li> <li>• .....</li> </ul>	Manufacturing faculty who are <i>governable objects</i> and <i>good zombies</i> .
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellence</li> </ul>	

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<b>Convergence in the dominant ideology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality assurance</li> <li>• Ranking</li> <li>• Accreditation</li> <li>• .....</li> </ul>	<p>Manufacturing <i>research men</i>, who are engaged in conscious or unconscious gamesmanship as well as blind or disguised conformity.</p>
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## **Filters**

### *Filter 1: Ownership*

The *ownership* aspect in GCC higher education is a crucial factor in explaining how consent is manufactured among faculty. In the modern sense, the higher education system in the GCC region is relatively new. It was developed in the 1960s and 1970s, soon after the GCC states attained their independence. The early results of the region's higher education systems were notable (UNESCO, 2018): universities not only provided the high-level skills necessary for local labor markets but also empowered domestic constituencies in building societal institutions, increased social capital, and promoted social cohesion. Until the 1980s, the GCC governments had invested heavily in free higher education with reasonably good results (UNESCO, 2018).

Despite this relative success, starting in the 1990s, certain criticisms have been leveled against GCC universities, mainly by international organizations and think tank agencies. Higher

education systems in the region were described as lacking quality, with outdated and traditional methods of instruction (UNESCO, 2018). Deficiencies in the management, effectiveness, and efficiency of the system were described (World Bank, 2017). It has been argued that basic learning takes place in the mother tongue; however, ‘the modern world also requires relative mastery of at least one secondary language, either French or English, especially ... for the labor market that tends to be more and more international’ (UNESCO, 2018, p. 12). Allegedly, ‘the quality of the faculty was also declining’ (RAND, 2009, p. xx), and ‘morale was widely reported to be low’ among them (RAND, 2009, p. xx). In short, higher education in the GCC region was seen as the *Achilles heel* of development, which necessitated radical reform (UNDP, 2002, p. 54).

In tandem with these criticisms, the region witnessed rapid population growth in the 2000s, with new local generations as well as enormous expatriate communities living long-term in the region all seeking enrolment for their children in higher education institutions. GCC governments found themselves challenged to address criticisms through existing institutions (Coffman, 2003). Eventually, these governments responded to educational reform calls to improve the quality of higher education and announced ambitious visions of building knowledge-based economies. However, with tight and stringent government budgets resulting from the drop in oil prices, higher education institutions were challenged to expand their financial bases. Universities, which once were controlled and funded by the state, began to open up to

private involvement, aiming to expand in the education market and make a profit. GCC universities needed to take a governance turn through decentralizing and depoliticizing higher education planning. They also needed to adopt a *glonacal* approach through ‘effectively observe international markets and consider the shaping roles they have on higher education institutions, operating across national boundaries, and yet [performing according to] national and local polities, economies, and professional conditions’ (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002, p. 305).

In a short span of time, the GCC higher education system has witnessed a significant transformation characterized by an exponential growth in the number of private universities, following a heavy dependence on the private sector to provide higher education (Coffman, 2003). During the last few decades, GCC states have all seen their first private universities open, and their national universities reformed, with strong praise from the local governments. Some private universities are purely local institutions funded by investors, while others are either joint ventures with foreign universities or satellite branch campuses of the latter (Coffman, 2003). In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, there are 102 universities, with 109,942 students enrolled. 99 of these universities are operated by private, profit-seeking businesses (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015). Many of these universities are located in the Academic Zone, which was established ‘to attract and support qualified educational institutions and service providers committed to delivering market-driven, educational, training and professional

development services that benefit the UAE and the broader Gulf region' (Academic Zone website). The focus of these universities is on 'the number of students enrolled and tuition revenues. Hence, courses are offered and cancelled at the students' requests' (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015, p. 23).

This trend of *privatization* has produced a trend of *competing*, winning, and losing. As Coffman (2003) noted, the prevailing notion is that higher education institutions in the region compete with each other to meet the market's needs, thereby guaranteeing courses of study of international standards that lead to employment. To gain a competitive edge, GCC universities started vying to become 'world-class' (University of Bahrain, p. 9), 'smarter, better and faster' (University of Bahrain, p. 7), 'internationally' (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix) and 'regionally' (Qatar University, p. 3) recognised.

As a 'competitive cooperation' (Merton, 1973) tendency has evolved, GCC universities need to be embedded in collaborative structures, which has intensified the work goal toward *internationalisation*. Today, most of the GCC policy makers are promoting internationalisation, with efforts to integrate the national and local perspectives, creating the *glonacal* determinants (Vardhan, 2015). This is despite the dearth of studies addressing internationalisation, mainly limited to 'comparative data, case studies, or institutional experiments has been conducted in the region' (Vardhan, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the dark corners of global collaboration and competition, which involve issues of

power relations, have been neglected (Ulnicane, 2015). Concretely, most of the time, more powerful global collaborators in higher education tend to adopt hegemonic narratives and thereby attempt to enforce a universal knowledge that ignores less powerful local collaborators' bodies of knowledge and expertise (Ulnicane, 2015).

While the trends of *privatisation*, *competition* and *internationalisation* are not exclusive to the GCC higher education system, working towards achieving them has had some unique consequences, one of which is the tendency to outsource management, programs, and curricular models from the *advanced* Global North. As Coffman (2003) notes, the most remarkable characteristic of the rapidly evolving GCC higher education sector is the wholesale adoption of the American university model as the sole standard. 'While the British and Australians have set up a number of degree programs and even campuses in the Gulf, they still operate in the shadow of the American behemoth that has already gained preeminence throughout the region' (Coffman, 2003, p.18). With no exceptions, educational governance has become a top-down process imposed on local faculty by governments and private investors and implemented by outsourced experts unfamiliar with the region (Willoughby, 2018). Today, conflicts between policy makers and local faculty are common in many GCC universities (Willoughby, 2018). In such cases, policy makers can impose their will on faculty whose fallback (the next-best alternative source of employment) is not attractive (Willoughby, 2018).

Hence, in the GCC context, privatisation, competition, and internationalisation challenges are exacerbated by authoritarian political systems that tend to assume dissent in any event (Willoughby, 2018). This has been challenging the agency of faculty, who are caught at the intersection of conflicting tensions, including tremendous pressure to satisfy the state's agenda, to serve market interests, to conform to international expectations, to acquire and implement new ways of thinking and doing, and to contribute to establishing a profitable business that can pay off the investments of owners in a short period of time. Amidst this, it has become difficult for GCC faculty to have an influential voice. Drawing on empirical studies, Badry and Willoughby (2016) argue that the new orthodoxies of ownership in GCC higher education excluded most national faculties. It also 'impacted the [remaining] national faculties by limiting their participation in the leadership and decision-making process of their national educational system' (p. 48). They noted, 'On the one hand, no [other] region in the world has grown more rapidly over the past several decades. On the other hand, this growth has been accompanied by unprecedented isolation of the national population from direct participation in and management of the educational system' (p. 49).

In this sense, the new orthodoxies of *ownership* in GCC higher education have been manufacturing *alienated labour* in the Marxist sense. An 'Alienated labour produces things for exchange; its use-value is not material; it is only its exchange-value that counts' (Harley, 2017, p. 2). As exchange-value creates relationships between things/commodities and not people, GCC

faculty are alienated from each other and their students. Their professional relations are shaped by clock-time and exchange-value, and they consider each other as competitors and their students as customers. Moreover, faculty are alienated from themselves. The new orthodoxies of *ownership* may drive them away from the creative and joyous *doing* (i.e., teaching and researching), which is an intrinsic part of themselves, towards a mechanical mode of production. More importantly, faculty are alienated from their labour (i.e., their scholarly work), as it has become the possession of another (i.e., the market) and is, therefore, out of their control. In short, the filter of *ownership*, with its various interrelated dimensions, contributes to faculty alienation, which can be thought of as ‘a surrender of control through separation from an essential attribute of the self’ (Horowitz, 2011, p.1) and, in this context, the separation of the faculty from the conditions of meaningful agency.

### *Filter 2: Dependence on revenue*

This second filter is closely related to the first, as the forces of *privatisation*, *competition*, and *internationalisation* have driven the adoption of various market mechanisms at GCC universities. When competing as economic actors, GCC universities ‘took their wares’ to the market. As such, they became evermore engaged in variety of economic, industrial, and commercial activities, such as segmenting, targeting, positioning, branding, pricing, promoting, and commodifying. All activities targeted the sequestration of funds in response to the drastic decrease of governmental funding.

GCC universities started to *commodify* and *marketise* curricula and research.

Curricula became industry focused. Hence, they are reconstructed as production markets for skillful workers having the necessary dispositions to compete in local and global markets. This entailed the recalibration of curricula alongside the needs of capital and led to forming of ongoing local and global partnerships with corporates. Banks began providing input on financial programs, and oil companies demanded course contents, especially regarding the medium of instructions. Governmental bodies impose roadmaps on colleges, encouraging them to achieve economic and social priorities. The curricula recalibration process involved implementing frequent standardized testing (i.e., checkpoints) with the purported aim of ‘achieving standards.’ This served to keep GCC faculties focused on the business of being accountable for producing human capital. Essentially, curricula have been subjected to technocratic reductionist approaches to education that pay far more allegiance to market needs than genuine and deep interests in applying educational research to educational policy. Curricula review became a central process that is directed by employers’ input. Corporates, in turn, provide endowments to fund academic activities and initiatives, build facilities, and recruit graduates. Indeed, all the talk about curricula changes being globally researched and evidence-driven, is similar to what Braverman (1974) terms ‘management masquerading in the trappings of science’ (p. 86).

Research also provides access to additional funding resources. The fruits of research are no longer integral to the general quest for knowledge (Kezar, 2004). Instead, they are seen as intellectual capital linked to national priorities, that should be sold on the open market. Research produced at GCC universities must be transformed into industrial processes or products that are marketable. This phenomenon is matched by a de-emphasis on research activities that serve general knowledge or the local public good. The precise goal of research simply tends to maximise revenue generation. Therefore, research is not valued in terms of how useful the knowledge it contains is/can be. Rather, it relies on the exchange value, constantly refined by market needs.

Effectively, these discretionary sources of funds became the golden handcuffs that alter GCC faculty behaviors by typifying them in a corporate climate and, hence, may straightforwardly manufacture *homo economics*. GCC faculties, as *homo economics*, primarily pursue their self-interests. When given options, they choose alternatives having the highest expected utility. Certain products count more for them. For example, an article written in English and published in a high-impact journal counts more than a study reported in Arabic and published for national audiences. A research grant counts more than an outreach to local communities. Research partnerships with industrial stakeholders count more than peer-to-peer research collaborations. Postgraduate students are more valuable than undergraduate ones, and so on. In summary, as *homo economics*, GCC faculties

can be seen as consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents, pursuing their subjectively defined ends optimally.

### *Filter 3: Information Sourcing*

As mentioned earlier, several IOs and think tank institutions took it upon themselves to situate the GCC universities globally and put forward ‘international evidence, policy lessons and practical examples to guide these countries’ future graduates’ skills development’ (OECD, 2015, p. 3). In an engagement note, the World Bank (2017) promotes itself to the GCC policy makers as ‘a producer of knowledge, [that] can assess, diagnose, and recommend strategies to address the most complex policy question decision makers face’ (p.8) in GCC educational systems. This claim is based on the World Bank’s ‘decades of experience operating in the GCC’, which allegedly makes the World Bank ‘a strategic partner to support efforts that will propel quality education for all in the respective GCC countries’ (p.8). Think tank institutions also played a similar role. RAND, for example, worked with some GCC universities ‘to identify a handful of foreign experts in higher education’ who joined with policy makers from these universities to form senior reform committees that advised universities on reform matters (RAND, 2009, p. iv). These matters included financial investments, allocating teaching resources and facilities, and the design of curricula and medium of instruction, among others.

Hence, there is a process of interconnection between the elite actors in GCC higher education. That is, IOs agencies and think tank institutions formed alliances with GCC policy makers to ensure the achievement of a *development* agenda. A brief overview of the GCC universities' strategic plans, published online, reveals the abundant use of the word *development*. Throughout their strategic plans, GCC universities show strong urges to enter new phases of *development* (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix), to keep up with the latest *developments* (Qatar University, p. 5), to uphold their role in *development* (Kuwait University, p.1) and eventually to *develop* education (Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, p. v).<sup>1</sup>

Esteva (2010) argued that *development* can be a loaded word. In tracing the political coinage of the word, Esteva points to American politicians at the end of World War II when they wanted to consolidate their hegemony and make it permanent. Specifically, when President Truman took office on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1949, he maintained that Americans 'must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of the scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'. He stressed that 'the old imperialism, exploitation for foreign profit, has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic plans for universities in the Global North read differently and tend to lack *development* as their main goal. Instead, strategizing in these universities sets out 'a framework of priorities for the university' (Oxford University, 2018-23, p. 2) with the key aim to 'generate and communicate knowledge derived from research' (Lund University, 2017-2026, p. 2) and 'serve as a global base for knowledge collaboration that can contribute to 21<sup>st</sup> century global society' (Tokyo University, Vision 2020).

democratic fair dealing’ (cited in Esteva, 2010, p. 2). At that point, an era of development was launched to serve the *other*. Hence, the associated idea of *underdevelopment* began. Around two-thirds of the global population was declared underdeveloped and ceased to be what they really were in all their diversity; these communities were transmogrified into an inversion of developed reality or ‘a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority’ (Esteva, 2010, p. 2).

In the GCC higher education context, IOs agencies and think tank institutions assumed the role of the *beacon on the hill*. Partnering with policy makers, they launched a *development* agenda, which became the main source of information on how GCC universities should follow the footsteps of the *advanced* universities. The question then becomes how this agenda, which was put forward by the elite alliance, could possibly manufacture consent among faculty in GCC higher education. An answer can be found in the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which discusses ‘the capacity of an actor to define or influence issues on the public agenda by selecting issues seen as important or relevant or by shaping the way these issues are framed, discussed, and interpreted’ (Bacevic & Nokkala, 2020, p. 3). The agenda-setting theory was developed to argue against positivist paradigms, which consider policies as technical solutions to objectively existing problems. Rather, the agenda-setting theory offers critical approaches that emphasize the constructed, contingent, and

processual nature of policies. This involves the role of differently positioned actors in bringing specific issues to the fore (Fischer, 2003).

In this sense, agenda setting, as opposed to agenda building, has developed a Western perception of reality, which is very rarely questioned. This reality manipulates GCC faculty by instilling what they should think about instead of what they actually think. Faculty habitually rely on the development agenda, in their research and teaching, as the sole source of information and direction. This is because of its perceived authority, credibility, and legitimacy. They do so also to escape the presumed undignified conditions of *underdevelopment*. In such cases, any intellectual intervention from the *other* is to be sanctified in the name of a higher goal, *development*. This has created a *self-defeating development discourse* among the GCC faculty, as they perform from within a catch-up situation. Precious little has been written to support this claim or to expose some of the unconscious structures created by the development agenda that reinforce the Occidental worldview or its impact on limiting the GCC faculty's senses of agency and confidence. This is mainly because perspectives that go against this agenda, originating from marginal local actors, receive very little attention and are treated with scepticism.

To conclude, this filter has two different, yet interrelated, dimensions. One is the capacity of the elite alliance to set the agenda and assume the role of the sole source of information in

GCC higher education and their self-interest in doing so. The other is the way in which the GCC faculty often accept, implement, and praise this agenda and thus allow it to guide their ways. Because GCC faculty often accept the prevailing *development* discourse in GCC higher education, they not only wear merely tinted but tainted glasses as well.

#### *Filter 4: Flak*

Coercive legal measures, such as prosecutions, wrongful imprisonments, and restrictions on academic travel, are deployed by state authorities in some GCC countries (Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, 2020). Likewise, GCC universities penalize faculty members for serious misconduct such as criticizing or blaming the government by any means through the local or global media (Saudi Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics, n.d., Article 13), or minor misconduct such as ‘using any musical instruments or engaging in music in the classroom’ (Prince Mohammed Bin Fahd University, 2016, p. 25). In GCC universities, it is anticipated that ‘every [faculty] member must align his/her actions with his/her words, and the words must be consistent with the university’s policies’ (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015, p. 4) and that all faculty members ‘at all times act in the best interests of the university ... obeying all applicable laws and prescribed policies’ (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015, p. 4). Failure to follow these guidelines leads to verbal warning, written censure, withholding of promotion, loss of annual salary increase, removal

of rolling contract status, deprivation of end of service gratuity, and dismissal from employment at the university (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015).

Before reaching these extreme measures, GCC universities use prior covert countermeasures to mitigate any *unnecessary* conflict or distribution of punitive measures. These include *prior threat mechanisms* (i.e., before conflict manifests itself), and *neutralization mechanisms* (i.e., so conflict can be prevented). *Strategic planning* serves as the former while *faculty evaluation* facilitates the latter, as further explained in the following sections.

Relying on the developed *other*, GCC universities invest a tremendous amount of time, effort and money into constructing their *strategic plans*. They hire ‘professionals and international consulting firms’ (Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, p. 7), carry out ‘substantial analysis of international and regional trends’ (Qatar University, p. 9), and study ‘commissioned papers from distinguished international experts’ (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix). Once finished, there is great publicity; ambitious goals are announced in highly visible places on websites. Then, events are organized to discuss plans and stages of implementation. This lengthy process facilitates reconstructing identities and reclaiming subjectivities through several means. Chief among them is the *technologization* of the strategic planning discourse, a term coined by Fairclough (1992), who was influenced by Foucault’s ideas about the synthesis of power, knowledge (technology) and discourse. Technologization is a mathematical concept that

involves using a reproducible chain of elements and a recurrent algorithm until a desired outcome is achieved (Smirnova, 2011). The concept kept its original mathematical meaning and function when it was introduced into philosophy and linguistics. Fairclough (1992) defines technologization as a ‘calculated intervention to shift discursive practices as part of the engineering of social change’ (p. 140) by way of ‘exercising power and influence over people’s lives and opinions through certain linguistic tools’ (Smirnova, 2011, p. 38). Some aspects of ‘technologization’ are evident in GCC universities’ strategic planning discourse. For example, there is an extensive duplication of signs that can be claimed to be linear transformations of the same idea. Let us examine the following two examples, where *italic* words manifest the same idea in different guises. Qatar University’s strategic plan states, ‘[The] University’s model of transformative education ... is a *systematic, state of the art, and innovative* approach ... [that] aims at *developing* existing issues in [the] QU education system, *bridging* current gaps, and holistically *transforming* QU education to elite global standards’ (p. 17). Another example can be found in the University of Bahrain’s strategic plan, which states that the university ‘must be exceptional and that can only be achieved by [staff’s] *collective efforts, focus and determination*’ (p. 5). The discursive technologies in both examples create magnified suggestive effects, multiplying faculty responsibility for achieving the declared strategic goals. In effect, faculty members may internalise the dominant discourse and practice what Herman and Chomsky and Otero (2003) refer to as ‘auto-censorship’. That is, faculty members stop constituting themselves through their own

thoughts and ideas. Instead, their thoughts are constituted by means of discursive technologies that are used to impose a certain frame of mind. If a member of faculty considers deviating from the predominant discourse, he/she will need to think twice before having to deal with a well-organized and powerful system of countermeasures.

Next comes the *faculty evaluation* as a *neutralization mechanism*. Just as their counterparts around the world are, GCC faculty are evaluated annually. This evaluation consists of the submission of activity reports that include concrete evidence of performance in teaching, research, and participation in committees, among other activities. The declared aim of faculty evaluation is to ‘develop highly professional, stable, and competent faculty’ (King Fahed University website). Still, as Foucault (1977) taught us, the process of evaluation can be seen as a social practice that has been galvanized throughout history for the surveillance of individuals. This is clearly manifested in Qatar University’s evaluation system, which was built on the five stages of ‘DMAIC’: Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve, and *Control* (Qatar University website).

Many forms of faculty evaluation in GCC universities are preordained, as opposed to communicative, which cancels plurality and diversity by subsuming participants’ views within evaluators’ perspectives. Hence, university administrators, through evaluation processes, harvest a *forced consensus* among faculty, not only in the process of data gathering and the subjection to evaluators, but also in the act of writing evaluation

reports, which privilege the voice of the evaluator as the interpreter of the social world. Additionally, almost inevitably, faculty themselves could become ‘agent[s] of the authorities – mostly through feeding the decision-making processes, sometimes by naming the unexpected, the anomalous or the heterodox – since, by naming these heterogenous cases, one also opens them to regulation and normalization’ (Kemmis, 1993, p. 38). In this sense, faculty evaluation in GCC universities represents the emergence of a particular rationale of educational governance in a neoliberal era, in which the management of faculty becomes more important than the management of the university per se. That is, educational governing becomes redirected towards making faculty potentially more ‘docile’ and ‘productive’ (Foucault, 2000).

To conclude, GCC higher education depends on *strategic planning* and *faculty evaluation* as prior covert countermeasures to mitigate any distribution of punitive measures. Both processes have been manufacturing GCC faculties that are, at best, ‘governable objects’ (Foucault, 1982) and, at worst, ‘good zombies’ (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009).

#### *Filter 5: Convergence in the main ideologies*

The bogeyman that makes all the previous filters operate so vigorously is the pursuit of *excellence*, which is a major goal of the

GCC universities, that shapes their educational activities and institutional identities. In an almost identical language, GCC universities proclaim themselves as, variously, ‘a centre for innovation with an international reputation for excellence’ (Kuwait University website), ‘a beacon of academic and research excellence in the region’, ‘the leading university in the region for excellence in educational innovation, research, and student leadership development’ (Zayed University website) and ‘[aiming] to excel in teaching and learning, research and community service’ (Sultan Qaboos University website). This ‘Excellence R Us’ rhetoric is turned into a reality through centres and programmes of excellence. Although the term *excellence* is presented as unproblematic in GCC universities, the pursuit of *excellence* has become a self-perpetuating and self-congratulating hydra, possessing three heads: *quality assurance*, *accreditation* and *ranking*.

*Quality assurance* involves ‘the systematic review of educational provision to maintain and improve its quality, equity and efficiency’ (European Commission, n.d.). In the GCC higher education, quality assurance involves adopting international standards that determines what constitutes academic quality, including expectations of faculty, curriculum, program structure, course design, instructional methodology and assessment. GCC higher education is saturated with this ‘international standards’ discourse. To illustrate, Zayed University’s programs are designed to ‘fulfil the highest international academic standards’ (Zayed University Catalog, 2020–21, p. 2). Underpinning Qatar

University's commitment to providing high-quality education 'is the goal to align its colleges, programs, and courses with established international standards' (Qatar University website). Arguably, the overall aim is to improve students' satisfaction, increase effectiveness and gain competitive advantages. Still, most often, the international standards followed to assure quality are detached from the reality of the local educational context. For instance, Bachelor of Education in English programs offered in GCC universities are aligned to TESOL standards. This choice points to the obliviousness of decision makers to the actual students' needs and the appropriateness of the standards to the reality of the English language in the GCC. Even if it is assigned the status of a second language, English cannot be considered as such because the status of English as a second or foreign language is determined by the amount of exposure to and opportunities for language use outside the formal instructional context (school/classroom). Among GCC locals, this usage and exposure cannot be elevated to the level of native-speaker experience required by TESOL standards. Regardless, faculty must comply with these standards, irrespective of whether they believe the content and practices stipulated in and predetermined by the standards are appropriate to their educational context, their students' needs and expectations and their own educational philosophies and teaching styles. In such situations, GCC faculty may engage in counterproductive *conscious and unconscious gamesmanship*, mainly because they need to submit proof of achieving standards and demonstrate their practices' conformity

to these standards to a third party, a certification or accreditation agency.

*Accreditation* is seen as the preferred quality assurance mechanism in GCC higher education (Romanowski, 2021) and as a means for the attainment of international recognition and world-class status. Within the accreditation process, accountability is the watchword: 'To call for accountability is to assert a political right – to demand that a particular individual or institution assume some responsibility and demonstrate it in a certain form' (Smith & Fey, 2000, p. 335). Such imposing model seeks to compel rather than invite change or improvement (Romanowski, 2021). That is, accreditation forces faculty to replace their existing educational values and goals with the accreditation values and orthodoxies. In the GCC higher education context, this 'ideological bullying' (Romanowski, 2021) led to *blind conformity*, where faculty adhere passively to new principles and theories, or to *disguised conformity*, where they are required to show evidence that may be false. Both the *blind and disguised conformity* were proved by empirical research. Romanowski and Alkhateeb (2020) argued that accreditation in the GCC is a McDonaldised system in which faculty practices are modified passively and mechanically in order to meet the standards of accreditors, hence embracing *blind conformity*. In a similar vein, Alkhateeb and Romanowski (2021) demonstrated how GCC faculty may appear to cooperate with the accrediting agenda despite harbouring negative opinions about accreditation, thus practicing *disguised conformity*. Regardless, higher education policymakers in the GCC cling to accreditation

for its perceived ability to grant international recognition, which is an inch forward towards a higher ranking.

In the GCC region, as it is the case worldwide, *university rankings* are used to determine the status of higher education institutions, assess their quality and performance, and measure their global competitiveness. The quest for ranking influences several university operations but the most important are the policies related to research (Hazelkorn, 2015). GCC universities have become research-oriented; more importance is given to research in specified fields. Research groups are set up to maximize research outputs. Research centers are established, and new research grants are offered. Resources are increasingly directed towards research areas or higher education institutions that are likely to be more productive and have faculty who are more likely to positively affect publication or citation factors. An important factor in decisions about faculty retention is research output. Being aware of the impact of ranking on faculty recruitment and retention, faculty direct most of their efforts to research. GCC universities put pressure on and push their faculty to publish, creating an environment where universities become factories for publication. Faculty are no longer researching for the cultivation of erudition, where the focus is on the quality of research. Rather they are researching for *hiking ranks*, where the focus is on quantity of the products and research outputs. In this competitive atmosphere, as Heidegger (1938) far earlier than others anticipated, ‘the scholar disappears’ (p. 64), and replaced by the ‘research man’ (p.64). Heidegger (1938) wrote, ‘The research man

no longer needs a library at home. Moreover, he is constantly on the move. He negotiates at meetings and collect information at congresses. He contracts for commission with publishers. The latter now determine along with him which books must be written' (p. 64).

To conclude this filter, the *pursuit of excellence* in the GCC higher education has manufactured a *research man* who works in a hyper-competitive context, practising either *blind and disguised conformity*, and being ready to engage in counterproductive conscious or unconscious gamesmanship.

### **A space for resilience**

The constrictions of the PM filters are not omnipotent. In the light of this study, there are spaces of autonomy that make it possible for faculty to negotiate and challenge the dominant discourses serving the political, economic, social, and ideological interests of the elites. Some faculty members may participate in macro and micro processes of negotiation, which, depending on the faculty's persistence and relative power, produce different results. Nevertheless, I argue that the fact that this space exists, and that some faculty members can subscribe to it, does not mean that the barriers constituted by the filters are not extremely high or that GCC higher education does not perform a propagandistic role.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study examined how GCC faculty are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture their consent for political, economic, and social policies. In effect, this orchestrated propaganda produces faculty who are alienated, turned into governable objects and good zombies, and shaped as hypercompetitive economic actors. They operate from within a Western perception of reality and are ready to engage in counterproductive, conscious, or unconscious gamesmanship as well as to practice blind or disguised conformity. I conclude by referring to two issues. First, the use of the PM as a theoretical framework was not intended to generalise or generate a universal truth. Rather, I argue that the model helps expose the power structure in GCC higher education and reveals how this structure maintains its superiority through the creation of propaganda. Second, it is worth noting that the manufacturing of consent, as presented in this study, is not peculiar to GCC higher education. The filter dimensions discussed in this study are trends characterising global higher education. However, what distinguishes GCC higher education is that these filters operate within neo-colonialist spaces and under authoritarian regimes.

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