

## Noam Chomsky and the Manufacture of Consent for American Foreign Policy

KURT LANG and GLADYS ENGEL LANG

Few names of academic scholars are so well recognized all around the world as that of Noam Chomsky. He is listed as the author or coauthor of well over 1,000 items in the online database of the Library of Congress. The range of topics covered in these books, videos, and audiotapes reveals at least three different Chomskys: the linguistic scholar internationally recognized for his theory of transformational grammar and generative syntax, the political activist inspired by the writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Anton Pannekoek, and the analyst of media performance who (together with Edward S. Herman) promulgated a “propaganda model” as an alternative to the conception of the media as “adversarial,” the one to which journalists, jurists, and communication scholars typically subscribe. It is this third role, which accounts for roughly 80% of the Library of Congress items, that apparently moved the editor of this journal to suggest a review of work by or about Chomsky.

Having dutifully absorbed the contents of what looms as an unceasing, still continuing, flood of books, pamphlets, articles, and interviews—including some on C-Span, public radio, and the Internet—we refrain from reviewing each individually. This becomes unnecessary inasmuch as, at least on the subjects of greatest concern to communication scholars, almost all make use of the same materials and dwell on the same themes with surprisingly little variation. Endlessly repetitive, they do, however, when considered in their entirety, confirm Chomsky’s contention that despite his academic preoccupation with language, he completely separates his role as linguistics scholar from those of media critic and political activist. It is in the two latter roles that he has expressed his anarchist creed and developed, in conformity with it, a communication model that concedes no legitimacy to state authority and certainly none to any kind of violence even when used to counter something far worse. The connection to ideology does not, of course, invalidate the model. Social science inquiry generally and the study of mass communication, in particular, have often been driven by meliorative impulses. They are not separated by an impenetrable wall. Be this as it may, Chomsky’s model, like any model, still has to be judged not just, or even primarily, on its suitability as a club for beating up on the media but rather on its theoretical adequacy, which is to say, on how closely it approximates how they actually function.

Kurt Lang is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Sociology and Communication at the University of Washington. Gladys Engel Lang is Professor Emerita in Sociology, Political Science, and Communications at the University of Washington.

Address correspondence to Kurt Lang, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA, or Gladys Engel Lang, Professor Emerita, 1249 20th Avenue E., Seattle, WA 98112, USA. E-mail: lang@u.washington.edu or gladyslang@comcast.net

The propaganda model depicts the media system as having a series of five successive filters through which the “raw material of news” must pass, leaving a “cleansed residue” of what “news is fit to print, marginaliz[ing] dissent, and allow[ing] the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public.”<sup>1</sup> In brief paraphrase, these filters are (a) a focus on profitability by an increasingly concentrated industry that has close ties to the government and is in a position by sheer volume to overwhelm dissenting media voices, (b) the dependence of these media organizations on funding through advertising, leading them to favor content likely to appeal to the affluent and making concessions to commercial sponsors, (c) the dependence of journalists who work for the media on information from sources that constitute, collectively, a powerful and prestigious establishment; (d) commercial interests that make the media vulnerable to “flak” and criticism from groups and institutions with the power to generate criticism and protest to which they respond with caution; and, finally, (e) “anti-communism” (or some ideological equivalent) that those who produce content have internalized, thus conjoining them to frame the news in a dichotomous fashion, applying one standard to those on “our” side and a quite different one to “enemies.” Most recently, the “war against terrorism” has served as a non-ideological substitute.

Surely, few readers of this journal would seriously dispute the existence of such filters or Chomsky’s contention that they “narrow the range of news that passes through the gates and even more sharply limit what can become ‘big news’ subject to sustained news campaigns.”<sup>2</sup> Far from being autonomous creations, media systems inevitably reflect, however imprecisely, the distribution of economic, political, and symbolic power in the society. Those at the top, and especially the federal government with its huge public relations apparatus, hold a strategic advantage. Their ability to create the “facts” that pass through these filters to become news is far greater than that of the vast public that consumes news but rarely makes it. Chomsky, the political activist, has contributed to the flow of case material that exposes serious flaws in the pattern of media reporting. Seven Story Press, with offices in New York, London, Sydney, and Toronto, has been a major outlet both for his own political writings and for the annual volumes of *Project Censored*, which offer an inventory of newsworthy stories said to have been inadequately covered in the major media, which have shown themselves all too ready to ignore material that would have been available to them had they chosen to pursue it.

For Chomsky to be putting the same spotlight on the media that media claim to be putting on government institutions is all to the good. But what about his interpretative paradigm? The propaganda model assigns to the media system just one major function to which everything else is subordinate. That function is the “manufacture of consent” for government policies that advance the goals of corporations and preserve the capitalist system.

To make his case, Chomsky provides a wealth of information focused, almost exclusively, on media coverage of U.S. foreign policy. But data, no matter how painstakingly amassed, hardly speak for themselves. They have to be organized so as to provide a critical test. Understandably, he devotes a lot of attention to news relating to the American interventions in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, to this country’s involvement in Latin American terror and assassinations, to its relentless support of Israel, and to other situations where his views are diametrically opposed to American policy. Drawing on these cases, Chomsky asserts, in a methodological appendix to *Necessary Illusions*, that in tests using paired examples of the attention paid to atrocities committed by “friends” and by “foes” the propaganda model stands up quite well, revealing “a consistent pattern of radically dichotomous treatment, in the predicted direction.” It holds up even

when his examples—apparently referring to the coverage of the Vietnam war—are the same as those from which others argue for an adversarial model of the media role,<sup>3</sup> including some who, like Peter Braestrup,<sup>4</sup> following a systematic review, concluded that the “overly negative and pessimistic” reports of the media after Tet (especially by television), were responsible for the general loss of morale and ultimately the inglorious American withdrawal from that country. Braestrup’s strong conclusion remains controversial even for some to whom the propaganda model is anathema.

Other of Chomsky’s paired situations include the different treatment by the American media of the concurrent massacres by Pol Pot in Cambodia and by Indonesian troops in East Timor and the contrast in media judgment of the elections in two American client states, El Salvador and Guatemala, and that in Nicaragua when under the Sandinistas. The method sounds scientific except that Chomsky selected his cases (and his data) to make a political point while a lack of information on sampling, coding procedures, and so forth raises questions not so much about the existence of bias in any particular case, but about the viability of a model about “the media” in general based on anecdotal evidence.

The introduction to the updated edition of *Manufacturing Consent*<sup>5</sup> takes a further step towards more rigorous quantitative analysis by showing a table of the frequencies with which five American mainstream media referred to situations in which numerous deaths were inflicted by one party on another as “genocide.” They are those by the Serbs in Kosovo, by the Indonesian army in East Timor, by the Turks against the Kurds, by Iraq against the Kurds, and by American-sponsored sanctions on Iraq from 1991–1999. Most frequently—by far—characterized as genocidal were the Serbs, even though the analysis covered only two years (1998–1999), followed by Iraqi action against the Kurds from 1990 to 1999 when Saddam Hussein was no longer considered an American ally. The term was much less often used to characterize the deadly results of action by Indonesia and Turkey and sanctions against Iraq over a nine-year period.<sup>6</sup> It is possible, but unlikely, that controlling for the total amount of media coverage would significantly alter these relative positions, which turn around a single word and thereby sidestep the more basic question: Does every policy that causes a large number of deaths, however horrific and regardless of its objective, measure up to genocide (a concept to which lawyers and social scientists have sought to give precise definition) and thus be equated with deliberate ethnic cleansing such as that practiced by the Serbs? The bombing of Dresden by America or the use of chemical weapons by Iraq during its war against Iran certainly were atrocities, but to label them genocide would hardly be accurate.

Subject to the above qualifications, a good deal of evidence has surfaced (in the writings of both Chomsky and others) of differential media treatment of the friends and foes of America. But is this sufficient to validate the propaganda model as a reasonable replication of how the news system in general functions? The concept underlying the model is of a *one-way* flow of content filtered by gate-keepers in control of what ultimately gets through. It recalls to us an early study by David White of how radio stations selected bulletins from wire services that came their way. In adopting a model based on this concept, Chomsky reveals himself remarkably unconcerned with the “facts.” He does not inquire into how events become news, preferring to work with the alternate assumption that the information screened out of the system already exists in a transmittable format just as it did for the night-time editor of radio news bulletins. This is no parody of his view, as documented by the following quote:

As we reiterated to the point of boredom [in our comparative study of responses to the Cambodia and Timor massacres], an attempt to assess the actual facts

is a different topic, not pertinent to our specific inquiry. That is a simple point of logic. The question we addressed was how the *evidence available* [italics added] was transmuted as it passed through the filters of the ideological system. Plainly, that inquiry into the propaganda system at work is not affected, one way or another, by whatever may be discovered about the actual facts . . . [some of which] are well confirmed in retrospect, but the accuracy of our suspicions as to the facts is not pertinent to the question we addressed. . . . Our goal . . . was to consider the relation between the *evidence available* [italics added] and the picture presented by the media and journals of opinion; to determine the actual facts is a different task.<sup>7</sup>

“Evidence available” is an ambiguous term, because the credibility of sources and their accounts varies. Analysts of the media have to be concerned not only with news flow but with how newsworthy facts are located to begin with, then correlated with others facts, evaluated, and interpreted. Most stories survive only as long as they appear timely and until displaced by other more interesting or important happenings. Those which turn out to have a longer life are sustained by the chain of responses generated by an initial report.

News is, quite literally, *produced* whenever reporters approach their sources for information that the latter may want disseminated, disseminated in a certain way, or not disseminated at all. The process of news gathering is pretty much routinized. Reporters have their beats and most organizations in and outside of government hold press conferences, give regular briefings to reporters, or at least issue press releases. Public relations is a recognized professional specialty whose practitioners provide news for which the media function as conveyors. Providers and conveyors do indeed cooperate but only to the extent that they need one another. When their interests diverge, the relationship becomes adversarial to the extent that neither the one nor the other is in full control of the product. Farther up the line, reporters may have to negotiate for approval from editors (or producers), editors from publishers (or executives), and publishers from their board. In the event of an open clash, the decision rests with the owners and their representatives, but even here the final outcome is by no means preordained. Some owners possessed of a social conscience are prepared to take on acceptable financial risks, while other media personnel have sometimes been able to use the leeway, autonomy, prestige, and authority they enjoy to get their version of a major news event out to the public, thereby pressuring political leaders to confront a problem they preferred to ignore. There is a lot of interaction, much of it openly or tacitly collaborative but also with distinct elements of confrontation.

Few of us doubt that many potentially important facts never make it through Chomsky’s “filters” or that much of what gets through is managed news with a special spin to serve a particular interest. But there are limits, some of them embedded in the institutional role of the press as an informational medium and some in the professional norm of journalists that obliges them to be more than just a platform for the actors and institutions they are assigned to cover. Chomsky only allows, somewhat grudgingly, that “the media . . . must present a picture of the world that is tolerably close to reality, even if only in a selective version,”<sup>8</sup> with the implication that this, too, is subordinate to their propaganda function according to the well-established principle that persuasion based on facts is more effective than lies so brazen that they fly in the face of everyday experience or purely emotional appeals. Regardless of whatever “raw material of news” may enter the public domain, Chomsky perceives the American media in their entirety as so intrinsically elitist that they “yield a propaganda result that a totalitarian state would be hard put to surpass.”<sup>9</sup>

The last judgment strains credulity because it obliterates all distinctions in the degree of openness. The media are not adversarial in the sense of an autonomous counter-establishment. But they will reflect to some degree not only divisions within the elite but also significant political movements. When there are none, they will mirror the existing consensus and, in this respect, act as pillars of the status quo. Public discourse tends to be even more constrained whenever the country goes to war. It raises concern, first over our troops, who bear the main burden of defense, and to a lesser degree over the possible dangers and tribulations non-combatants may still face. People rally to the flag, and wartime leaders—some more than others—seek to mute critics by charging them with a lack of patriotism. All of us have good reason to be concerned about the strictures on public discourse in the present “war” against terrorism. Not until the onset of war weariness will the area of discourse expand, but only—and this is a major point in Chomsky’s line of argument—when the powerful begin to defect as they did during the latter phase of the Vietnam war. Yes, the powerful, which include some of the barons of the press, are important, but not even a despot can afford to be entirely unmindful of what people in general think. One of the salient differences between an imperfect democracy and a truly totalitarian regime, as Chomsky would know had he ever lived in Hitler’s Germany, for example, is that open disagreement, even in the face of impending total military defeat, draws severe sanctions. No critic would ever have found anything like the outlets that Chomsky has for disseminating his deviant point of view.

It is of some significance that Chomsky turns for his examples of excessive media subservience to the “powers that be” to the coverage of events outside America. The world is large, highly diverse, and hence intrinsically more difficult to cover than the domestic scene. Media organizations deploy their resources with some care. They maintain permanent news bureaus in only a few capital cities, usually in countries to which America is tied by cultural or strategic interests. When something happens in some far-away place, there is often no one with the requisite area knowledge, language skills, or even contacts to get an accurate sense of the situation. This deficiency increases the dependence of journalists on embassy personnel and on other experts, many of whom have connections, past or present, to the government. These constraints, consistent with the propaganda model, would be less limiting when it comes to covering events at home.

The propaganda model does not admit that the modern media, and the American media possibly more than others, are the designated battleground on which the political parties and various interests compete over whose version of reality is to prevail. There is a multiplicity of such conflicts—within the elite, among powerful interests, between any of these and the public in general. To be sure, there is no level playing field. Large and single-minded constituencies, in particular those backed by significant wealth, are favored, while concentrated corporate ownership of the media enables a remarkably small and dwindling number of managers to quash debate if and when they choose to. Because of this power, the media themselves have often been major players in these conflicts, some of which involve criticisms of media performance. Here, too, according to Chomsky, the propaganda model predicts that the “media debate will be bounded in a manner that satisfies [the system’s] external needs [and] thus is limited to the question of the alleged adversarial stance of the media . . . [with] critics of these adversarial excesses . . . pitted against those who defend the media as balanced and without bias” while any study or critique beyond these bounds “will be ignored or bitterly condemned, for it conflicts with the needs of the powerful and privileged.”<sup>10</sup>

This statement is not exactly helpful given the extent of recent coordinated attacks

on the allegedly “liberal” media by political conservatives who, by controlling the terms of the debate, have succeeded in moving the political center several steps to the right. These attacks, more than anything else, have moved some who would protect press freedom to defend some media practices behind the rampart of apolitical “objectivity.” Critics of current policies have become more circumspect as administration supporters package patently conservative comment into the news, which gives government a freer hand. But at least some part of the press does not hesitate to scrutinize zealously business scandals as well as failures and misdeeds by America and its allies. By accentuating only the negative, Chomsky, quite consciously, seeks to distance his own view of media performance as far as possible from those of academics, the “diploma managers,” who specialize in the study of communication and information. Favorite targets of his scorn are Walter Lippmann, Edward L. Bernays, and Harold Lasswell—all no longer able to reply—whose words he repeatedly cites as evidence that “the modern state, having lost the power to coerce, elites need to have more effective propaganda to control the public mind.”<sup>11</sup> Chomsky notes, with apparent satisfaction, that the epithet “manufacture of consent” comes right out of Lippmann<sup>12</sup> but gingerly avoids any mention of its author’s concern about the refinement that the art of propaganda had undergone during and after the First World War. Nor does he acknowledge Lippmann’s search for ways in which public opinion could nevertheless remain effective.

If the highly selective use of information from documents characterizes the propagandist, then this part of Chomsky’s work has to be considered propaganda. Some of his political positions may be congenial, but the manner in which he supports his theoretical model confuses rather than clarifies the issues on which he and some academics differ. In the same passage just cited, he writes that Walter Lippmann “referred to the population as a ‘bewildered herd’: we have to protect ourselves from the ‘rage and trampling of the bewildered herd. And the way you do it, Lippman said, is by what he called the ‘manufacture of consent.’”<sup>13</sup> The evocative simile of “the herd” is one of Chomsky’s favorites; it turns up time and again in his writing, published interviews, and lectures—usually without a specific reference.

To us, the cynicism he attributes to Lippmann seemed inconsistent with the thoughtful Lippmann we knew from his writings. The web site—the one with the apropos name “www.understandingpower.com”—where one is directed for annotations to Chomsky’s article contains the following text, which we quote in full just as it reads:

For Walter Lippmann’s exact words, see Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, eds., *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, New York: Random House, 1963, pp. 91–92 (“The public must be put in its place, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and roar of a bewildered herd”).

Consulting Rossiter and Lare, we located Lippmann’s original text. It reads: “The public must be put in its place, *so that it may exercise its own powers*, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd” [italics added]. The omission of the italicized phrase, without deletion points, distorts the basic argument Lippmann made in the *Phantom Public*,<sup>14</sup> in which it appeared. It comes at the end of a paragraph summarizing his previous argument against what he saw as a “false ideal of democracy,” namely that all citizens can think and act as if they were office holders. He considered this ideal false because he thought it unrealizable, not because citizens are incompetent but because it ignores the distinction between insiders, placed where they have information on

which they can act, and outsiders who observe and judge from a distance yet have too many other obligations to develop expertise on the many complex issues faced by the various agencies of government so that, when they do intervene, they are often manipulated for partisan ends. Lippmann hoped that citizens could be educated so as to exercise their true power more wisely without becoming victims of propaganda.

The rest of the footnote in [www.understandingpower.com](http://www.understandingpower.com) contains a much longer passage from *Public Opinion*, in which Lippmann outlines, though not approvingly, “the manufacture of consent” and ends with the statement that public affairs “can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality.” This footnote omits the rest of the paragraph from Lippmann, in which he adds that “this class is irresponsible, for it acts upon information that is not common property, in situations that the public at large does not conceive, and it can be held to account only on the accomplished fact.” But held to account it must be. As the opening of the next paragraph indicates, the problem, as Lippmann saw it, is that “democratic theory, by failing to admit that self-centered opinions are not sufficient to procure good government, is involved in perpetual conflict between theory and practice.”<sup>15</sup> These selective citations and omissions of context suggest Chomsky’s uncanny ability to find documents and texts that contain exactly what he is looking for. He refuses to see anything else.

There is no question that democratic government must be open to the public; citizens have to be in position to inform themselves on what their government does and able to hear dissenting voices. In these and other respects, present media practice falls short of the ideal. But even if complete openness were attainable, it would still not eliminate all disparities of power nor of expertise. Still, the affairs of the public have somehow to be managed by someone acting on its behalf and, hopefully, with popular approval. It is not clear whether Chomsky’s general political position would allow him to accept any government authority as legitimate or, for that matter, any authority that is based on differences in knowledge and experience; he prefers the diffuse authority that he generally refers to as “the people.” On this point, we would surely side with Lippmann, when he wrote that

the practice of appealing to the public on all sorts of intricate matters means almost always a desire to escape criticism from those who know by enlisting a large majority which has had no chance to know. The verdict is made to depend on who has the loudest or the most entrancing voice, the most skillful or the most brazen publicity man, the best access to the most space in the newspapers. For even when the editor is scrupulously fair to “the other side,” fairness is not enough. There may be other sides, unmentioned by any of the organized, financed and active partisans.<sup>16</sup>

The advocate of popular government has also to come to terms with the fact that on political questions there is rarely a single version of the truth. The relevance and significance of the “facts” is often disputed while typical citizens, in view of the many competing demands of family and job, not to speak of an inherent right to pursue their own “happiness,” have little time and limited inclination to educate themselves on the many, often complicated issues that regularly command the attention of public bodies. As Rousseau recognized long ago, the “people” refers in the last analysis to an existing majority. There is no rule for resolving disputes democratically other than to grant the majority authority over the rest. Implementation of its decisions requires additional rules formulated so as to protect the fundamental rights of everyone, especially minorities who find

it difficult to make their voices heard. The public encompasses many constituencies, whose interests often conflict, not only with one another but also with the general interest. The presence of conflict increases the need for persuasion. Insofar as not even reformers and advocates of people's rights can extricate themselves from the web of antagonistic relationships, they are compelled, if they want to be heard, to develop skill in the technique of gaining favorable notice from the media and of getting the public to understand where their true interest lies.

No matter how useful the premises underlying the propaganda model may be for critics in search of a theoretical peg on which to hang their documentation of the media's many failings and occasional bias, the model does leave out a lot. This has not, however, been a barrier to its dissemination. Chomsky is a prolific writer, lecturer, and conversationalist. His ideas have had some resonance among members of the "political class," which is how he likes to refer to readers of the *New York Times*, to university professors, and others like them. A forthcoming review complains of the opposite, namely that his works are "not denounced, misinterpreted or engaged with by his colleagues" but "simply ignored."<sup>17</sup> If that has been true, it no longer is. His remarks on 9/11, his opposition to the war on Iraq, and his ardent support for the Palestinian cause have been greeted with outrage. A featured profile in the *New Yorker* summed up his situation as follows: "his criticism of America's role in the world has increased his isolation—and his audience."<sup>18</sup> The reappearance of Chomsky—if that's what it is—on the public stage is less as a media scholar with a new seminal theoretical model than as a political activist promulgating his political doctrine. Yet persistent efforts by the Bush administration to manage the news and the use of government intelligence, not to mention such things as the emasculating restrictions on broadcast ownership, have increased the salience of Chomsky's critique. It is to be expected that, in these circumstances, the value of the propaganda model will also become a subject for discussion among those who approach the study of political communication as a scientific discipline.

## Notes

1. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (with a new introduction by the authors). New York: Pantheon, [1988] 2002, p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3. Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Boston: South End Press, 1988, p. 137.

4. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (2 vols.). Boulder: Westview Press, 1977.

5. *Manufacturing Consent*.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

7. *Necessary Illusions*, pp. 155f.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

9. *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 141; also p. 302, etc.

10. *Necessary Illusions*, p. 15.

11. From the transcript of a teach-in in Peter B. Mitchell and John Schoeffel (eds.), *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*. New York: New Press, 2002, p. 16, but the reference appears in many other places as well.

12. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922, p. 248.

13. *Understanding Power*, p. 16.

14. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public: A Sequel to 'Public Opinion'*. New York: Macmillan, 1925, p. 155.
15. *Public Opinion*, p. 310.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 401
17. Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, "Too Polemical or Too Critical for the Mainstream? Chomsky on the Manufacture of Consent for U.S. Foreign Policy. Typescript, 2003.
18. Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Devil's Accountant." *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2003, p. 64.