

**MANUFACTURING
CONSENT**
**NOAM CHOMSKY
AND THE MEDIA**

**CONCISION:
NO TIME
FOR
NEW IDEAS**

A six-part series designed especially for classroom use, based on the award-winning box-office hit.

"You must meet the condition of concision. You've got to say things between two commercials or in 600 words. And that's a very important fact, because the beauty of concision — you know, saying a couple of sentences between commercials — the beauty of that is you can only repeat conventional thoughts."

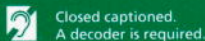
— Noam Chomsky

This video focuses primarily on the implications of the structure and format of television, especially the consequences of concision, and how these factors can shape the messages of the medium. In addition, other issues, such as how democracies handle dissenters, and how the mainstream media have treated the challenges of Chomsky's media critiques are explored. The media construct reality, and in the conclusion we see the author participating in that very process.

A *Necessary Illusions* / National Film Board of Canada co-production
Distributed by the National Film Board of Canada
Directed and Produced by Mark Achbar, Peter Wintonick
Producer for NFB: Adam Symansky

14 minutes 45 seconds

Part of a six-volume package, order number: 193C 9192 183



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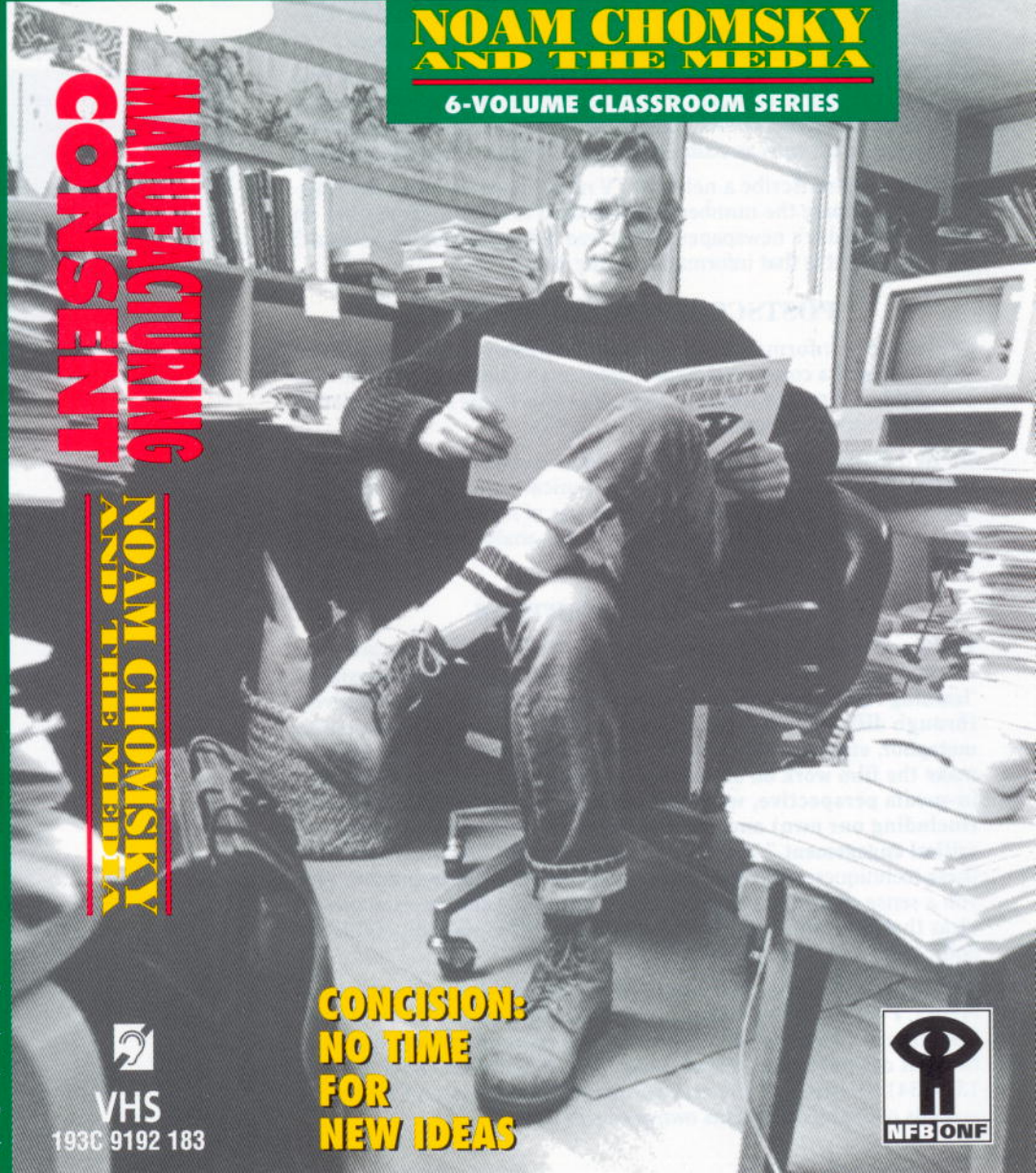
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6-VOLUME CLASSROOM SERIES



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PRESCREENING ACTIVITIES

1• What news programs have you watched in which important ideas could not be explored fully or fairly because of such factors as the limitations of format, time

restrictions, or the biases of the host or newscaster? To directly experience the limitations on ideas, try writing some thirty-second sound bites on subjects such as economic trends, environmental damage, and foreign policy. What did you learn from this experience?

2• How have the media represented controversial issues and the role of dissenters? Some examples might include: the treatment of a public protest and the leaders of that protest; treatment of groups that tend to be marginalized, such as visible minorities, labour unions and women.

3• Tape and transcribe a network TV news story (or order the transcript). Compare the number of words used to tell the same story on TV as in that day's newspaper. What was left out of the TV account? How important is that information to the story?

POSTSCREENING ACTIVITIES

1• For more information about how the news is managed and the ways in which a conservative ideology is maintained, you might read *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in the News*, by Martin Lee and Norman Solomon (Lyle Stuart, 1991).

2• Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Viking, 1984), writes about the impossibility of communicating rational, linear and sequential thought on television because of American television's obsession with entertainment. Compare his analytical approach with Chomsky's.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1• Filmmakers Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick have stated the rationale for their cinematic style in the film: **"There is a diversity of 'learning styles,' and information reaches individuals most effectively through different channels: visual, aural, textual, through story, metaphor, etcetera. Synthesizing many cinematic styles, we tried to make the film work on all these levels. Also, by using a media-within-media perspective, we reveal processes of media construction (including our own) and attempt to create in the viewer a sense of critical engagement."** Everyone should decide for him- or herself how these techniques worked. In what situations did these techniques give you a sense of "critical engagement"? Talk about several examples of ideas that were presented in engaging ways, either visually, aurally or both. (See "Notes on Process," p. 12)

2• The video begins with comments from people on the street in Media, Pennsylvania, followed by an irate student who accuses Chomsky of "whining" about the elite, the government and its use of thought control to keep radicals like himself out of the limelight (pp. 132-134). Do you feel there is a contradiction between Chomsky's analysis of the media and his own access to it?



Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to the film's companion book *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*

Mark Achbar ed., Montreal:
Black Rose Books, 1994

3• It is interesting to see how Chomsky's calm demeanor and cool rationalist style functions in the arena of debate and invective. What is your personal response to his style of public performance? How well does this style serve him in his encounters with: a) John Silber on the Ten O'Clock News; b) Bill Moyers; c) the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour? How do you think he would fare in programs with some of the combative talk show hosts such as Geraldo, Rush Limbaugh or Larry King? (See Chomsky with Silber, pp. 139-144; with Moyers, pp. 20-21, 136, 211, 213; with MacNeil, pp. 157-159; analysis of MacNeil/Lehrer, p. 145.)

4• Comment on the concluding exchange between Moyers and Chomsky:

Moyers: "...most dissenters do not get much of a hearing in this medium."

Chomsky: "In fact, it's completely understandable. They [the media] wouldn't be performing their societal function if they allowed favoured truths to be challenged." (p. 136)

5• "In a democratic society — I mean it may be paradoxical — but the freer the society is the more it's necessary to resort to devices like induced fear." How would you explain this paradox? (p. 137)

6• Of particular interest to Canadians and Europeans is Chomsky's comment: "A part of the reason why the media in Canada and Belgium and so on are more open is that it just doesn't matter that much what people think." (p. 138) To what extent do you agree?

7• "You must meet the condition of concision. You've got to say things between two commercials or in 600 words. And that's a very important fact, because the beauty of concision — you know, saying a couple of sentences between commercials — the beauty of that is you can only repeat conventional thoughts." The connection between concision and the consequence of repeating conventional thoughts is important since it seems to be inherent in the format, the commercial underpinnings and even the attitudes of network producers. What do you think Chomsky is suggesting in his dissatisfaction over "conventional thought"? How would you go about provoking unconventional thought in the mass media? Later, he says, "you can't give evidence if you're stuck with concision. That's the genius of this structural constraint." If you did the sound bite exercise in the Prescreening Activities, how might that experience shed light on the relationship of concision to "conventional thoughts"? (pp. 146-159)

8• The video concludes with Chomsky participating in the constructed nature of the medium with a television camera shooting footage of him for insertion, in subsequent editing, of the introduction and reaction shots. Why do you think the filmmakers included this at the conclusion of this video? How does it relate to the major themes of this video and the other modules? (p. 159)