

FROM THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

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

**A PROPAGANDA MODEL  
OF THE MEDIA  
PLUS EXPLORING  
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

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

*"When you can't control people by force and when the voice of the people can be heard, you have this problem. It may make people 'so curious and so arrogant that they don't have the humility to submit to a civil rule,' and therefore you have to control what they think. And the standard way to do this is to resort to what in more honest days used to be called propaganda. Manufacture of consent. Creation of necessary illusions. Various ways of either marginalizing the general public or reducing them to apathy in some fashion."*

— Noam Chomsky

A PROPAGANDA MODEL OF THE MEDIA, plus EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, provides an ideal introduction to the six modules in the package. Beginning with Chomsky's response to a college student who role-plays "Jane U.S.A." — someone who naively believes she lives in a democratic society in which she can create her own destiny — the viewer is presented with a cross-section of typically lively Chomsky encounters. Central to a functioning democracy is the necessity of free access to information, ideas and opinions. But what should be our democratic right turns out to be limited and shaped by the biases of institutions and ideologies within the mass media. Chomsky shows how governments, corporations and other elites manufacture the consent of the public to serve their interests.

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

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

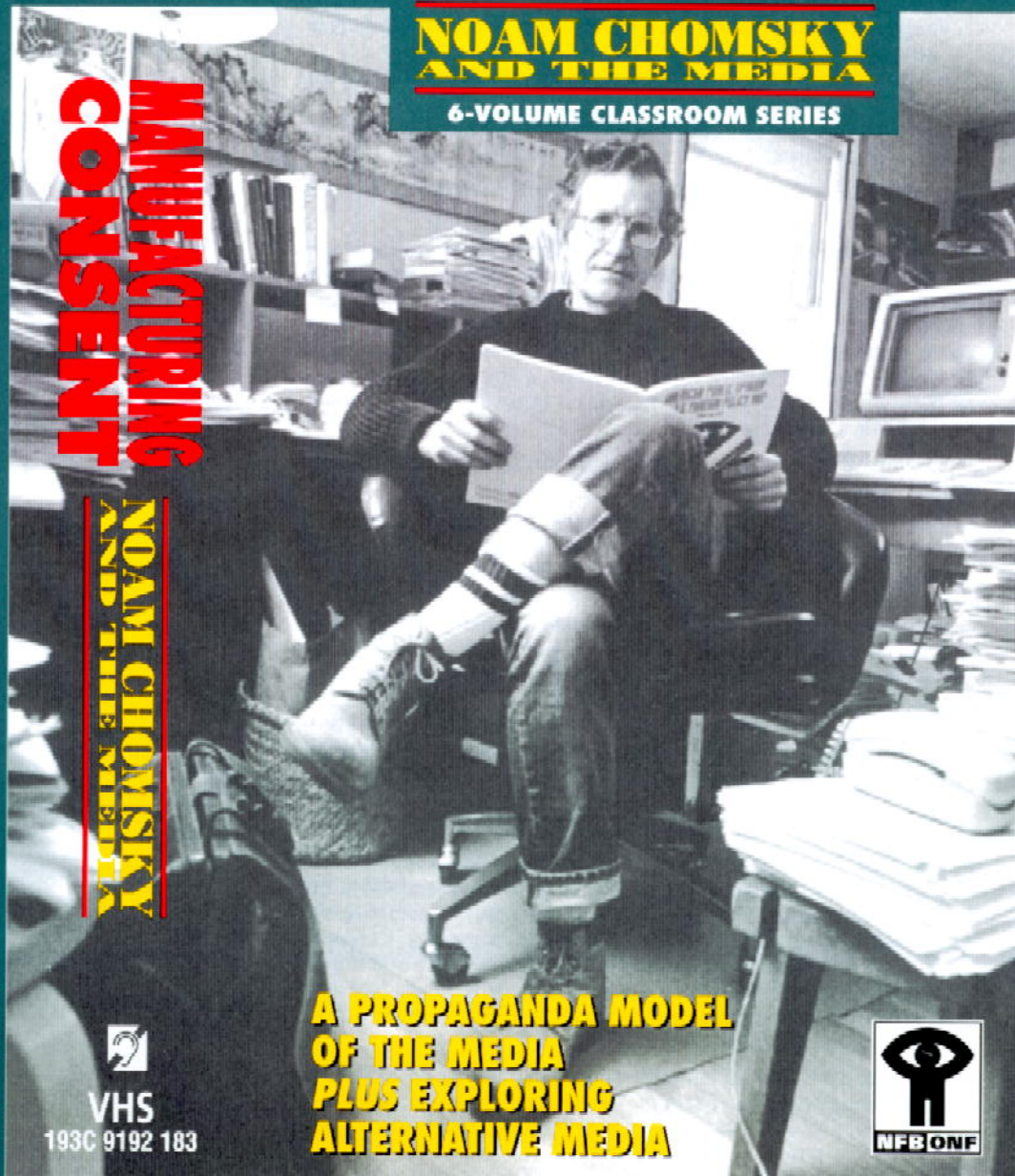


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Printed in Canada



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6-VOLUME CLASSROOM SERIES

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## PRESCREENING ACTIVITIES

Review five filters of the media outlined under the heading, “A Propaganda Model” (p. 53):

- size, ownership, and profit orientation (pp. 59-60);
- advertising as a primary income source (p. 63);
- reliance on information from government or corporate sources (p. 145);
- flak — negative responses to media to discredit dissenting voices (p. 57);
- anti-communist campaigns — also applicable in the 1990s to anyone perceived to be the evil “other” (p. 108).

Try applying these filters to current situations. The following are some suggestions:

**1•** Examine the news coverage of a global hot spot, especially where government and corporate interests are at stake. Order a transcript of a mainstream news broadcast. Read along with the video. What effect do the visuals have? Try to characterize the language used in the reports and discussions. How might the choice of words bias a viewer’s perception? (See Edward S. Herman’s *Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda, With a Doublespeak Dictionary for the 1990s*, Black Rose, 1992).

**2•** Examine the coverage of the latest government scandal. Discuss how the news was managed.

**3•** The term “manufacturing consent” is the title of one of Chomsky’s and Edward S. Herman’s most widely read books and is a key concept pervading their work. The term refers to how the dominant media create the conditions for our acceptance of certain attitudes and opinions — the very essence of propaganda. To make this notion personally relevant, recall situations in your education, workplace, in encounters with government, or a large institution or corporation in which you realized they had effectively engineered consent for a regulation or policy, or conveyed a view on what was the proper attitude or political position to be taken. In your examples, try to identify how language and other techniques of persuasion were used.

## POSTSCREENING ACTIVITIES

**1•** There are several good follow-ups to Chomsky’s description of the Propaganda Model (in addition to the same exercises described in the Prescreening section). Examine the media coverage of a controversial issue, ideally involving government or corporate policy. Compare coverage in different news sources — newspapers, radio and television. Read, listen to, or watch coverage in alternative media (see next column). What are the ideological factors at work? Who is privileged? Who is marginalized? Who is left out?

**2•** Chomsky discusses the immense power and information control of the media conglomerates. There are many facets to this phenomenon. For more detailed information on the pressure of advertisers on the



Text written by  
Barry Duncan

**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

content of television or the use of public relations (PR) flacks to put a good corporate face on such crises as Union Carbide’s handling of the toxic gas leak in Bhopal, India, you may wish to consult *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in the News* by Martin Lee and Norman Solomon (Lyle Stuart, 1991) and *The Media Monopoly*, by Ben Bagdikian (Beacon Press, 1990).

**3•** Some radical critics of television share many of Chomsky’s concerns but feel that he presumes too simplistically a monolithic relationship between the government and the media, which, in fact, may often be contradictory. In addition, they claim that he overlooks the conflicts between different ruling elites and policies that take place in the media. Read these critics and decide for yourself. An excellent source to consult is *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* by Douglas Kellner (Westview Press, 1990).

**4•** Fortunately, there are alternatives to the mainstream media — from college radio and listener-supported stations, to public access TV programs, to magazines, periodicals and computer bulletin boards that systematically critique the news or cover important issues such as health care, environmental protection, sexism and racism from a non-mainstream perspective. A few of the better-known alternative publications include: *The Nation*, *Utne Reader*, *Media & Values*, *Mother Jones*, *Extra*, *Canadian Dimension*, *This Magazine*, *Lies of Our Times*, and *Z Magazine* (the last two publications regularly contain articles by Noam Chomsky). Read one or more of these publications and evaluate their perspectives on several recent news stories. (For additional sources, see the Resource Guide, pp. 239-256.)



## 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). As a starter, you may want to talk about the image of Chomsky emanating from a video wall installation in the mall, or the use of archival footage or ominous sounding music behind certain visuals. (This discussion starter applies to all six tapes and will be repeated.)

**2•** Select an issue raised in this video and debate its merits and possible limitations. Be sure to support your opinions with concrete evidence. The following are a few suggestions:

On the topic of freedom and access to information, Chomsky has written: **“If the freedoms are such that the only choices that you have objectively are to conform to one or another system of power, there’s no freedom.”** (p. 214) To what extent do you agree with this observation? On indoctrination and democracy, Chomsky comments: **“It’s not the case, as the naive might think, that indoctrination is inconsistent with democracy, rather, as this whole line of thinkers observes, it’s the *essence* of democracy.”** (p. 43) What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?

**3•** Explain the thinking behind Chomsky’s provocative observation: **“When you can’t control people by force...you have to control what people think. And the standard way to do this is to resort to what, in more honest days, used to be called propaganda. Manufacture of consent. Creation of necessary illusions. Various ways of either marginalizing the general public or reducing them to apathy in some fashion.”** (p. 43) Based on your observations of the way the media work and/or your understanding of Chomsky’s views, how do you think the public is marginalized or reduced to apathy?

**4•** Chomsky discusses sports from a critical perspective: **“It offers people something to pay attention to that’s of no importance... it’s a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority. In fact, it’s training in irrational jingoism.”** Have spectator sports contributed to the apathy of the public? Some might argue that Chomsky gives insufficient credit to the spectator. Stage a debate on the merits or possible shortcomings of these observations. (See pp. 90-92)

**5•** The Gulf War is a casebook study of propaganda and the ultimate management of the news. Apply the filters of the propaganda model to the coverage of the Gulf War or the coverage of a war today. (See pp. 71-74, 78-79; also see *The Persian Gulf TV War* by Doug Kellner, Westview Press, 1992.)

**6•** Chomsky describes the process of people working within elite systems who internalize the institution's values: "...and then you regard yourself — in a way correctly — as acting perfectly freely." Elsewhere he states: "You start saying certain things because it's necessary to say them and pretty soon you believe them because you just have to." (p. 170) How do you think this process comes about? Share your own experiences of when this has happened. You might refer to your workplace or to coming to terms with a belief system as examples.

**7•** Chomsky said in a published interview: "I'm not really interested in persuading people. I don't want to and I try to make this point obvious. What I'd like to do is help people persuade themselves." (p. 208) Why is Chomsky's distinction important? How does Chomsky's evidence and style of delivery succeed in terms of his desire to help you persuade yourself?

**8•** On the same tape as the Propaganda Model is a short video on the alternative media. How do the working processes of alternative media differ from mainstream media? Do people working in alternative media have the same goals as their main-

stream counterparts? Consider some specific situations in recent years in which the insights of alternative media have been especially valuable. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative media? (See pp. 197-203)

