

FREE TO BE HUMAN

Intellectual Self-Defence in an Age of Illusions

DAVID EDWARDS

FOREWORD BY JONATHAN PORRITT



FREE TO BE HUMAN

DAVID EDWARDS was born in Maidstone, Kent in 1962. After taking a degree in Politics at The University of Leicester, he worked in sales and marketing management for several large corporations. In 1991 he left the business world, to concentrate on writing and teaching. He has had articles published on human rights and environmental issues in a number of magazines and journals. *Free to be Human* is his first book.

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DAVID EDWARDS



A RESURGENCE BOOK

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Jonathon Porritt	vii
Introduction	1
1 Beyond Totalitarianism: Noam Chomsky and the Propaganda Model of Media Control	5
Proceed with Caution! The Pitfalls of Common Sense • Tools of the Trade: Chomsky as Man of the Enlightenment • Manufacturing Consent: Media as Propaganda • Framing Conditions and 'Accidental' Necessity • The Five Reality Filters • Testing the Hypothesis • Drugs and Terror • Invisible Genocide: The Silent Death of East Timor • 'It Doesn't Take a Hero!' War Crimes in the Gulf • All Aboard the Neptune Express! Chomsky as 'Latter-Day' Ass	
2 Extending the Scope of the Propaganda Model	35
Freedom to Conform • Success as Obedience • Who's Watching Big Brother? Filtering the Classics • Necessary Beliefs • The Economic Expedience of Neurosis • Cure or Conformity? The Sickness of Psychotherapy • Freudian Psychoanalysis, the Sexual Revolution and the Propaganda Model • Limiting the Debate: Ridicule • Limiting the Debate: Silence • Limiting the Debate: The Relativity of Truth	
3 Killing the Dream of Religious Truth	59
Storms in the Propaganda Tea Cup • Clinging Religiously to Non-Belief: the Political Economy of Atheism • Security in Despair • The GFF is Dead: Long Live Religion! • Atheism as Anaesthetic: The Great 'So What!' • The Unholy Trinity: Atheism, Consumerism and 'Progress' • 'Always Winter, Never Christmas' • Milk and Sugar? • What Zarathustra Also Said • Power Religion • Experts: High Priests of Incoherence • 'Wherever I Lay my Hat...' Devils on the Move • Free at Last: Again!	
4 Killing the Dream of Right Conduct	83
Enlightened Ethics: Why Not? • The Short Arms of Cosmic and Earthly Law • Zen and the Art of Living: A Rational Basis for Morality • Sin as Mistake • Why the Above Interpretation is Absurd • Truth and a Good Buying Environment	

5	The Desolated Day-Tripper	105
	The Soluble Self • 'Can't Find The Wound From Where I'm Bleeding' • The Natural History of the Desolated Day-Tripper • Desolate: Meaning 'Alone'	
6	Beyond 'Success'—Tolstoy's <i>Confession</i>	125
	The Self-Defined • When Life is a Lie: Tolstoy's <i>Confession</i> • When Life Comes to a Standstill • Into the Abyss • Returning to the Real World • The Reasonable Demand of Life • The Need to Know • The Demon Cities of the Underworld: Where the Jewels Glow!	
7	The Wound Outside	141
	Pyrrhus Recalled • The Pathology of Profit • Two Voices of Resistance • The Real Foundation of Skyscrapers	
8	Joining the Two Wounds: Personalizing the Global, Globalizing the Personal	157
	'The Wound That I Beheld Bleeding, Is Bleeding, Now, Within Me' • 'Hooray for Peter Pumpkinhead! The Task of the Hero' • Shoes for the Road Less-Travelled: The Task of the Individual • Destination Unknown: The Archetypal Hero • The Call to Adventure	
9	A Chest of Tools for Intellectual Self-Defence	177
	Against a Sense of Hopelessness • The Limits of Freedom • Opposition as Vaccine: Inoculating the Body Politic • Specific Problems with 'False Friends' • Hate as an Obstacle to Solutions • Even Genghis Khan thought he was the Good Guy! Rationalisation as an Obstacle to Truth • Manufacturing Discontent: Advertising Anorexia and Bulimia • In Conclusion: A Few Last Questions	
	References	227
	Bibliography	236
	Index	241

FOREWORD

As chance would have it, I finished reading the final chapters of *Free to be Human* over the weekend of the Victory in Europe celebrations back in May. The contrast was disturbing.

The airwaves at that time were brimful with the moving memories of those who had fought against the scourge of Nazism, who had sacrificed so much to restore freedom to Western Europe. The moral outcome of that dreadful war was never in dispute: evil had been overcome; virtue and courage had triumphed. There was an almost universally shared certainty in that outcome, providing a solid foundation for post-War society.

Set against that was the central case argued in this book: victory failed to build any kind of secure moral edifice on those foundations, that our freedom is largely an illusion, and that the psychological chains that bind us now are so evasive and subtle that we're often unaware of our own confinement.

At the start of the Second World War the threat to our freedom was explicit, manifest in each and every person's life. It bound people in an unprecedentedly robust common purpose to restore freedom, whatever the cost and however long it took. Young people today have to work hard to understand the very idea of freedom being absolutely on the line, and no doubt the majority of people would subscribe to the view that we are more free today than we have ever been before—even if we seem incapable of finding any common purpose whatsoever. We are still the beneficiaries of 50 years of peace and freedom.

It will therefore seem obscene to some for any equivalent to be made between the privileged, choice-rich state of most Western Europeans today, and the dark, despairing days of the Second World War. Yet that is the challenge David Edwards asks us to be open to.

Part of that challenge entails revisiting some familiar territory. The stranglehold that the pursuit of economic growth through profit maximisation has over society has been well documented before now. But Edwards updates it, pointing out that this has now become so dominant as the principal functioning goal of all parties other than Greens that we no longer question the extent to which the achievement of such growth delivers the promised benefits. Nor are we unduly concerned at the ways in which that growth is achieved—or

what happens to our minds, bodies, communities and environment in the process.

Even conventional politicians are now seeking to mitigate the impact of those costs, however haphazardly or hypocritically. But the goal itself (the Holy Grail of growth through increased profitability) is never challenged. It has, after all, been *freely chosen* by the people as the most appropriate goal for modern society. We demand it; the politicians merely have to deliver it. Or so today's oppressive orthodoxy would have us believe.

Building on the ground-breaking work of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, Edwards suggests that in reality we have no free choice in this matter. Maybe we once did in the 1940s or 1950s, but it has long since been eroded away under our very noses, precisely because we have been prepared to trade it off against gains (both real and notional) in private wealth and collective prosperity. Lulled by a back-of-the-mind reassurance that we could still change things if we wanted, and gulled by the formidable combination of concentrated media and corporate interests, we become positively resentful if anybody suggests that we are living anything other than self-determined, autonomous lives.

It's a hard message, with few punches pulled. Even those who would count themselves on the side of freedom and self-determination come in for a fair amount of stick. 'New Labour' would appear to be blissfully unaware of the danger it runs in flirting with the 'iron disciplines of the market place', promising only to run that market more efficiently than the Conservatives. And those Greens intent on finding some accommodation with big business stand accused of naïveté at best and foul complicity at worst.

Like most purgatives, it's both painful and purifying in the same draught! By implacably redirecting our attention time after time to 'the framing conditions' that regulate our lives, the illusory nature of most contemporary reform processes is powerfully exposed. But even as certain avenues of change are closed down, others open up ahead of us.

As Edwards argues, political change depends very much on psychological change. 'In the past, we have been prisoners of tyrants and dictators, and consequently have needed to win our freedom in very concrete, physical terms. We now need to free ourselves not from a slave ship, a prison or a concentration camp, but from our own minds, from our brains that have been washed whiter than white by the adverts, by the TV soaps, by the sports and quiz programmes.'

And we can only start that process through constructive questioning and constant doubt. Edwards acknowledges that there are few external or institutional resources to assist us in that process given that the media, our universities and most religious and political leaders have been co-opted under the self-same framing conditions.

For all that, there are still many people today who do feel a deep sense of ill-ease at the direction we seem to be taking—or at least at the directionless way in which we just muddle on. *Free to be Human* will clarify the causes of much of that muddle simply by articulating that which so many would prefer to keep off *any* political agenda.

Jonathon Porritt

May 1995

INTRODUCTION

The Limits of the Possible

This is a book about freedom, and above all about the idea that there is often no greater obstacle to freedom than the assumption that it has already been attained. What prison, after all, could be more secure than that deemed to be 'the world', where the boundaries of action and thought were assumed to define not the limits of the permissible, but the limits of the possible?

It seems to me that the struggle for human freedom is all too prone to illusory 'ends of history' of this kind. When we think we have arrived, when we think battles have been won, we have often simply arrived at more sophisticated forms of control, so that our 'triumph' is actually the obstacle we need to overcome.

Today we are living in a society that creates the powerful impression that, barring a few issues of inequality and distribution of wealth, freedom has been more or less fully attained for the majority of people (the chaos of the Third World being someone else's problem, a result of self-inflicted overpopulation, natural disasters, or whatever else serves to avoid the responsibility of five hundred years of European exploitation). As a result, the majority of us feel little urgent need to strive for freedom.

What will be suggested here, however, is that the battle for freedom from the control of earlier church-based and autocratic regimes has been, at best, only partially successful; that many of the devices used to maintain our conformity and passivity in the past have not been overcome at all but remain (often unconsciously) as servants of the powerful in new guises. Today, the same Emperor can be seen striding unashamedly across our TV screens, resplendent in the various guises of 'democracy', 'the free world', 'the free press', 'Third World aid', 'human rights concerns', 'normality', 'just the way world is', appearing to be noble and moral as a matter of 'self-evident' 'common sense'. We have merely come full circle to a new version of the old illusions that clothe the same naked ambition and greed.

While it is true that we in the West (though certainly not in the Third World) have largely escaped the physical chains and violence of state control, these have been replaced by psychological chains which are, in many ways, even more effective if only because they are invisible and thus far more difficult to perceive. Because we are talking here about manipulation of thought, we find that these chains

come in an almost endless variety of forms.

We can of course be controlled by simply not being informed, by limiting our access to the facts so that we perceive no need to be concerned or take action; but we can also be pacified by the framework of presupposed ideas into which we are born, by the assumption, for example, that the search for truth is the business of 'experts', that understanding the world is not possible or important for that mythical creature 'the average man in the street' (women can be pacified by not even being mentioned in this regard!).

Similarly, we can be made to defer to our leaders by the spectre of awesome enemies bent on our destruction (devils, Evil Empires, New Hitlers); by exploiting our tendency to idolise some all-powerful father-figure (either declaiming from heaven or chatting by the fire-side); by using scapegoats to play on our need to belong with the herd (one of 'us'—moderates, liberals, freedom fighters) and to not be an outsider (one of 'them'—terrorists, communists, extremists); by obscuring the ugly truth beneath the camouflage of opposites beloved of all tyrants and deceivers (as in the Department of Defence, the Ministry of Truth, the People's Revolution, Green consumerism). The result is that we are persuaded to applaud the forces of exploitation as they march forward under the flag of equality and justice.

In short, we can be manipulated in any number of subtle ways—through what we know and don't know, through what we desire, through what we fear, through what we assume to be the truth about ourselves, human nature and the world generally. The consequence of this is that it is not enough simply to succeed in unearthing the facts about, say, our government's complicity in human rights atrocities abroad, because fundamental areas of our belief system may have been subject to the same influences which made the recovery of those facts so difficult. We may have gained the facts, but not the belief that it is up to us to do anything about them; either because we are not 'experts', or because truth, compassion and understanding seem a side issue and even a hindrance in our lives devoted to improving our 'standard of living' and 'having fun'. The world is full of examples of individuals who have glimpsed the horror of what is being done in their name in the Third World, or who have collided with the limits of justice and freedom in their own lives, but have turned away for exactly this reason.

As a consequence, we will not be content here to restrict ourselves to a political analysis. Instead, we will begin with such an analysis and move on, or rather down, to examine some of the fundamental issues

of the human situation to seek out areas in which we may have been manipulated at the most basic levels of thought. The problematic nature of this strategy is clear—some readers may be drawn to factual political analyses (media studies, human rights, the environment, and so on), others may be drawn to more philosophical (dare I use the word 'spiritual?') interests (mythology, psychology, humanistic religious speculation) with some deeming the other to be irrelevant in comparison. Indeed from my own experience, I would argue that it is possible to see both areas of interest as irrelevant from the perspective of the other side'. For example, an understanding of the messages of mythology can seem academic in the extreme when set alongside the terrible and urgent facts of the latest Western-backed massacre in East Timor. On the other hand, the importance of individual cases can seem to diminish when set beside the assertion in endless mythological tales that genuine motivation to act on such horrors with any conviction and hope of real change is gained only through understanding that the 'wasteland' 'out there' is reflected in the 'wasteland' in our minds and hearts, which have been desolated by the same web of necessary illusions supporting the same mindless greed that have destroyed—and obscured the destruction of—the people of East Timor. Only when we make that link of understanding can we be fundamentally transformed and so truly willing and able to act.

It is my belief that neither perspective is unimportant, that both are absolutely vital and, in fact, mutually reinforcing and illuminating. If you and I are to truly master the arts of intellectual self-defence, if we are to gain the freedom to be human as independent, critically thinking individuals able to fight for the life, liberty and happiness of ourselves, each other and all life against those who would use us for their own ends, then we need to gain as rational an understanding of the facts as possible—of the world of politics but also of the underlying framework of modern beliefs and values.

Above all, if we are to escape from the prison as 'the world', we need to be wary of our own presumptions, in the understanding that what we thought were the limits of the relevant, of the useful, and of the possible, may indeed turn out to be simply the (subtly imposed) limits of the permissible.

BEYOND TOTALITARIANISM

Noam Chomsky and the Propaganda Model of Media Control

'Our whole social system rests upon the fictitious belief that nobody is forced to do what he does, but that he likes to do. This replacement of overt by anonymous authority finds its expression in all areas of life: Force is camouflaged by consent; the consent is brought about by methods of mass suggestion.' Erich Fromm, *The Art of Being*¹

Proceed With Caution! The Pitfalls of 'Common Sense'

Psychologists advise caution in situations where we find either ourselves or other people dismissing an argument out-of-hand as absurd or incomprehensible. It seems that several very different motives may account for our response.

First, rejection may of course be a rational response to the nonsense of a demonstrably irrational argument. Secondly, however, it may be triggered by the accurate but uncomfortable nature of an argument—we may reject an idea as 'nonsense' precisely because we recognize (perhaps unconsciously) that it raises a profoundly unpleasant truth we would rather not confront. Thirdly, the argument may be so contrary to our common sense view of the world that it strikes us as being simply ridiculous (the word derives from the Latin *ridere* meaning 'to laugh'; we tend to find ridiculous, or funny, that which dramatically contradicts our usual conception of the world). Fourthly, we may simply be lying when we dismiss an argument that we perceive as damaging to our interests.

In short, immediate rejection of an argument may be based on rational, emotional, or self-interested motives. While it may often be difficult to establish which motivation, or mixture of motivations, is involved at any given time, rejections based on emotional discomfort, intellectual sloth and/or self-interest will tend to claim a greater level of certainty than those based on reason; reason, after all, is not in the business of absolute certainty, while emotion and self-interest often tolerate nothing less.

Unfortunately it is when we claim to be most certain about what is or is not a 'common sense' argument, that our judgement is most suspect. In the face of this all-too-human predicament, our only realistic strategy would appear to be to rely on our powers of doubt and reason, to put aside our (perhaps) irrationally-motivated knee-jerk response and take as careful a look as possible at *the facts*.

This, I would like to suggest, is the course of action demanded of anyone encountering for the first time the dissident political writings of linguist Noam Chomsky. For, in his criticism of the abuse of contemporary economic, political and military power in the United States and beyond, Chomsky presents a view of the world that is in extreme conflict with the 'common sense' version held by the majority of people. In fact, his argument is at such odds with the view of the world presented, for example, by the mass media, that an emotionally-motivated dismissal seems almost guaranteed. Similarly, the nature of his attacks on vested interests are such that responses motivated by self-interest also seem extremely likely.

In short, Chomsky's views are so contrary to what most people believe and to what some people would *like* most people to believe, that it is easy to imagine that he rarely receives a fair intellectual hearing. The factual record does not disappoint us. A typical example of the sort of out-of-hand dismissal he generally receives was provided by the New York Times:

'Arguably the greatest intellectual alive, [Chomsky's political writing is]... maddeningly simple-minded.'²

According to this view, immediate rejection is demanded by the self-evidently absurd nature of Chomsky's arguments. Yet the reader will agree that the statement itself presents us with a bewildering problem for, the author of these 'simple-minded' political views is indeed one of the truly great intellectuals of our time. We might feel inclined to pose the question differently, then, and ask how it might be that a thinker with Chomsky's spectacular intellectual track-record could come to be adjudged to be simple-minded when he chooses to criticize the powerful?

Thus we come to the crux of the matter: is it Chomsky's intellectual competence which deserts him when he criticizes the powerful, or is it the willingness of Chomsky's critics to perceive that competence which deserts *them*? Is this great mind so fatally flawed by an eccentric, irrational, anti-authoritarian bent that his political arguments can be dismissed out-of-hand? Or is it possible that critics

are in some way influenced by emotional, and/or self-interested prejudices, thus ensuring that Chomsky's work is met with ridicule and silence in such a way that they suppress the dissident criticisms of one of the clearest thinking, most rational intellects of this, or any other, age? Intellectual responsibility surely requires—no matter how absurd or pointless we might initially consider the task—that we look at the facts of the argument in a rational manner.

Tools of the trade: Chomsky as man of the Enlightenment

Intellectually, Chomsky is a man of the Enlightenment. As such, his revolutionary work in linguistics has been founded on a simple, rigorous application of the basic tools of scientific method. Chomsky argues that all intellectual problems should be approached in the same way—by gathering all the available facts, constructing provisional hypotheses to account for them and by then testing and refining, or rejecting and replacing those hypotheses in the light of the available facts. This is a simple restatement of Popper's process of 'conjecture and refutation' and while it does not claim to deliver absolute certainty, it does seek to advance the most plausible hypotheses in the light of the available data. There is no room (or ability) here to detail Chomsky's success in applying this method within the field of linguistics; suffice it to say that the history of linguistics is commonly divided into two ages—BC (Before Chomsky) and AD (After his Discoveries).

This, of course, proves nothing about the rationality of Chomsky's political writings, but it does provide significant circumstantial evidence for Chomsky's capacity for rational thought. However, in accordance with the method favoured by Chomsky himself, let us turn to the facts of some of the simple-minded political ideas he is proposing.

Manufacturing consent: media as propaganda

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Edward Herman propose a hypothesis which they call a *Propaganda Model*. (Although we are focusing on Chomsky's political writing, it should be noted that much of this model was actually formulated by Edward Herman.) This model:

...reflects our belief, based on many years of study of the workings of the media, that they serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity, and that their

choices, emphases, and omissions can often be understood best, and sometimes with striking clarity and insight, by analyzing them in such terms.' Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*³

It is important to be clear that this propaganda model of media performance is not merely intended to account for the capacity of dominant interests to loosely influence the general direction of mass media. Rather, it is intended to account for a dramatically effective system of control by which dominant interests are able to manipulate media behaviour from the broadest direction of strategy down to the minutest detail of stress and intonation in individual journalistic reporting. In fact, this model is intended to account for a system of control far tighter than anything imagined by Orwell, or practised by totalitarian governments. The achievement of this extreme level of control, it is argued, is ultimately facilitated precisely by the fact that it is almost completely invisible. The ultimately secure system of control, after all, would be one presenting every appearance of complete freedom—for who, then, would perceive any need to challenge it? This would represent a system of control far beyond any based on totalitarian force.

It is here that we confront what has been described (by Chomsky himself) as the 'Neptune factor' when considering Chomsky's ideas. For at first sight the notion that even the tiniest detail of journalistic reporting might somehow be controlled by the powerful institutions of society, may indeed give the impression that Chomsky is 'fresh in from Neptune'. The reasons for this reaction are clear enough.

Whilst we might be prepared to admit the possibility that the higher echelons of state and business power exert influence over what does or does not appear in our media, we find it frankly ridiculous to suggest that everyone—from the editor down to the most junior hack on the street in all the newspapers, magazines, TV and radio studios around the world—is involved in some kind of global conspiracy to advance the interests of the élites by which they are employed. This, we know, is simply not realistic. As a matter of common sense, we know that such a conspiracy would have been exposed: we would have heard about it from close friends or family members, and anyway, we may in fact know some journalists and they find the whole notion utterly risible. As an English commentator, whilst discussing the issue of freedom, recently asked: 'Who are these people controlling us, restricting our freedom? I just don't see them!'

And yet is not some sort of active conspiracy of precisely this type

implied, even demanded, by the suggestion that modern democracies are in thrall to a system of control so complete that it surpasses anything achieved by totalitarianism? Chomsky and Herman's reply to this suggestion is a disconcerting one:

'We do not use any kind of conspiracy' hypothesis to explain mass-media performance. In fact, our treatment is much closer to a 'free market' analysis, with the results largely an outcome of the workings of market forces.'⁸

Chomsky and Herman argue that maintenance of control over the media (and society generally) does not even necessarily require conscious planning (although this does take place), but simply 'happens' as the result of 'free market' forces operating to meet the needs of the day. Their theory as to how this works is reminiscent of the old school chemistry experiment designed to demonstrate the formation of crystalline structures.

Framing conditions and 'accidental' necessity

At first sight, it seems extraordinary that snowflakes and other crystalline structures are able to form almost perfect, symmetrical shapes in the complete absence of conscious control or design. The mechanism by which this occurs can easily be demonstrated by setting-out a flat, box-like framework on a table. By pouring a stream of tiny balls over this frame, we find that we eventually, and inevitably, end up with a more or less perfect pyramid shape. Because the most stable resting position in the structure (given the square framework and the spherical shape of the balls) is always one that contributes to the construction of a perfect pyramid, any ball that settles inevitably builds, while all others in less stable positions are moved into more stable positions or bounce out. No one is designing the pyramid, or forcing the balls into place; the pyramid is simply an inevitable product of the framing conditions of round objects falling onto a square wooden frame.

In an analogous way, I would suggest, Chomsky and Herman argue that powerful state and business élites seek to determine the basic framework of modern social goals: maximum economic growth generated by maximized corporate profit, fuelled by mass production, fuelled by mass consumerism. By 'pouring' news, information and ideas into this basic economic framework, a version of reality progressively suited to the requirements of the framework is inevitably produced. As with the crystal model, conscious design is not at all

required beyond the initial framing of conditions (which Chomsky and Herman argue business élites do consciously try to maintain: any threat to compromise the basic, unchallengeable goal of maximum economic growth from maximum corporate profit is vigorously and consciously opposed at home and abroad). So long as the basic framework is maintained, the pyramid will simply 'build itself'. Thus supportive media, editors and journalists will find a stable place in the economic pyramid, while their unsupportive counterparts will either be moved, or will bounce out (of business).

If we accept the basic plausibility of this model, we have to at least admit the theoretical possibility of extreme levels of control without coercion or planning (beyond that required for the maintenance of the framework). Similarly, we must admit the possibility that a state of extreme lack of freedom might be able to exist in an ostensibly 'free', 'non-totalitarian', 'democracy'.

Let us now look at some of the framing conditions which, according to the propaganda model, provide the basis for a system of media control of near-crystalline and extra-totalitarian perfection.

The Five Reality Filters

Chomsky and Herman argue for the existence of 'filters' by which money and power are able to filter out news 'fit to print', marginalize dissent, and allow government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public. (The details here refer to state and business control of the US media).

The First Filter: the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit-orientation of the dominant mass-media firms.

Media ownership is limited by the substantial cost involved in running even small media entities. With the industrialization of newspapers, for example, the cost of machinery required for even very small newspapers has for many years run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. As has been ironically suggested, anyone is free to open their own newspaper, so long as they have a couple of million dollars to spare. Thus the first filter is the limitation on ownership, by the large amount of investment required, of media with any significant influence.

In 1986, there were some 25,000 media entities (daily newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations, book publishers and movie studios) in the United States. Of these, many were small, local news dispensers heavily dependent on the large national companies for all but local

news. Also, despite the large numbers of media, the twenty-nine largest media systems accounted for over half the output of newspapers and for most of the sales and audiences in magazines, broadcasting, books and films.

These top companies are of course all large, profit-seeking corporations, owned and controlled by wealthy people. Many of them are fully integrated into the stock market and, consequently, face powerful pressures from stockholders, directors and bankers to focus on profitability. Despite often being in competition, all have a basic framework of identical interests:

"These control groups obviously have a special stake in the status quo by virtue of their wealth and their strategic position in one of the great institutions of society [the stock market]. And they exercise the power of this strategic position, if only by establishing the general aims of the company and choosing its top management."⁵

Mark Hertsgaard has commented (in conversation with David Barsamian) on how this commitment to the status quo means that major media corporations tend to avoid reporting that seeks out root causes of the problems that afflict our world:

"...that's the kind of reporting that raises very serious and pointed questions about the way our society is organized, about power relations in our society, about the advantages of and problems with a capitalist system. It raises real questions about the status quo. Those questions are not going to be asked on a consistent basis within news organisations that are owned by corporations that have every interest in maintaining the status quo. Those corporations are not going to hire individuals to run those organisations who care about that kind of reporting. Therefore, those individuals are not going to hire reporters who do that kind of reporting, and so you're not going to see it... Generally, if you start as a reporter early in your career you pick up the messages and it becomes almost instinctive. You don't even realize all of what you've given up, all of the small compromises that you've made along the way."⁶

The control groups of the media giants are brought into close relationship with the mainstream of the corporate community through boards of directors and social links. This relationship is intensified by the fact that the corporate parents of media giants like NBC, Group W television and cable systems are themselves corporate giants

dominated by corporate and banking executives (here General Electric and Westinghouse respectively).

The Second Filter: advertising

Before advertising became prominent, the price of a newspaper had to cover the costs of production. With the growth of advertising, however, newspapers attractive to advertisers were able to lower their copy price below the production cost. This put newspapers which attracted less advertising at a serious disadvantage—their prices would tend to be higher, which reduced sales, and they would also have less profit to invest in improving saleability through quality, format, promotions and so on. For this reason, an advertising-based system will tend to drive into the margins, or out of existence all together, media entities that depend on revenue from sales alone.

'From the time of the introduction of press advertising, therefore, working-class and radical papers have been at a serious disadvantage. Their readers have tended to be of modest means, a factor that has always affected advertiser interest.'⁷

Chomsky and Herman cite several examples of media that have failed for this reason. The British *Daily Herald* newspaper, for example, failed despite having double the readership of *The Times*, the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian* put together. A significant reason was the fact that, whilst the *Herald* had 8.1 percent of national daily circulation, it received only 3.5 percent of net advertising revenue. Apart from the lower disposable income of its readers, an additional reason the *Herald* received so little advertising was clearly the fact that it promoted:

'...an alternative framework of analysis and understanding that contested the dominant systems of representation in both broadcasting and the mainstream press.' James Curran, *Advertising And The Press*⁸

That is, the *Herald* challenged the status quo and was not as business-friendly as other newspapers competing for advertising revenue. Chomsky and Herman go on to cite several examples of advertisers and corporate sponsors clearly (and quite naturally) supporting periodicals and television programmes which support their interests, while withdrawing support from media deemed 'anti-business'.

In 1985, the public television station WNET lost its corporate funding from Gulf & Western after the station showed the documentary 'Hungry for Profit', which contained material critical of

multinational corporate activities in the Third World. Even before the programme was shown, station officials 'did all we could to get the program sanitized' (according to a station source). The Chief Executive of Gulf & Western complained to the station that the programme was 'virulently anti-business if not anti-American,' and that by carrying the programme the station was clearly not a 'friend' of the corporation. *The Economist* reported that WNET is unlikely to make the same mistake again.

In similar vein, Proctor & Gamble instructed their advertising agency that 'There will be no material on any of our programmes which could in any way further the concept of business as cold, ruthless and lacking in all sentiment or spiritual motivation.' The manager of corporate communication for General Electric (which, as we have discussed, own NBC-TV) has said: 'We insist on a program environment that reinforces our corporate messages.'⁹

If advertisers, and corporate sponsors generally, tend to support media which boost their message, and these media consequently tend to flourish relative to those not so supported, then we have one example of a tight system of control that does not at all require a conspiracy theory but simply the operation of market forces. For advertiser control clearly extends to the detail of the contents and tone of media. This influence can be extremely subtle and far-reaching (the beginnings, perhaps, of the invisible hand of total control implied by the pyramid model above). A truly advertiser-friendly TV station, for example, will be supportive of the advertiser's desire for the maintenance of a 'buying environment' in between commercials.

'Advertisers will want, more generally, to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the "buying mood". They seek programs that will lightly entertain and thus fit in with the spirit of the primary purpose of program purchases—the dissemination of a selling message.'¹⁰

Editors are well aware that a failure to maintain advertiser-friendly content and tone will result in the loss of critical advertising revenue to the competition—a double blow. According to Lewis Lapham, former editor of *Harper's* magazine, New York editors 'advise discretion when approaching topics likely to alarm the buyers of large advertising space.' He goes on:

'The American press is, and always has been, a booster press, its editorial pages characteristically advancing the same arguments as

The Third Filter: the sourcing of mass media news

The mass media, Chomsky and Herman suggest, are inevitably drawn into symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and mutual interest. As we know, the media must have a steady, reliable supply of news. For obvious economic reasons, they cannot have reporters everywhere around the globe, so resources are concentrated where significant news is likely to occur. The White House, the Pentagon, and State Department are central news terminals of this type. Similarly, business corporations and trade groups also act as significant, regular news terminals. Their importance as news sources is a direct result of the fact that both corporate and state sectors have enormous resources dedicated to public relations and the dissemination of promotional material.

The US Air Force, alone, for example, publishes 140 newspapers every week and issues 45,000 headquarters and unit news releases a year. Similarly, in 1983 the US Chamber of Commerce had a budget for research, communications and political activities of \$65 million. Among many other things, it produced its own weekly panel discussion programme carried by 128 commercial television stations. The scale of this influence dwarfs anything that might be mounted by the combined effort of, say, human rights, church and environmental groups, who might attempt to present a view of reality less in harmony with state and/or corporate goals (the leading dissident magazine currently publishing in the US—*Z Magazine*—is run by a grand total of three people. By comparison, even as far back as 1968 the US Air Force PR effort involved 1,305 full-time staff, as well as countless thousands of staff with public relations duties).

The huge volume of state and business communications not only swamps dissenting voices, but provides the media with cheap and readily available news. This effective subsidising of the media is another important factor in determining what tends to become news.

'To consolidate their pre-eminent position as sources, government and business-news promoters go to great pains to make things easy for news organisations... In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become 'routine' news sources and have privileged

access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers.' Chomsky and Herman¹²

The Fourth Filter: flak

The term 'flak' refers to negative responses to a media statement or programme, which may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, law-suits, speeches and bills before Congress as well as other modes of complaint, threat and punishment. One form of flak mentioned above is the threat of withdrawal of advertising revenue; this threat alone is often sufficient to persuade editors to review the contents of their product. Business organisations regularly come together to form flak machines. One such machine formed by a collection of corporate giants is *Accuracy In Media (AIM)*, whose income rose from \$5,000 in 1971 to \$1.5 million in the early 1980s. At least eight oil companies were *AIM* contributors in the early eighties. The function of *AIM* is to generate flak and put pressure on the media to follow a corporate-friendly agenda.

Just as state and corporate communications power naturally tend to assist supportive media, so state and corporate flak machines tend to attack and undermine unsupportive media. These are both powerful factors tending to bias the viewpoint of media that are able to flourish. For example, it will be far safer for media to opt for uncontroversial, advertiser-friendly news proffered by state and corporate information machines which will not draw flak, than news proffered by isolated dissident sources which may draw intense flak from state and corporate institutions.

The Fifth Filter: anti-communism

Until recently, this has been especially useful for justifying corporate behaviour abroad and controlling critics of corporate behaviour at home. The creation of an 'evil empire' of one sort or another, Chomsky and Herman suggest, has long been a standard device for terrifying the population into supporting arms production and economic/military adventurism abroad (both important revenue-generators for the corporate community).

Before Communism, the role of 'evil empire' was played by the 'devilish' Spaniards, the 'savage' American Indians, the 'treacherous' British, or the 'baby-eating' Hun. More recently, since the collapse in credibility of any communist 'threat', the war against 'international drugs trafficking and terrorism' as well as skirmishes against various

'new Hitlers' and 'mad dogs' in the Middle East, have served to mobilize the populace around and against threats to elite interests in a similar way.

"This ideology helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism."¹³

Testing the Hypothesis

Chomsky evaluates the propaganda model against the available facts in books like *Manufacturing Consent*, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (both with Edward Herman), *Detering Democracy*, *Necessary Illusions* and *Year 501*. His method is to compare the type and extent of media attention given to reasonably closely-paralleled examples taken from contemporary history. According to the propaganda model, the media will tend to emphasize and ignore news according to its appropriateness for state and above all corporate ends. Thus, for example, human rights offences committed by clients of the United States supporting US corporate aims will tend to be downplayed or overlooked, while offences by states deemed to be unsupportive—or enemies—of US corporate interests will tend to be vigorously emphasized.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman go to undeniably impressive lengths to establish their case. They compare, for example, media attention given to the murder of Polish priest Jerzy Popieluszko by Polish police on Oct 19, 1984, with media attention given to the murder of 72 religious victims in Latin America in the years 1964–78 (they also compare the Polish murder with the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador on March 18, 1980, with similar results). In the *New York Times*, for example, we find that the Polish murder received 1183 column inches of coverage, while the 72 Latin American victims received just 117.5 inches (9.9% of the Polish total). Even wider discrepancies are found in *Time* and *Newsweek* (313 column inches combined against 16 column inches combined respectively) and *CBS news* (23 programmes against 0 programmes). Chomsky and Herman suggest that these discrepancies can be explained in terms of a propaganda model.

The Polish murder came at a time when the Reagan administration was eagerly soliciting support for increased arms production against the threat of the 'evil empire' of communism; publicising the murder provided an ideal mechanism for generating that support.

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