P	eter Wintonick and Mark Achbar's Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media has been very well received, not just by its 'natural constituency' of leftish political and media activists, but by a wider audience both at the cinemas and through its screening on SBS-TV. Considering that the film is about one prominent academic and his views on the world, and consists largely of a series of interviews with, or monologues by, Chomsky, its success might seem, on the face of it, surprising.

The book by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman upon which the film is based represents the most sophisticated and empirically grounded presentation yet of a 'propaganda model' of the operation of the mass media in contemporary democratic societies. For the authors, the mass media in the United States functions as a means of exercising 'thought control' over its intelligentsia and citizenry, in the interests of the dominant political and economic elites. Like other analyses of this type, it sees the concentration of ownership of mass media in the hands of a small number of large, profit-driven corporations, and their dependence upon corporate advertising revenues for commercial survival, as being at the base of explaining their operations and their effects. Ownership and advertising dependence are two of the 'filters' which, Chomsky argues, skew the process of news-gathering and selection in some directions and not in others. Others include the dependence established by journalists upon a few information sources, of which government, business and 'experts' funded by either or both of these sources are the most important; the use of 'flak' by think-tanks and syndicated columnists as a means of 'disciplining' the media and controlling potential renegades; and the use of 'anti-communism' as an ideological control mechanism.

An interesting aspect of the film Manufacturing Consent is the way it relates Chomsky's analysis of the media and his broader political economy of American power to his earlier work in structural linguistics. For Chomsky there is a human nature which is fundamentally rational and enquiring, or what is now called a 'rational Cartesian subject' (after 17th Century French philosopher René Descartes who sought to establish a mathematical theory of mind). The violence of contemporary democratic societies is the way in which they prevent real human needs, such as the needs for creative work and free enquiry, from being realised.

The significance and shortcomings of this conception of knowledge, power and human nature is intimated at in Manufacturing Consent by a brief excerpt from a Dutch television program from 1971, where Chomsky featured in an interview with French political philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the interesting political and intellectual question is not whether or not there is a 'human na-

Manufacturing Consent, a film about American cultural critic Noam Chomsky, was a raging success on the art-film circuit. But TERRY FLEW (left) and DAVID McKNIGHT (overleaf) are uneasy with Chomsky's conspiratorial vision.
tute', but lies in considering the effects in Western societies of seeking to answer that question, and to that shape institutions around the sorts of answers reached. The consequence in Foucault's research was that they turned from the question of the 'why' to the 'how' of power, and from abstract discussions of human nature to more specific understandings of the formation of social subjects.

This has a bearing on some of the limitations of Manufacturing Consent. At one point Chomsky is asked by a Canadian student newspaper editor to expand upon how the power systems he has outlined actually work. The student gets a fairly blunt answer to the effect that as soon as you challenge corporate power in media work, you will be crushed by those dominant elites, whether you work for a major media institution or for a student newspaper — unless you are simply being ignored. To me this did not answer the question. There is a sense in which the New York Times editor featured in the film is correct to say time pressures and forms of routinisation in journalistic practice are a more powerful force in 'framing' particular issues in a certain way than the direct intervention of proprietors, their agents or powerful vested interests. What needs to be added to his picture, however, is a consideration of the ways in which ideas of 'journalistic professionalism' interact with both such routines and power constraints, as well as with the sorts of power systems outlined by Chomsky, to what comes to us as news.

It is also notable that both the film and Chomsky's overall analysis are very America-centric, and particularly centred around the gap between the ideals and the practice of US foreign policy. It is not clear how applicable such an analysis is to countries such as Australia, where domestic politics are not so much driven by foreign policy issues. Another problem relates to Chomsky's idea of 'manipulation': it is clear from the film that the mass media manipulates and distorts the truth, but is a truly truthful presentation of news, which presents all facts and opinions, possible given constraints of time and format? More significantly, if the news media is manipulative, then so is the film. This is not a criticism of the film as such — all films of this type seek to generate a sympathetic portrayal of their subject — but it does point to an important political point.

Part of the reason why certain viewpoints have predominated in the news media in recent years is that their advocates have employed quite targeted media strategies, relating an assessment of new routines to the deployment of resources to particular ends. This has mostly been the prerogative of 'think-tanks' and corporate-funded bodies, but such strategies have also been employed by groups such as Greenpeace to good effect. In Australia it has often been argued in the 1980s (quite contrary to the situation in the mid-70s) that the Labor Party gets an unreasonably positive presentation from the media. This is usually explained by an argument that journalists are pro-Labor, but I believe the answer lies more in a better media strategy, combined with other forms of social and ideological mobilisation, than the Coalition has thus far been able to develop. The period leading up to the next federal election will certainly provide an interesting 'case study' of such a question.

The sort of 'balance' the news media realises on any issue at any particular time will always reflect in part the distribution of power resources in the overall society. But the relationship is not as straightforward as Chomsky and other advocates of the 'propaganda model' suggest. For those with different political agendas, the lesson of Manufacturing Consent may be to learn how to better 'manage' the media, as well as posing more abstract questions about bias and truth.

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MANUFACTURING CONSPIRACY

One simply has to say the words 'the media' in some circles to immediately identify the force responsible for a multitude of social evils. It's just like saying 'Hinch' or 'Sixty Minutes' or 'John Laws' or 'bloody Gerard Henderson' (or for Age readers 'Michael Barnard'). Thus, Chomsky's views on the media in Manufacturing Consent 'strike a chord' with many people on the Left, appealing because of their similar muddled mixture of valid criticism, ignorance and poorly thought out assumptions.

At one point in Manufacturing Consent Chomsky contends that the media's preoccupation with sport is a diversion to keep people amused and entertained while the real policy makers get on with the job in secret and away from the eyes of the populace. It's not his main point but it's a good place to start.

I never watch sport on TV. Organised team sport has never appealed to me and watching it bores me; I don't understand why some of my friends waste hours watching it. But as far as I know the fact that they watch sport does nothing to blunt their critical faculties or to 'manufacture consent' within their skulls. If people watch lots of sport, game shows and sitcoms on TV and little else, the chances are they will be poorly informed about national politics and social issues. They will probably have views on these things, but they will not be informed by much actual information. This may (though certainly not 'will') lead them to have conservative views. But are their conservative views ('consent') formed by their TV watching habits? And is it really possible that TV executives flood the network with oodles of entertainment, sport and sitcoms to keep the masses' minds off the actions of the rich and power-