Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar's Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media has been very well received, not just by its 'natural constituency' of leftist 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.
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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