ne 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 it 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 probably have views on 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-

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It's obviously not as simple as that. The social values which underlie many sitcoms and current affairs programs exist 'out there' in the real world as much as 'inside' the production teams that produce them. In my experience, while journalists and media people too often resort to the argument that 'we give them what they want', there is a sense in which they are right. And there is definitely a sense in which TV ratings and circulation mean something.

This is the real problem with Chomsky's railing against sport: it's a kind of criticism which lets journalists and media people off the hook too easily. It's easy for journalists to answer (or usually ignore) such silly criticism and carry on as if all critics are similarly intellectual snobs or totally off-beam.

The really telling criticism of contemporary media behaviour is not the fact that people like to be entertained, but that, increasingly, TV news and current affairs and press coverage is being presented simply as entertainment. Shuffled aside in this process is a body of practices and beliefs about the ideals of journalism that get in the way of such 'infotainment'. A recent edition of Channel Nine News covered three car accidents in the space of its 18 minutes or so of non-sport news. If you asked the news editor or the journalists at Nine why this was so, in all likelihood they would say it was a slow news day. Or maybe they would respond 'that's what our viewers want to know' — and point to their smashing ratings success as the final answer.

But, quite independent of ratings, journalism must have its own standards. Journalism must have some concept of professionalism and of public service. One of the most serious criticisms of 'the media' is that too often it doesn't live up to its self-proclaimed goals of informing people. But often it is as much to do with laziness, cowardice and place-seeking as it is by the conservative values of media people, junior and senior, let alone Chomsky's grand conspiracy.

Manufacturing Consent has a dramatic sequence which compares the tiny coverage in the New York Times given to East Timor between 1975 and 1979 compared to that provided for Cambodia in the same period. In both countries genocide was taking place. In Timor it was by the USA's ally Indonesia while, in Cambodia, it was by America's enemies. Of course, it is not surprising that a US newspaper covers Cambodia more than Timor, given the more overt and long-lasting US entanglement with Indochina. Yet even this rings untrue in Australia where the media covered East Timor extensively and where, in some cases, dramatic news stories and pictures of Indonesian atrocities have galvanised public opinion.

In fact, that strong media coverage and exposure of the horror of Indonesian aggression didn't change Australia's policy on East Timor much. And that's significant. The power to change policy lies in the hands of the bureaucracy and the elite in political parties who are often only indirectly affected by public opinion or 'the media'. Chomsky's right that powerful corporate and political elites prefer to operate in secrecy. And there is far too little commitment by TV, radio and press to investigative work to remedy that situation. But that has more to do with laziness and tight-fisted budgets than it does with a desire by editors or owners to protect the powerful.

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