

Noam Chomsky on Power, Control, and Media

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## INTRODUCTION

This literature review will consist of three books written by Noam Chomsky as well as a documentary he created and several journals he contributed to. For my literature review, which will be used as a basis for my film proposal, I would like to write on the topic of Noam Chomsky and his views on the American political system. The literature reviewed will consist of work by Chomsky and those that study him to get a better understanding of media, control, power, and propaganda. The topic of media as a tool of propaganda is especially relevant in modern times, so I would like to incorporate this into the “Fake News” phenomenon that is currently taking place. This literature review will consist of past work that analyzes the way governments operate and how media is used, so that I can see the evolution of how fake news came about. The three books used for this assignment were Chomsky’s *Media Control*, *Requiem for the American Dream*, and *Manufacturing Consent*. Professor Chomsky constantly contributes to journals that deal with topics of language, politics, media, and propaganda so those will be used in conjunction with interviews he’s given as well. His book *Requiem for the American Dream* has been adapted into documentaries as well, which will be discussed in the review to give reference to the style and techniques he used to create the film.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the topic of Noam Chomsky, I want to specifically look at how media is used by outlets or the government to achieve their goals. For the review I will also be looking at how government has gained control of the masses and continues to keep it, especially with the media being a tool to control the masses. Chomsky has long argued that the government uses media as a tool for propaganda to sway Americans into capitalistic and militaristic tendencies. For my future film proposal, I would like to relate his work to the current political climate that exists in the

United States. How exactly is our current presidential administration using or demonizing media to achieve certain goals while influencing Americans? Along with this, how does the government and ruling class use concentrations of power and wealth to keep their power over the rest of society. These are questions I would like to answer through my research, and Noam Chomsky is the perfect springboard for my film proposal at the end of the semester.

### *Noam Chomsky*

Noam Chomsky's rise came as an anti-war hero during the Vietnam War. Before the age of 40 Noam Chomsky was known around the world for being a top linguist who had changed the nature of the subject all together. At the time, Chomsky identified with what was considered to be the new left. Since he began publishing in the early 60's, he has been an activist, professor, writer, and award winning speaker. He was known for rejecting American foreign policy when it came to war and his critics looked at him as Anti-American or even rejecting America itself. Chomsky speaks about the term anti-American and how it is used to attack those that challenge the status quo. He describes it as a totalitarian tool that is not used in free societies. In Italy, Chomsky writes, people are free to criticize their leaders without being called anti-Italian or traitors. Vice versa, Americans have often called those that challenge the government or dominant thought as anti-American. The term is only used in totalitarian states such as the old Soviet Union in which dissidents were called anti-soviets In Brazil as well dictators would call those who opposed those in power anti-Brazilian. It is true however, that in any society critics are often maligned and mistreated in certain ways. Depending on the society dissenters are maligned differently depending on the act and community. Some societies may have their dissenters imprisoned while others would murder them to prove their point. Some other societies may just condemn or vilify the perpetrator. Here in the United States the terms often used are

communist, socialist, Marxist, anti-American, and other terms used to abuse those who challenge the status quo. When you challenge the status quo or the concentration of wealth and power, such as state power corporate power, you're going against most of society. Chomsky states that these things are not found in other democracies around the world and is one ugly aspect of our society. In his documentary film *Requiem for the American Dream* Chomsky speaks about the concentration of wealth that creates a concentration of power in our society, which in turn creates more power for certain individuals in an endless cycle. Viewers are introduced to ten principles by Chomsky that he believes are used to create the disparity of wealth within our nation. The following aspects of the review will combine journal articles with a critique of his documentary to get a better understanding of power, control, and the media in the United States.

#### *Concentration of Wealth and Power: The Ten Principles*

The first principle Chomsky introduces is the concept of reducing democracy to gain control. Many examples are given dating back to the founding fathers of our country who purposely set up a system to keep power in the hands of certain individuals. Our founding fathers believed that the new democracy we created needed to withhold a certain amount of power, so their resources could not be taken by the lower socioeconomic class. He gives the example of Aristotle who proposed the idea of reducing inequality, much different than James Madison who wanted to reduce democracy and stated it should "be in the hands of the wealth of the nation, the responsible group of men, people who have sympathy for property owners and their rights, and the rest of the population has to be marginalized somehow" (Wubbena, 2015, p. 3). There was a huge wave of activism that rose in the 1960's and this scared many in the ruling class, especially those with wealth and power. In *Media Control* (2011) Chomsky states that "Democracy was regarded as entering into a crisis in the 1960's. The crisis was that large segments of the

population were becoming organized and active and trying to participate in the political arena” (p.32). These lower socioeconomic people “are to be distinguished from those whom Adam Smith called the ‘masters of mankind,’ who are ‘the principal architects’ of government policy and pursue their ‘vile maxim’” (Chomsky, 2011, p.43). In *The Restorations of Democratic Rights* (2002) Chomsky writes that one way the ruling class or the “masters of mankind” have kept control is through mass incarceration. He states that “the counterattack against democratizing, civilizing tendencies of the ‘60’s and later and [mass incarceration] happens to coincide with it” (p.115). It shows how hard those with wealth and power have pushed back against activism to tighten their grip on society and reduce democratization.

Another principle Chomsky writes about is how our government aims to shape our ideology. He gives two examples from both conservatives and liberal camps in which they both try to shake ideology in their own way. The Trilateral Commission Report, distributed by members of the democratic party, stated that that there was an excess in democracy because too many people were expressing certain political beliefs and that younger generations were not being indoctrinated by the right morals and values. This can be seen in modern times with politicians attacking other political parties as being the reason our moral values have deteriorated as a country. Members of the right are now attacking the Democratic Party as degrading the moral values that our country was built on because of the legislation they lobby for. Ha (2012) states that governments also use ideology to shape the shape the way we view the rest of the world and globalization. Today, we are trying harder to secure borders, a different trend than even ten years ago.

The third principle Chomsky elaborates on is the redesigning of our economy throughout time. For decades there has been a shift for financial institutions like banks, investment firms.

and insurance companies to have a larger role in the marketplace. By 2007, before the latest crash, financial institutions had 40% of the corporate profits, which was far beyond any profit margin in history. Back in the 1950's these financial institutions were based largely on production with the United States being the great manufacturing center of the world, but this soon changed. There had been no financial crisis during the period of deregulation and by the 1970's that had changed as well. There began to be an increase in speculation, and changes in the financial sector with risky investments and money manipulation taking place. Companies like General Electric could make more money using techniques of money manipulation than actual production or manufacturing. Financialization of the economy and offshore production are two major reasons that the changes began to occur. Those two-phenomenon stated led to the disparity in wealth and power adding to the cycle that we see today. There has been a move towards deregulation of certain markets to produce wealth for the concentrated few. At the same time there have been cycles of upturns as well as crashes since the 1970's, leading to bailouts that only perpetuate the concentration of power and wealth to financial institutions.

Policy is also designed to perpetuate worker insecurity in jobs, which is another theme that Chomsky touches on. Keeping workers insecure allows corporations to have more control because it prevents employees from trying to act together, unionize, or ask for basic rights and necessities. For the architects of mankind that is fine because they know they will still turn profits, but the for rest of society preventing them to freely group with one another, at work especially, has devastating consequences. According to Selenko (2017) job insecurity can have many other effects outside of work as well such as lack of social identity and fear of unemployment or being labeled unemployed.

Chomsky's fourth principle talks about how the 'masters of mankind' attempt to shift the burden of problems to others. In the 1950's and 1960's the idea of the American dream was real in the eyes of many. All individuals were getting richer, poor and wealthy. Since then, this has shifted completely to the poor getting poorer while the rich get richer. In the past, taxes were much higher on corporations and other wealthy individuals, which is not the case at all in modern times with deregulation being the major themes. When the United States was its own manufacturing center we needed to be concerned about our own workers. One example given is of Henry Ford who raised the salary of his workers, so they could afford the cars they worked on. Overnight employees of Ford were paid double in 1914 (Taylor, 2003). This type of action is not seen anymore, and our society can now be defined as a precarious proletariat meaning people are not securely held or in position to constantly fail. Now taxes have shifted and focus mostly on wages and consumption, which everyone must do compared to dividends which go to the rich. Major corporations such as General Electric pay almost no taxes and the burden of the economy has shifted onto the rest of the population.

The fifth principle in this concept that the ruling class attack solidarity to create animosity among groups. Chomsky believes that individuals with resources try to attack things like social security and public education while simultaneously creating a society that is not sympathetic. Solidarity is dangerous, so we are urged to not care for others and we care about our self, the vile maxim that Adam Smith would speak of. It's taken a lot of effort to get this across and drive these emotions out of individuals heads. Social security for example, is based on the principle of solidarity of caring for others. For a good amount of our society, social security is how they get by. The very rich have no use for these types of programs so they aim to destroy them. Defunding, for example, is one way to destroy it. Once you defund a program, there begin to be a

multitude of issues and people who want to move away from it. This has been a widely used technique in the privatization of our economy for some time.

For those with power and wealth, another way to control the market is the run the regulators, the sixth principle Chomsky speaks on. In the 1970's, Washington D.C. saw a rise in lobbyist who fought for certain issues and lobbied for legislation that benefited their groups. As a reaction to this, the business world moved sharply to try and control legislation. There were no financial crashes in the 1950 and 1960s because of the regulations that the New Deal had put in place, but under business and political pressure, the New Deal began to fall apart and there began to be more and more crashes in the economy. In the 1970s and 1980s there were multiple crashes, but the government would come to the rescue and bailout corporations. Reagan, Bush, and Obama all participated in bailouts and there will be another according to Chomsky. Each time taxpayer's bailout financial institutions, which in a capitalistic society should never happen, more power is given to the financial institution or corporation, making it too big to fail.

The seventh principle shows how elections are engineered by the wealthy. Wealth and power go hand in hand with elections, especially as the price of elections continue to go up, which forces politicians and political parties to ask for corporate funding. Article 14 of the constitution was used not to protect free sales, but to protect corporations so their rights could not be infringed without due process of the law. Corporations are considered people and have more rights than people, so they can often influence elections. Taking this same concept, no undocumented alien would be considered not a person, but GE is considered person so they have more influence than an undocumented alien that has no rights. In the 1970's, they found that money was a form of free speech after the Buckley V. Valero, 1976 ruling. Free speech cannot be limited especially when it comes to buying elections, which is an attack on democracy itself.



Principle eight is defined as keeping the rabbit in line or avoiding forms of organized labor, which is also the barrier to corporate tyranny. One reason there is such an attack on unions is because they are a democratizing force bringing individuals together. It is a barrier for workers that helps provide rights, but this has interfered with those that manage society. There have been labor movements throughout the history of our country, but as in the 1920s they are often crushed. By the mid-1930s the labor movement began to form again with Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president. He was sympathetic to workers and was in favor of legislation that positively impacted the public, even encouraging them to form and start the movement. FDR expressed his sentiments of how freedom was had shifted to a few elites and wanted to get the term liberty back to a broader sense. It was a combination of government sympathy and activism that allowed labor movements to begin to form during this time. McCarthyism came about as a reaction to activism in support of corporate rights and was perpetuated during the Reagan years as he encouraged the dismantling of unions. Reagan gave an ultimatum stating that “if they do not return to work in 48 hours they have forfeited their jobs and will be terminated” (Chomsky, 2017). This trend continued in the 90’s and in the 2000’s with less than 7% of private sector workers being a part of unions. Another way to keep people in line is to keep class consciousness for yourself while eliminating it for everyone else. In the past, individuals understood that their work was not much different than slave labor and this gave them a sense of class consciousness. The elite however wanted to drive these ideas out of their head because they did not want them to understand they were oppressed, so they could be controlled easier.

The ninth principle is the idea of manufacturing consent without coercion or the idea that those in power create needs for people that they feel they must act on. Chomsky (2011) states “The people who are able to engineer consent are the ones who have the resources and the power

to do it-the business community-and that's who you work for" (p. 29). It was not possible to control the masses with force with the amount of freedom that existed, so other techniques became necessary. They realized to control masses they needed to control their beliefs and attitudes, and this is done by "fabricating consumers," and essentially trapping someone into becoming a consumer for life. In the 1920's, there was an idea that people needed to be driven to superficial things in life like fashionable consumption that would in turn distract the masses from real issues affecting society. This ideology began with Walter Lippmann who stated that the public needed to be put in their place by reliable men who should be "free of the trampling and the roar of the bewildered herd" (Curtis, 1991, p. 26). Thus, the advertising industry exploded with the goal of fabricating consumers and this is done with great sophistication to grasp control of the consumers mind. A prime example of this is teenage girls who feel the need to walk around the mall rather than spend their time at the library or another place of learning.

Advertisements help perpetuate this by creating messages that do not inform, but create a need to live a certain lifestyle, which helps create the consent to becoming a lifelong consumer. An uninformed electorate is better for corporations because it allows them to consent to marketing techniques by corporations and politicians as well. In politics, politicians are basically sold to audiences through political ads driven by marketers and public relations specialists. For example, in the Obama campaign he promoted hope, but there was little policy that was discussed. This could be seen in the recent Trump election as well. Trumpism seemed to take over without any real policy or written legislation being discussed in the campaign.

The tenth and final principle is to marginalize the population, and this is done in several ways by the elite class. Martin Gilens, a famous political scientist, came out with a study looking at public policy and attitudes finding that about 70% of the population has no influence on policy

or legislation. This has left us with a society that hates institutions like the government and makes irrational decisions with no focused goal. Chomsky also believes that if greed and money are the goal, then the fundamental principles of caring for others will go by the wayside. Essentially, actions are taken that “enrich some and impoverish others” (2000, p. 723). He also believes that it is the responsibility of intellectuals with privilege to combat this type of behavior stating “intellectuals, who are quite privileged in this regard, have a greater responsibility. But only because they are human beings. Everyone has responsibility for being concerned with the consequences of their actions or inactions” (Chomsky & Reynolds, 2015, p.104). Per Chomsky, one way to combat marginalization is for everyone to be aware of their actions and how they affect others, especially intellectuals. When speaking on freedom Chomsky states that it “requires what economist Amartya Sen calls capability. You are not truly free if you don’t have options to pursue your own concerns, to have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in a functioning and democratic society: that’s real freedom.” (Eppard et. al., 2017, p.11). Marginalized societies are not aware that they are oppressed, so individuals must take it upon themselves to work and educate one another.

Those that followed John Dewey believed that all aspects of society need to be under full participatory democratic control to create a truly free functioning society. Dewey states that “democracy required active engagement by the citizenry in helping to decide the great and small issues of the day” (Champlin & Knoedler, 2006, p. 138). Similarly, Chomsky believes that to challenge the dominant ruling class individuals must keep working daily to build up the basis for popular movements that cause change. An example of this is the civil right movements that saw groups challenging the status quo and finally gaining rights they never had. Activism is another

way to avoid this marginalization, so groups and people can have more freedom in their situations. A lot of things can be done if people organize and fight for what they believe in.

### *Documentary Style*

To convey his message Chomsky presents each principle in segments, explaining each thoroughly with himself speaking to the camera along animations, images, and videos that provide supporting materials to help prove his points. Themed music is cued at different times throughout the film to create drama and suspense for the viewer and creates an eerie feeling around certain aspect of our economic system regarding power and control. Naturally, the film is biased because it opposes certain political beliefs and many aspects of the American economic system. To many, Chomsky is seen as a radical liberal and has been called Marxist, communist, anti-American, and socialist. His work as an American anti-war hero dating back to the Vietnam War may make some individuals shy away from his work because it is pushing a mostly liberal agenda. Like Michael Moore, he is advocating for what are known as liberal ideologies and this can upset conservatives or those that identify as republican. This film would fall under the expository mode as it shows Chomsky narrating his points throughout to argue for the films rhetorical content. As for my film proposal, I would like to follow the techniques used by Chomsky and follow him stylistically as well.

### CONCLUSION

For this literature review, I have gone in depth on the principles used by the elite class to gain and keep control in their hands. Along with this, I have incorporated other work from Chomsky that shows how those in power control resources through tools such as media that has been used to control the masses through advertising and creating lifelong consumers. Media has long been used as a tool of propaganda and will continue to be used as such. Advertisements,

especially, are tangible examples of how companies use media to achieve their goals, but I would like to look further understand how government uses the media to influence individuals and achieve their underlying goals. Going forward in my film proposal I would like to tackle this to understand how media is used as a tool in capitalism, specifically how fake news is used by the current administration. There has been extensive research over the years on this topic, but with the “fake news” craze, we are seeing new ways in which individuals can be persuaded. So, how are institutions using media and how does government use media to discredit other institutions? These are just some of the questions that can be asked in the scope of this project.

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