



## **Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies**

*Noam Chomsky*

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## Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies Noam Chomsky

Στο συναρπαστικό αυτό βιβλίο, ο Νοάμ Τσομσκι, μεσάς πληθράς ντοκουμέντων, καταρρίπτει τον μύθο των ανεξαρτητών ΜΜΕ, τα οποία η προπαγνόδα θλίψει θεματοφλάκες της ελευθερίας του λόγου και της δημοκρατίας, ενώ δεν είναι παρά? νας μηχανισμούς ελλήνου της σκέψεως, στην υπηρεσία των συμφερόντων του κράτους και των μεγάλων εταιρειών. Πώσω από το θάμα του ανεξαρτητού δημοσιογράφου, η εταιρειακή ελλάς είναι εκείνη η οποία αποφασίζει, τελικά, τι θα δομεί, θα ακούσουμε ή θα διαβάσουμε. Τοι, ο μπεριαλισμός των ΗΠΑ μπορεί να συνεχίζει ακεραιότος το «θερεστό» ρυθμό του, οικοδομήντας να, πρωτοφανής στην Ιστορία, στηματά παγκόσμιου ελλήνου το οποίο κατέχει «Νόμος Παγκόσμια Τέλη».

## Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies Details

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### Arash Kamangir says

??? ???.

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### Leo Walsh says

I don't know why, but I've been on a Chomsky kick. I broke out this book -- which has been sitting unread on my book shelves for years -- and found it contains the skeleton key to Chomsky's political thought. A true scholar & scientist, Chomsky serves up an operational model of tearing apart media stories that anyone can apply.

Here's a quick overview....

- 1) Find a media story that tells about a war or economic policies of one of our "freinds" -- like, say, Israel. And pay attention to what they are actually doing.
- 2) Find the media story of an official enemy of the US. Like Iran.
- 3) When you locate a match in situation and action -- say both countries responded to an internal terror threat by imprisoning the terror suspect -- notice the tone of the media coverage.

Once you learn the trick, you can take apart and locate the biases even when the US media is reporting on itself. For instance, the Boston Marathon Bombings just happened recently, and were carried out by a couple Muslim extremists. Tragically, three people were killed, and hundreds wounded. There was a huge outcry. About a week before, a US drone killed 13 people in Pakistan. The media shrugged, with no public outcry.

This book also makes Chomsky's central thesis clear. We all live in a world where our side is right. In this regard, the US is no different than Iran. The big difference seems to be that the US government is not overtly coercive due to the Constitution. Instead, they try their hardest to indoctrinate us. But education and hard thinking can actually lift you out of that "propaganda climate." And allow you to see the government for what it is. Warts and all.

And, all too often, that picture is not nearly as pretty as we'd want it to be. But, instead of whining about it, Chomsky's dedication to communicating his cause makes him a role model for thought in action.

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### Travis says

Another excellent Chomsky book! An incredibly rich analysis of US policies, the media's "service to power", and the victories of historical dissent. His revelations of official hypocrisies are incomparable. Special attention to Nicaragua and the Middle East, in which he absolutely skewers NYT reporters Stephen Kinzer and Thomas Friedman, among others. I was surprised to read the critique of Kinzer- I recently read his "Bitter Fruit" and would've assumed he was more critical of Reagan's Central American campaigns. The last

10 pages give a fascinating review of free speech (or the lack thereof) in America. The book is composed of five chapters (a.k.a. the Massey lectures, about 136 pages) and five corresponding appendices (over 200 pages). The lectures are well worth re-reading.

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### **Patrick says**

This is one of the most dry and depressing books I have ever read. This book will open your eyes to the ways that the American government and politicized newspaper editors work together to deal with international relations.

The American-Supported atrocities uncovered in this book (many of which are available from the government as public information, but that newspaper reporters and editors don't bother to address) are simply horrific.

This book really puts into perspective the power that the United States government really has over weaker/developing nations, not to mention the indifference of the American press and American citizens.

Aside from some humour that is dark as pitch and dry as a bone, this book is a consistent and well researched dispersal of information. Chomsky's directness at times seems insensitive toward masses of dying and tortured citizens of developing nations, but I think it is purposeful, and the instant emotional reaction that this insensitivity precipitates refuses to allow the reader to ignore the magnitude of the atrocities it cites, as American newpeople have.

It will bore you, it will piss you off, it will make you want to cry. It's not a book, it's a rite of passage into a more realistic and dismal view of our country's place in the world.

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### **Robert Run says**

If you are a non-interventionist of any stripe you should read this.

Chomsky is hard to read, but for people who are afraid that he just "hates America", it really is based in fact and he is adept as a linguist, in fact, in other parts of the world, people don't even know he is political. The guy knows how and why people use the words they use.

This book describes very well the collusion between the mass media and the govt. on issues of foreign policy, and even touches on marketing and the integration of those techniques.

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### **Trevor says**

This is old now - and in part that is a problem since a large part of the impact of this book is in the examples he gives and those examples are now from another world. All the same, very little has changed to undermine his basic argument for the media model. Today the media is even more dominated by the very wealthy, it is

more likely to present information that confounds rather than illuminates, and does little to even pretend to present an 'objective' version of the truth. To give but one example, the way the war in Syria is presented compared to how the war in Yemen has been covered. There has been hardly any presentation of the atrocities that are daily being committed in Yemen, all of which are at least as outrageous as those in Syria - but those atrocities are being committed by one of our allies, you know, they guys who paid for 9/11, while Syria is supported by our enemies - Russia and China - and so they can be accused of anything, real or imagined while what happens in Yemen doesn't really happen at all since no one even hears of it.

The media model Chomsky presents gives a view into a terrifying world, a world of mind-control as nearly total as anything dreamt up in the most dystopian of fiction. You might think that as we have become more educated such propaganda would become more subtle - but now things are infinitely worse, I think. Which of us has not been guilty of passing on a meme that has proven to be fake but that confirmed our prejudices? So many people I know now avoid the news altogether, not only because they are overpowered by the helplessness they feel watching it - but half the time they can't tell if they are being lied to.

The other day I saw a cartoon someone I know only on Facebook posted. It was some random guy on a plane and he stands up and says something like, "I'm sick of being treated like a moron by these supposed experts - who says I should take over flying the plane?" And you can see various hands held up. The point is pretty clear. The world is now too complex for democracy. People are too stupid to know what is good for them. When they vote they elect people like Trump - we need to leave running the world to the experts.

I honestly do believe that the ruling class have virtually given up on even the pretence of democracy. The media does all it can to show how ineffective democracy is. Wealth inequality has grown to such an extent that those who rule us are more distant from the ordinary person than the most fabulous king in history and that must make those with near infinite power also infinitely contemptuous of lesser mortals such as us.

We live in dangerous times. The infinitely wealthy and powerful control all aspects of our lives and their media construct terrors for us that have us begging to have our civil liberties taken from us in exchange for the illusion of security. Protect us and we do not need to be free. It is hard to imagine a more effective means of social control than the necessary illusions we are presented with today.

In Plato's Republic the ideal state is one that has the philosopher kings creating beautiful lies to help keep the rest of the population more or less content. Chomsky does as much to shine a light on the shadows cast by those in power as anyone else. Understanding his media model has become urgent.

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### **blakeR says**

This is a vitally important book for anyone concerned with Truth and/or Knowledge. It should provoke any mixture of the following emotions: outrage, shock, depression, shame, resignation, and hope. I'm embarrassed to say that this is the first book by Chomsky that I've ever read, despite being aware of his ideas from both articles and documentaries. Overall, this book met or somewhat exceeded my expectations, making up in content for what it lacked in accessibility.

This is a particularly interesting book to read soon after *What Liberal Media?*, which I can now recognize as quite a superficial look at media bias. Not only does Alterman inexcusably omit any reference to Chomsky's work on the subject (a fact which perhaps helps corroborate Chomsky's "propaganda model" that he explains here and in *Manufacturing Consent*), but he confines his book to the very narrow Liberal-Conservative

paradigm, whereas Chomsky pointedly recognizes that entire paradigm as a false dichotomy manipulated and maintained both overtly and covertly by both corporate and government interests.

The layout of the book is counterintuitive. It consists of five chapters that each has its own appendix. Strangely, however, the appendices are almost twice as long as the chapters they're meant to support, and they're usually more interesting and engaging. I understand that the chapters were based on lectures, which helps explain why they contain only general information (as opposed to the specific examples of the appendices). Still, as editor I would have suggested that Chomsky arrange each appendix after its chapter, perhaps in five sections with the original "chapter" serving as introduction. The confusion is compounded by the fact that he seems to discuss the same episodes of media malfeasance across different chapters and appendices, without an immediately discernible organization. This confusing presentation combined with both the repetition of facts and superfluity of examples caused me to subtract a star.

Ultimately, though, the information here is invaluable, and the task Chomsky undertook while proposing, supporting, and cataloguing evidence for his Propaganda Model is simply extraordinary. I haven't come across any other author that has so systematically and reliably challenged the status quo, not only discarding the myth of the "liberal media" but looking even deeper under the curtain to uncover some truly disquieting flaws in the very fabric of U.S. "free speech," a phenomenon of which we are (according to Chomsky) unjustly proud.

In an attempt to verify his model, Chomsky looks primarily at news coverage of the Cold War and its proxies from the 50s to the late 80s, with an emphasis on the 80s and, to a lesser extent, the 70s. He painstakingly analyzes the way that the U.S. media covered conflicts in Central America (Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala) and the Middle East (Israel, Lebanon and Palestine), with much less space dedicated to Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Indonesia).

In every case, he uncovers the double standard that U.S. media (particularly *The New York Times*, which he takes as the primary news source in the U.S.) employs when discussing the Nicaraguan versus the Salvadorean/Guatemalan insurgencies, or Israeli versus Palestinian aggression. In the latter case, he also goes to lengths to document the blatant racism that is regularly employed to describe the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

I'm not sure how critics can really refute any of what Chomsky says, unless it's to point to a selective citation of sources. I'm not accusing him of that myself since I have neither the time nor inclination to search through 80s newspapers to find mentions of "death squad" as opposed to "guerrilla" atrocities in El Salvador, for example. But as someone who tries to maintain critical perspective even when overwhelmed by a particular work (in addition to being unfamiliar with Chomsky as a whole), I grant that it's within the realm of possibilities, even though Chomsky's obviously tedious research comes across as exceedingly credible.

Making it even harder to refute him, Chomsky often uses the establishment's own words to point out their hypocrisy and absurd misanthropy. When discussing the (ironic) problem of Costa Rica's "lackadaisical . . . attitude . . . toward suppression (of communists)" (U.S. State Dept.), Chomsky cites the U.S. ambassador, who appears to lament that the C.R. government is "handicapped in arresting communists because of the protection afforded the individual in the Costa Rican Constitution." This is something that might otherwise surprise the citizens of a country that proudly flaunts its constitutionally-protected freedom of expression. The ambassador goes on to say that "it should not be too difficult to suppress communist publications" as long as the public is "conditioned" to "the use of force by authorities." Needless to say, none of these comments ever reached the U.S. public.

Perhaps the most memorable trend of the book, and a key point in illustrating both the double standard and the propaganda model itself, is Chomsky's iteration of the great quantity of horrific acts that are simply and utterly suppressed by the U.S. media. As such, we just never hear of the tens of thousands that were killed by (U.S.-supported) death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala, or the dozens of Lebanese and Jordanian villages that were bombed to pieces by the (U.S.-supported) Israelis.

It's downright scary to think of what else may be withheld from us all the time, and it should give any intelligent reader pause to consider just how distorted our view of the world is, due to being filtered totally through the lens of the mainstream, corporate-owned media. I could say how I really feel about our media and our nation after reading this, but I'm probably already on enough lists simply by virtue of having read it at all (much less labeling it a "favorite"); so I think I'll stop right here.

One further criticism I would consider valid is that the book is not completely timely almost 25 years after the fact. The rise of the Internet alone has entailed a vast democratization of media and allowed for many alternative viewpoints that are now encroaching on and broadening the conventional narrative to a degree unknown when Chomsky was writing. Then again, I wouldn't buy for a second the argument that Chomsky's propaganda model has disintegrated entirely with the influx of alternative viewpoints.

Indeed, two current examples are enough to show that the propaganda model is still relevant and necessary for analyzing the information we receive through the mainstream media. The coverage of the recent sequestration was dominated almost completely by an argument about *how* cuts should take place, with the more reasonable outlets against the sequester but generally for fiscal restraint in the near future. Left almost completely to the sidelines was the discussion of *whether or not* we should be cutting anything at a time when many economists believe that the most important task to improve our economy is to increase spending to stimulate job growth. This viewpoint is most publicly articulated by Paul Krugman, who, despite seeming wholly reasonable the most of the time, is usually deemed somewhere between a communist clown (by the right) and an extreme radical whose suggestions are interesting but have no real bearing on reality (by the left).

In other words, the media managed to completely obfuscate the actual problem facing us, and the result is that we are still leagues away from any solutions that most likely include higher taxes, anathema to corporate interests.

The second instance is much more menacing and concerns the drone programs. There has recently been a flap about the disclosure of drone memos that discuss how people or U.S. citizens can be targeted, abridging the constitutional right to due process. This is admittedly a grave concern, but at the same time an even more fundamental issue continues to be completely suppressed: namely, the question of whether a program of automated bombing devices that can unilaterally terrorize nations with which we are not at war, and without any sort of congressional or judicial oversight, is morally, ethically, or legally acceptable. Where is this debate? According to Chomsky's model, this very basic debate about the actual *rightness* of a major government policy lies so far outside of the accepted spectrum of discourse that it cannot be mentioned, because to do so would endanger the powers that be with unwanted (and, to them, unnecessary) public scrutiny and/or outrage.

Actually, that last sentence reminds me of another book because the word "unspeakable" comes to mind. All of these policy aspects outside of the accepted realm of discourse are considered "unspeakable." Another unspeakable part of U.S. history is discussed in the highly recommendable *JFK and the Unspeakable* by James Douglass. But be warned, by clicking on that page (and even by reading this review probably), you're probably placing yourself on some sort of list. Good lord I can't believe how much I've written here.

Apologies!

Not Bad Reviews

@blakerosser1

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## Kevin says

Chomsky was the first anti-imperialist I read, and his ideas have weathered many applications since while other early readings have collapsed (Hitchens, Ron Paul). My purpose for revisiting this book is to review its optimal use.

*Optimal application of Chomsky?*

1) To educate *default Liberals*:

--By which I mean those who have not explored much regarding how the world works, thus cautiously sit on the fence and take a centrist position. However, here I would not start with this Chomsky book, but instead this brilliant edited collection: Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky

2) To counter *experienced Liberals*:

--Here, I think this book will shine. Critically, this book is specifically about media propaganda **aimed at the intellectual class, not the general public**. Chomsky clarifies this important distinction towards the end of his lectures, clarifying why he focuses so much on foreign policy coverage and not on entertainment.

--This explores the radical democratic, anarchist core of Chomsky's politics, and his misgivings of the elite intellectual class as servants to power.

*Comes with the Essentials:*

--Systematically dismantling the Liberal (i.e. Imperialist) media (and making Lib reporters look silly during Q&A); hopefully you get inoculated young, when you can have a good hearty laugh at monoliths like The New York Times being exposed as shills. If you wait until old age, there may be unpleasant side effects.

--The elites of the American empire fear the "crisis of democracy". Thus, all the efforts to transform "democracy" where we the people are merely consumers rather than participants. But the crisis is real. Chomsky focuses on anti-war activism since the war on Vietnam: LBJ's failure to get national mobilization thus resorting to deficit spending (upon which Wall Street eventually withdrew from the war), Reagan resorting to clandestine operations (e.g. Iran Contra), etc.

*The Next Steps:*

--Chomsky's strength is his meticulous documentation; he can hold the hand of the Liberal and, step-by-step, spell out the word I-M-P-E-R-I-A-L-I-S-M. Once you've finally reached this stage and want to start a party (...), you go to Michael Parenti: <https://youtu.be/O8k0yO-deoA?t=26>

--Chomsky's anarchism should be complemented with a healthy dose of other Left analyses, particularly in the fields of political economy (Marx, 20th century anti-colonialism, world-systems analysis, etc.). An accessible economics intro: Talking to My Daughter About the Economy: or, How Capitalism Works - and How It Fails

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## Reginald Simms says

The actual main part of the book is short but there are multiple appendices added to give evidence to the five chapters that make it up and explain certain methods in more detail. Chomsky uses the Iran-contra affair as the situation in which to explain how the media in democratic societies control the narrative from both sides, omit the truth, and promote one side of the story opposed to others. Media outlets go along with the official story or sometimes don't report certain things that would make the country they reside in look bad. This behavior is also done individually creating a culture of self censorship.

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### **Ryan says**

When I started reading this, I was expecting it to not be all that interesting. "After all," I told myself, "it seems to mostly be based on historical US intervention in places like Vietnam and Nicaragua. How relevant could that be to today?" Sadly, I was very solely mistaken. Chomsky explores, at great detail, how media in "free" Western countries often toe the line for government when it serves their interests, going to the extent of deceiving people when 'necessary'. Sadly, most of this still seemed relevant, what with the current "war on terror" that the US is waging against many parts of the world.

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### **Kamil says**

Fantastically research study of how we are told what to believe in, how our judgments are altered, how logical analysis switched off when we are manipulated by media.... that might not even do it 100% consciously.

This is a great stuff, but Chomsky's books are so full of detailed case studies, one after another, that you just feel overwhelmed at times.

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### **Andy Guzik says**

This was a big one for me at the time. If you look at my shelves you'll see that for a while I was chasing the Chomsky dragon, but nothing will ever compare to the first time.

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### **Randall Wallace says**

When you use your magic Noam Chomsky decoder ring: "Special Interests" means the general population (the handicapped, workers, the elderly, etc.). You must deceive the masses with "necessary illusions" and let them challenge a few minor bad people but never let the masses discuss "the institutional factors" that cause their troubles. Noam defines the FBI as "a national political police" which rose after the Red Scare. Palmer of the Palmer Raids was actually a progressive and a liberal – a scary thought. Back then we interned the Boston Symphony Conductor for refusing to play the National Anthem and then interned those who dared to say that, "war was contrary to the teachings of Christianity". Further down the line, the decoder ring shows that Nicaragua had posed "the threat of a good example"- the dread prospect of independent development geared to domestic needs." When the world disagrees with us, it logically follows that they are wrong. ? Stranger is the fact that we can't acknowledge the first part – that the world ever disagrees with us. The last spirit of the original Revolution happened during Shay's rebellion in 1786. Those who fought then for the

right reasons were put down afterwards for the wrong reasons. “The Sedition Act of 1798 was not tested in the courts until 1964.” Isn’t it interesting that few Americans ever discuss American terrorism or American aggression; even though there are hundreds of examples to choose from, it’s always the terrorism or aggression of some other country that we are told we must now punish. When was the last time you heard anyone talking about when the US Navy shot down 290 Iranian civilians in a plane. Once you read the Army Manual definitions of terrorism you realize you are in trouble. Most of the terrorism in the world is caused by American foreign policy, even so the flagrant hypocrisy of our government, as you read Appendix V, is shocking. “No state has the right to defend itself from American attack.” A country can act independently only when doing so does not adversely affect the United States “and the United States has the natural right to impose its will, by force if necessary and feasible.” The U.S. sounds less like a country and more like a common bully – Noam calls it a “rogue state”. Here’s how far we will go: “the majority of the ‘international’ United Nations Secretariat work force was made subject to FBI screening and approval in a secret agreement with the state department”. If our country were instead a single paranoid control freak who was hurting people and planning on continuing to do so, and if this criminal was a person you realized you knew, you’d call the police. You’d do it for the benefit of the people and the common good. But when it’s your own country committing the crimes, forcing others to do it’s bidding and acting as sole judge away from all public opinion, what do you do? This is not an easy book to read because it is dense and the appendix takes a long time to get through, but it has to be read. This book is about the conscious attempt through history to control the American People by the state and it’s courtiers. It has great stuff on Nicaragua, US hypocrisy, Cambodian vs. East Timor Massacres, Grenada, Iran, Israel, Operation Mongoose, and the truth about Costa Rica. Although most people who publicly say they love Noam strangely haven’t read a book of his, he’s still the high watermark for rest of us who savor his thoughts not unlike Charlie Parker’s or Bach’s improvisations, yet not based on an underlying chord progression, but instead on the underlying subjects freed from propaganda. ?

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### **Alberto says**

A very basic point of this book is that media don't necessarily lie, but they withhold much of the information that goes against the interest of the elites. It was written in the 80's, so it is mainly focused in Nicaragua and Israel, two of the main foci of US foreign policy of the time. Both countries represent opposing sides of depiction. The Sandinistas are, by definition, bad. The Israelis are, by definition, good. Any deviation from these premises is either criticised or ignored. Case in point. To simply suggest that Israel is one of the major terrorist countries in the world (if we define terrorism as a way of coercing by violence a group of people for political, economical or religious reasons - which is the basic definition of terrorism, mind you) is absolutely out of the question. To simply suggest that Nicaragua had the right to defend itself from attacks within its own borders by an army organised and funded by a foreign power is simply ridiculous.

Highly recommended.

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### **Dahmane says**

This is another amazing book from Noam Chomsky shredding the US media to pieces, brings out their hidden agenda and fabricated lies in support of illegal crimes against humanity that are committed by CIA agents & US government in different parts of the world.

