BOOK REVIEWS

DAVID MILLER

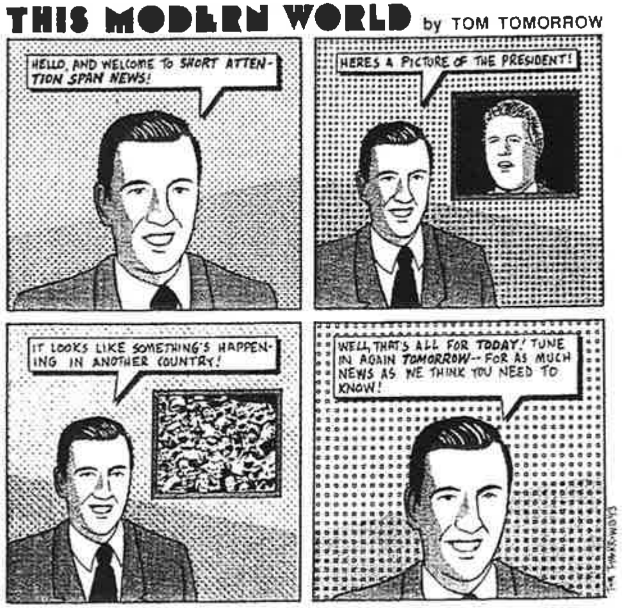
The media: a user's manual

Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media Edited by Mark Achbar, Montréal, Québec, Black Rose Books, 1994, 265pp. £11.99
Censored: The News That Didn't Make the News and Why: The 1994 Project Censored Yearbook. Carl Jensen and Project Censored, New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994, 318pp. US$14.95/£10.99

Everyone is opposed to censorship, yet there is a curious lack of agreement about exactly what defines the censorious act. The clearest cases are direct state interference with the concomitant employment of large numbers of official censors. In liberal democracies direct censorship is most evident in times of war, as we saw in the 1991 Gulf conflict. But the charge of censorship is often rejected in even the clearest examples. Many governments deny that their information controls amount to censorship: the British government denies that the ban on broadcasting statements by Sinn Fein and other Irish organisations amounts to censorship; the Allied forces in the Gulf insisted that information was controlled for reasons of operational security.

Attempts to legitimate the use of censorship are not always successful, nor, as far as the public is concerned, are they always necessary. The British government has recently managed to get the ban on Sinn Fein past the European Commission on Human Rights. Tactically this involved the use of direct censorship inscribed in the law, together with the double-think claim that the ban was not censorship since it placed responsibility for its implementation on the broadcasters. Nervous broadcasters themselves extended the ban and the government could then claim this was nothing to do with them.

Censorship is a contested category. One person's censorship is another person's national security or religious custom. Project Censored operate with a significantly wider definition than direct state censorship. Their book, subtitled *The News That Didn't Make the News*, is a catalogue of media failures together with a resource guide and chronology of censorship. Here censorship refers to news which does not receive prominence in the mainstream media. Among the 25 top censored stories of 1993 are some important suppressed stories. One example is the US intervention in Somalia, which was efficiently portrayed by the US and the BBC as a 'humanitarian' operation. There was little coverage in the US that discussed the potentially huge oil reserves in Somalia which had already been allocated to four big US oil companies before the pro-US president, Siad Barre, was overthrown. The increasingly key role of the public relations industry in skewing news coverage is singled out, as is the role of the CIA in masterminding drug running with elements of the Haitian police.


THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW
HELLO, AND WELCOME TO SHORT ATTENTION SPAN NEWS!
HERES A PICTURE OF THE PRESIDENT!
IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING'S HAPPENING IN ANOTHER COUNTRY!
WELL, THAT'S ALL FOR TODAY! TUNE IN AGAIN TOMORROW-- FOR AS MUCH NEWS AS WE THINK YOU NEED TO KNOW!

What remains to be explained is why and how some stories that, by normal journalistic criteria would merit extensive treatment, come to languish on the inside pages of the press and in alternative publications. This is where *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, comes in. Subtitled 'A primer in intellectual defense', it is the companion book to the award-winning film of the same name and contains a complete transcript of the film together with excerpts from Chomsky's writings and interviews with him, his critics and others such as co-author Edward Herman.

Chomsky and Herman advance a propaganda model in which there are five major filters through which news must pass 'leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print'. This is expounded at greater length in their *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy*, written in 1988 and in Chomsky's *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* a year later.

The filters are the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; media reliance on official sources; 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media; and 'anticommunism' as a national religion and control mechanism. All these result in major constraints on media practice in Western countries. In Britain, as I have already mentioned, there is also direct state censorship, together with a growing deployment of the law against journalists. These filters enable governments or business elites to manage events in their own interests. While Chomsky and Herman offer a persuasive account of the filters which operate to close down the media, they tend to neglect the factors which can result in the powerful being discomfitted by the media.

Both books focus attention on business and state elites and on the media as the prime agents of censorship by omission or commission. Yet in an introduction to Project Censored's book, celebrated investigative journalist Jessica Mitford devotes most space not to big business or government but to an attack on feminist campaigners against the pornography industry. Much of her invective is a personal attack on Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon — hardly comparable in their efforts with the might of the US state. Mitford's introduction alerted me to what seems to be a key ambiguity in these and many otherdiscussions of censorship: should freedom of expression be an absolute right?

Libertarians like Chomsky argue for virtually no censorship. There are, he says, two positions on freedom of speech: freedom for views you like and freedom for those you don't. He has defended the right to freedom of speech for revisionist historians of the Holocaust as well as for war criminals — Nazi leaders and post-war US presidents. Although Chomsky does set limits — the difficulty of continuing to justify academic freedom for counterinsurgency research that results in mass slaughter in the developing world, for example — he has a wider notion of free speech than most of his critics, including some free speech organisations. He has no time for civil liberties and free expression organisations that want to prohibit 'hate speech' or curb glorifications of sexual violence. And yet, the problem of ensuring that freedom of speech or action does not interfere with the exercise of freedom by others remains. Mary Wolstonecraft, who is quoted here, had it about right when she defined freedom, 200 years ago, as 'a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of the compact.'

The two books together make a valuable contribution to 'intellectual self-defence'. Jensen's is, perhaps understandably, predominantly focused on the US; *Manufacturing Consent*, with its wealth of well presented argument, information and critique, gives a more rounded account of the processes by which news and information come to be shaped and makes a valuable teaching aid to accompany the film of the same name.

However, intellectual self-defence does not depend solely on books like these. As Chomsky puts it, 'It's not a matter of what you read, it's a matter of how you read... People have to understand that there's a major effort being made to manipulate them. That doesn't mean the facts aren't there.'

IRENA MARYNIAK

Outsiders in Russia

Glas issue 6: Jews and Strangers, edited by Natasha Perova, Glas Publishers, 1994, Moscow 119517, PO Box 47, Russia *or* c/o Dept of Russian Literature, University of Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

In Russian the word *sobornost'* conveys the perfectly integrated community, unanimously bound by cultural and religious values, through which personal wilfulness is reoriented towards the Greater Good. It was an ideal espoused, particularly, by the Slavophiles: the purist patriots of 19th century Russia. They held that the country had a unique historical destiny and moral status in the world.

Today, the Slavophile vision, tinged with messianic hopes, still retains an attraction for many Russians as they look for cohesion and identity in a fragile and fragmented political environment. And it is tainted, as ever, with a tendency to categorise everyone by nationality: French means frivolous and superficial; German — schematic and unimaginative; Polish — infantile and vain; Jewish — cunning and mercenary. Clichés which have lost their piquancy in the West remain, in much of Eastern Europe, the benchmarks by which people make sense of the world.

The literary journal *Glas*, one of the few carriers of new Russian writing in translation, recently devoted its sixth issue to the theme of outsiders, exclusion and inner exile. It is entitled 'Jews and Strangers'. Unusually for *Glas*, it spans over a century of prose and poetry, from the 1880s to the present, proving how little some things have changed. And it attempts to address one of the chief preoccupations of fallen empires: who are 'we'? Where do 'we' end and 'others' begin: psychologically, geographically, politically? This is another of those dilemmas which fill the pages of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and continue to be the subject of impassioned arguments in contemporary politics. For it is precisely in Russia, the land 'beyond all rules and limits' where words, feelings and promises are fluid as the rouble that, as Lev Anninsky writes in *Glas*, 'the most desperate attempts are made to retain one's identity, to withstand this overpowering fusion of colours... The call of the ancestral homeland is one of the last life-saving footholds.'

In 1988, after decades of being refused the right to emigrate, Russian Jews began to leave for Israel in droves. The desire to go was heightened by the loss of the protection the Soviet state had offered, mitigating the sporadic cultural, educational and professional restrictions it had also imposed. In the Soviet Union, a Jewish background was a shaming liability best ignored or forgotten, as Liudmilla Ulitskaya's nicely shaped and keenly observed story '1953' illustrates. The humiliation of expo-