# Chomsky In First Person

In this exclusive interview, Noam Chomsky speaks to V.K. Ramachandran about the 'new war against terrorism', imperialism, the media and the role of intellectuals.

November 15, 2001: there is a break in the North East monsoon, and it is a clear, cool day in Thekkady. Noam Chomsky is on the second day of his first holiday in many years, a five-day break from public appearances that takes Carol Chomsky and himself to the coast, the hills and the coastal backwaters of Kerala. Both of them have spent much of the morning reading and replying to e-mails - the torrent that does not recognise time or place - and looking at the Internet. She is now at the ayurveda clinic nearby, and Professor Chomsky sits in a wicker chair outside his cottage, reading the newspapers and preparing for a lengthy interview, exclusive to Frontline, with V.K. Ramachandran. This is the most recent of many interviews that he has given Frontline; the first was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, more than a decade ago, during the Gulf War. The interview, interspersed with conversation, goes on for more than an hour and a half, and covers many fields: terrorism and the attack on Afghanistan, imperialism and war, the media, and a theme on which Chomsky first wrote in the mid-1960s, the role of intellectuals in society.

V. K. Ramachandran: Noam, what do you see to be the strategic significance of the new military situation in Afghanistan?

Noam Chomsky: I assume that the U.S. will more or less take control over Afghanistan. U.S. military force is so overwhelming that it can't fail to subdue a basically defenceless country. This is quite different from the Soviet invasion. The Soviets were facing a major mercenary military force, backed by the United States and other powers. They also had additional constraints: they never bombed cities or destroyed them, and they never used what amount to weapons of mass destruction, like carpet bombs or daisy-cutters. Assuming that this offensive subdues the country mostly, the United States will probably delegate authority to reconstitute the country to some other hands, maybe the United Nations or maybe its local allies. Then comes a very uncertain situation.

DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY/AFP
Chomsky in Calcutta.

The strategic consequences will be particularly significant for Pakistan. For the rest of the region, it is hard to predict; it depends how local populations will respond to what has happened. For example, will the population of Saudi Arabia remain more or less quiescent while observing the destruction of an Islamic country nearby? Nobody really knows. Experienced correspondents in Saudi Arabia have been comparing the situation there to Iran in the late 1970s, where events were completely unpredicted by Intelligence services or anyone else. These are very volatile, unpredictable situations, in which no one can tell when a popular explosion will take place. And if such an event occurs in the Gulf region, it will be of extraordinary strategic importance.

Ramachandran: Do you think the current military situation will encourage right-wing triumphalism and serve as justification for military action, here and elsewhere?

Chomsky: In the United States, undoubtedly. You can predict that any military triumph of a great power will lead to a mood of triumphalism, which is very bad news for the world. It frees options for further resort to military power on the

grounds that such power has been seen to succeed. When violence succeeds on its own terms, it increases the likelihood of further resort to violence.
Here the question is really how the U.S. population will react and how the powerful allies will react. Will they be supportive of further unilateral application of U.S. power in this fashion? If that is tolerated, it is very bad news for the world.

Ramachandran: What is your assessment of the potential of the Northern Alliance as a force with political legitimacy in the country and as a force capable of governing?

Chomsky: The so-called Northern Alliance is not much of an alliance. Its members are warlords who have been in bitter conflict with one another. In fact, the massive destruction that they carried out ten years ago when they were in control was mostly from fighting each other. Some of them have a very ugly record. General Dostum, who is the 'conqueror' of Mazar-e-Sharif, was a General in the Soviet Army who was part of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan until the end. After the Soviets withdrew, he retained control of his region.
The U.S. will certainly try to forge them into a more or less obedient group that listens to central orders, which ultimately will come from Washington. However, whether they can impose discipline on these groups is impossible to guess. These groups are non-Pashtun; they are Tadjik-Uzbek with ties to the Central Asian countries and are, for many Afghans, a sort of foreign force. The United States has, of course, been trying to bring in Pashtun Afghans to represent somehow the roughly 40 per cent of the population that is Pashtun. Whether there are any credible figures among the biggest sector of the population who can join a U.S.-run coalition is just unclear at the moment.

Ramachandran: What are the present and potential humanitarian consequences of this war?

Chomsky: For obvious reasons, the Western media and doctrinal system are trying very hard to suppress that question. First, the threat of bombing and the bombing itself have already caused a humanitarian catastrophe. Even before September 11, Afghanistan was in a dire predicament from a humanitarian point of view. Many millions of people - the United Nations says 6 to 7 million - were surviving, and barely that, from international aid. With the threat of bombing, international aid workers were withdrawn and food deliveries were cut. A few days after September 11, the U.S. demanded that Pakistan cut off food deliveries. International aid agencies were extremely bitter about this and condemned quite harshly the threats that were terminating the delivery of badly needed humanitarian aid (in the United States, these reports were either suppressed or barely mentioned). As of now, food deliveries are well below what were considered necessary to help the people just to survive.

It is not simply food; people need shelter and blankets. Huge numbers of people have been driven from their homes and have fled into the countryside. There is at least some hope of giving a degree of sustenance to those who fled across the border, to Iran or Pakistan. But apparently many millions have fled into the countryside, and it is impossible to reach them. For example, a couple of weeks ago, Western reporters estimated that about 70 per cent of the population of Kandahar had fled. It may well be that Kandahar, where the U.S. destroyed electricity and water supplies (which amounts to biological warfare), is almost unlivable. Where did these people go? They are off to the countryside, into regions that, first of all, lack access to food, except in an extremely limited fashion. These areas are also probably the most heavily mined in the world. The United Nations had been carrying out limited mine-clearing operations but those

were terminated when all international workers were withdrawn. Now the people have an additional problem: the area is probably littered with cluster bombs. Cluster bombs are much more dangerous than mines. They are vicious anti-personnel weapons that send out flechettes that tear people to shreds. They just sit there and if a child picks one up, or a farmer hits one with a hoe, it explodes.

Ramachandran: What does a bomb of this sort look like?

Chomsky: It is a little thing that a child would pick up thinking it is a toy. In fact, they apparently look pretty much like the food drops, except that they are smaller.

The same is happening in many places. The estimates are that in northern Laos there are probably thousands of deaths a year, 30 years after the bombing. In Laos the Pentagon would not even provide instructions on how to defuse them to a volunteer British de-mining group that was working there. In Kosovo as well, the U.S. refused to remove cluster bombs.

In Afghanistan nobody is going to clear these things. So in addition to the mines, there will be cluster bombs unexploded and very little ability to bring in food or blankets or to provide shelter. Many people will disappear and no one will even know what happened to them. No one is going to do a careful census of Afghanistan to find out what the effects were of the bombing and of the threat of bombing.

There may be another problem looming. Before the bombing began, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations warned that there was a grave humanitarian crisis taking place. A few days later, after the bombing began, they announced that by their estimate about 80 per cent of the planting of grain, which apparently takes place around then, had been disrupted.
A very graphic illustration of the investigation of casualties comes from the two major atrocities that ended the millennium, Serbian in Kosovo, and Indonesian in East Timor.

These are two major atrocities, but they are quite different. The Serbian atrocities in Kosovo occurred after the NATO bombing began. Western ideologues tried to suppress this fact, naturally, but we have extensive documentation on it from the West.

The British, who were the hawkish element in the alliance, have now released their internal records. Up until late January, the British literally regarded the KLA as being the main source of killing. Although, just given the proportion of force, it seems hard to believe, that is their estimate, and that is what Robin Cook and Lord Robertson were saying in late January.

After the bombing, substantial atrocities began. That is when the population was driven out of the country and truckloads of bodies were tossed into the rivers. Although it is necessary to conceal these facts, they are apparent from the Milosevic indictment, which includes virtually nothing before the bombing. It all started after the bombing. Not a great surprise: if you start bombing a country, they don't just sit there and throw flowers at you. And the atrocities constituted real war crimes, no question about that.

After the war, Kosovo was flooded with forensic experts who tried to find any possible trace they could of Serbian atrocities and these were calculated down to the last detail. That is interesting, because since the bombing was not a

result of the atrocities but rather a factor in them, the greater the atrocities the greater the guilt of the West.

In East Timor, the background is much worse. In the late 1970s, within a few years of its invasion of East Timor, the Indonesian Army had killed a couple of hundred thousand people, maybe a third of the population. This was done decisively with U.S. military and diplomatic support. When the atrocities peaked and really became genocidal, the British wanted to take part, so since 1978 they have been probably Indonesia's major military supplier.
The atrocities continued right through the 1980s, and in 1998, after the fall of Suharto and lots of confusion in the United States, the Clinton Administration organised a training programme for the Indonesian military. This is violation of Congressional directives, but nobody pays any attention to that detail. The United States trained, among others, Indonesian special forces. These forces were sent into East Timor in late 1998 and began very quickly to carry out atrocities. Their goal was to intimidate the population so as to force them to vote in favour of integration into Indonesia in a referendum that was planned for August 1999.

When the referendum took place, to everybody's amazement, the population - under military occupation and severe intimidation - nevertheless went to the polls. Almost the whole population voted and about 80 per cent favoured independence. At that point the Indonesian generals went berserk and immediately launched a major attack. They drove about 80 to 85 per cent of the population out of their homes, and hundreds of thousands of people were driven into Indonesian territory in West Timor. Possibly 100,000 are still there in concentration camps. Nobody cares about them, because they are victims of the United States and Britain. If 100,000 Kosovar Albanians were in Serbian concentration camps, we would know about it, but not in this case.

Finally, under tremendous pressure, Clinton was compelled to order the Indonesians to terminate the atrocities. And within 48 hours the Indonesians had reversed their position by 180 degrees. That reversal reveals the latent power that was always there and could have stopped the atrocities at any point. So you didn't have to bomb Jakarta, you didn't need any sanctions; all you had to do was tell them to stop.

Incidentally, Britain was so supportive of Indonesia that it was still sending jet fighters to Indonesia two weeks after the European Union declared an arms embargo and after the Australian-led peace-keeping force had entered. That's Tony Blair the great humanitarian - and Robin Cook and Clare Short, incidentally. They are even worse than the Americans.

To return to the question of forensic experts, the Australian forces brought in a few and the U.N. pleaded for forensic experts to come in to find out what happened.

To this day the United States has sent virtually no forensic experts, since it does not want to find out what happened. This is radically different from Kosovo, where they are desperately eager to find any trace of an atrocity; by contrast, in East Timor, they are desperate not to find any traces of atrocities. That's the way it works. If you can blame atrocities on someone else, they become huge crimes against humanity and there is no limit to our indignation and self-righteousness. If, however, the crimes are ours, they have to be suppressed.

I shall give you one last example of how the record of deaths is suppressed. The standard estimates of deaths in Indochina...

Ramachandran: Over which period?

Chomsky: They usually start in 1965, because the U.S. does not want to admit that it started attacking Vietnam in 1961. In fact, there were probably 70,000 or so people killed in the late 1950s. According to the official chronology, however, the war started in 1965, when you can claim that the North Vietnamese got involved (before that the U.S. was just bombing South Vietnam).
The general estimates from the early 1960s to 1975 are in the neighbourhood of 2 to 4 million for all of Indochina. It is not a precise number by any means because nobody looks.

Ramachandran: Two to four million is a pretty wide range.

Chomsky: And what do you count? Do you count the people who are still dying of U.S. chemical warfare? The U.S. deluged the place - South Vietnam, not North Vietnam - with poisonous chemicals. Nobody counts the effects of having wiped out most of Quang-ngai province, an agricultural area - who cares?
Whatever the estimates are, it is somewhere in the neighbourhood of several millions. When people in the United States are asked to estimate the number of Vietnamese dead, the median response is 100,000, a number that gives you the impression of the way the culture works. For example, if in Germany you asked how many people died in the Holocaust and they said 200,000, you would think there is a problem in German culture. This is comparable, but it is our atrocity, and therefore the intellectual classes and the media and anyone responsible for controlling thought and opinion suppress it. They don't know themselves and they don't want anyone else to know.
It is going to be the same in Afghanistan. The humanitarian catastrophe is traceable to the United States and its allies, and therefore it is not going to be investigated. That is almost a historical law.

Ramachandran: You have, on different occasions, made two sets of points about reporting the casualties of war. One is on the tendency of the media and commentators to concentrate only on "collateral damage" - terrible term - and not on the totality of destruction in a war. The second is a point you have made even recently, particularly with reference to Sudan and Nicaragua and other parts of Central America, that the victims of an attack are not just the number of people who die in the immediate attack but also those who die of its long-term effects.

Chomsky: Both of those points are important. By the way, when you see CNN or BBC focus on collateral damage, you know it is unimportant. If it was of any significance they wouldn't talk about it.
The fact is that collateral damage is unimportant. It is horrible, but it is going to be in the order of maybe hundreds of people, maybe thousands, and furthermore you can claim - with some plausibility - that it was a mistake. On the other hand, a conscious, premeditated operation that will kill hundreds of thousands or even millions of people cannot be talked about, since you cannot say that our leaders do things like that. The major humanitarian catastrophe is suppressed and so-called collateral damage receives the focus.

Ramachandran: On the second point, you have referred recently to the examples of Sudan and Central America.

Chomsky: Thirty thousand people were killed in the fighting in Nicaragua, but how many people died? The numbers are huge.
Sudan is an interesting case. A few Cruise missiles destroyed a pharmaceutical factory, one that happened to produce half the pharmaceutical supplies for the country, about 90 per cent of its critical medicines, and also apparently almost all its veterinary medicines.

The West is willing to accept the fact that two or three guards were killed; that is collateral damage. But what were the effects on the population of a poor African country? What happens when you destroy half its pharmaceutical supplies and its veterinary medicines? The country is under sanctions so cannot easily obtain these medicines elsewhere (the British government, for instance, refused to provide anti-malarial medicines to Sudan after this happened).
There have been virtually no attempts to estimate the effects of the attack. The German Embassy in Sudan issued an estimate (I don't know how they obtained it); the Ambassador said that his guess was several tens of thousands of deaths. One specialist who investigated the matter is the regional coordinator for a major NGO, the old and respectable Middle East Foundation. His estimate is tens of thousands. He could not do a careful study; it is a guess based on what he has seen.

Watching CNN and BBC is horrifying. When they talk of September 11 there is justified outrage and shock. "How can human beings sink to such a level?" they ask, rightly. When they talk about the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan it is in a few cool, dispassionate phrases, with no particular comment: "unfortunate", "heart-rending but necessary" (that's The Economist), part of a just war. In a way they are right. This is a normal event in modern history. It is entirely normal for the European powers and the United States, an offshoot, just to massacre people.

Ramachandran: What kind of popular support do you think there is in the United States for this kind of retaliatory war against poverty-stricken people?

Chomsky: I think it is extremely low, which is why it is not reported. If there were no fear of popular reaction, the facts would be investigated and reported. They are aware, however, that there would be popular revulsion. Even in the polls that are taken - which are pretty superficial - if you look carefully, you find that if people are asked "Should we retaliate forcefully against the September 11 atrocities?", almost everyone says "Yes". If you go down a few questions and say "Should we carry out military attack if it is going to harm innocent civilians?", the numbers go down sharply. If you give people any idea of the scale of the harm, support would go way down, which is why it is not reported.

Ramachandran: Is there any evidence for this, or are you speaking of what you would expect?

Chomsky: It is what you expect... Well yes, there is evidence but it is not evidence that you could write a technical paper about.
Take a look at the 25-year gap between the John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan Administrations. Kennedy sent the U. S. Air Force to bomb South Vietnam. He inaugurated the use of napalm and chemical weapons, and the policy of attacking food crops to deprive the population of support, driving millions of people into concentration camps called "strategic hamlets" and later into slums. Although it was a major attack, there wasn't a whisper of protest. A big protest movement built up only in the late 1960s, after many years of war.

When the Reagan Administration came to power, Kennedy was in many ways its model. It had problems in Central America similar to those Kennedy faced in South-East Asia and it tried to duplicate, step by step, what the Kennedy Administration had done.

Within a month of the entry of the Reagan government, it published a White Paper - almost modeled on the Kennedy White Paper - warning that Russian-backed terrorists were going to take over the world, starting from Nicaragua. They were plainly planning to move on to direct military attack against Nicaragua. There was, however, an enormous - and totally unanticipated - public reaction all over the country.

The Administration had to turn to clandestine terror, and never could invade Nicaragua. It had to use a terrorist mercenary army attacking from abroad because it could not use direct military force. It was the same in other parts of Central America.

Ramachandran: You've also said that the Gulf War was one in which protests began even before bombing began.

Chomsky: The Gulf War was amazing. It is the first time in history that there was protest - major protest by hundreds of thousands of people, you were there - before a war.

Actually the 1980s are a very interesting chapter in the history of imperialism. This was the first time that ordinary people from the imperial society went to live with the victims to try and help and protect them. Tens of thousands of people from the United States went to places like Nicaragua and El Salvador, partly to provide assistance, but in large part just in the hope that a white face in a village could cut down atrocities. Nobody ever thought of such action during the Vietnam War. No one thought of living in a Vietnamese village to try to protect the village people against atrocities. In Central America it was common and many of them are still there.

Ramachandran: Like your daughter in Nicaragua.

Chomsky: Yes. That is an enormous change in consciousness, and it is still there.

Ramachandran: It went beyond just solidarity, then; they were conscious of being a human shield.

Chomsky: It was participation and it was living there, not just going on a march or going to jail overnight, and it was not easy. It is not easy to live in a Salvadoran village. First of all it was dangerous; it was also hard. These were middle-class, relatively prosperous people. There was also an underground resistance, a sort of new Underground Railway run by conservative Christians to bring illegal immigrants into the United States and to disperse them in the country.

Ramachandran: To shift to some issues of media analysis, to issues relating to your 'propaganda model'. In your thinking, the propaganda function of the dominant media is part of a broader process of building a consensus for official policy.

Chomsky: Official policy and more or less standard doctrine, that is, supporting privilege and existing institutional structures.

The work on the 'filters' is mostly Edward Herman's, from his interest in institutional economics. My own feeling is that the consistent ideological-doctrinal commitments that are part of intellectual life - and these are not easily measurable - are an overwhelming factor. That is why you do not find much difference between the media and scholarly journals; they come from the same roots. In the media the problem is intensified by ownership and advertising - these intensify something that already exists.

One of the reasons I study the media is because they are the most visible part of the intellectual culture. To study the intellectual culture is not easy, but when you study the media, there are some very straightforward ways of doing it. You can ask, for example, "How do they handle the war in Afghanistan?" There are neutral ways of handling the issue, but do the media use the neutral ways or do they just act as a state propaganda agency? You can investigate that rather closely. And the results are stunning, I think, and beyond what any model would predict.

The degree of conformism and support for elite policies is astonishing. Take, say, the elections of November 2000. You can see from the polls that there are issues that concern the public greatly. Its main concerns are economic issues, for instance, the trade deficit. Most people don't even know what the trade deficit is. They couldn't explain it to you, but they know that it is leading to the deterioration of their lives, and that it makes it possible to attack the quality of their work and even their employment. People are strongly opposed to the so-called free trade agreements. People are almost instinctively opposed; they do not have a lot of information and they cannot give you an explanation, but they are opposed.

There is a thing called 'fast-track' legislation, basically Stalinist legislation that gives the executive branch the right to enter into economic treaties without Congressional participation. Congress is then allowed to say 'Yes'. Although for years fast-track legislation was passed without any problem, it has been very hard to do so over the last few years.

Right after September 11, the U.S. Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, said the first thing that had to be done to combat terrorism was to pass fast-track. Now that should really make Osama bin Laden tremble in his boots - that the President has Kremlin-style authority to sign economic agreements. The Administration wants to use the present window of opportunity to ram fast-track through without people noticing.

To get back to 2000, none of these were issues in the elections. There is a kind of criterion that determines such exclusion: if the public and the business world are both very much interested in some issue, but are on opposite sides, the issue doesn't enter the political system.

Ramachandran: Is it getting worse or have your book and your work and that of others made a difference to the quality of the media?

Chomsky: They have been barely willing to recognise its existence. Nevertheless, people know about this kind of critique because by now there is a strong popular movement against the media.

The media are very unpopular. The situation is somewhat similar to what I said about free-trade agreements: people don't really have detailed reasons, but they just don't trust them, because they feel manipulated.

Edward Herman and I and others, including Michael Parenti, give endless numbers of talks - this is basically participation in a mass movement - and that reaches a fair number of people.

There is another influence on the mass media that should not be overlooked. The 1960s had a big civilizing effect on society; people who went through that experience are just different. A reporter or young editor in the 1980s would have been somebody whose view of the world was shaped by events in the 1960s and what followed.

My own feeling is that, bad as they are, the media are better than they were 40 or even 20 years ago, partly for these reasons, partly because the public mood is different. Things are still awful, but they used to be much worse.

Ramachandran: I haven't heard you say that before.
Chomsky: I think it's true. In the late 1960s, for example, I tried very hard to get the major media to cover the war in Laos, which was a horrible atrocity. I actually met with editors of The New York Times and Time-Life and talked about it. It was not even a possibility. When the Intifada broke out in 2000, I had a meeting with senior editors of The Boston Globe, people I have known in one way or another for years.

Ramachandran: Did you ask for the meeting?

Chomsky: There was a small delegation that asked me to come along. The Globe was in a way happy: it is under constant attack from the Jewish community for being too pro-Arab, so they want criticism from the other side in order to be able to say that they are in the middle.
I went anyway, and at the meeting, I tried very hard to get them to cover some very simple facts. For example, the following: when the Intifada started on September 13, there was no Palestinian fire for the first few days. During those days, Israel immediately reacted with extreme violence, including helicopter attacks on civilians. Helicopter gunships attacked apartment complexes, ambulances and so on, and killed a lot of people. On October 3, the Clinton Administration made a deal with Israel for the biggest shipment of attack helicopters in a decade. One of the issues I raised with the Globe was just, "Why won't you report this fact?" We had a polite discussion, but I knew they were never going to report it.

Ramachandran: Did they, finally?

Chomsky: No, they never did. A couple of months later, a new shipment of the most advanced helicopters in the United States arsenal was sent. That one happened to be mentioned in the business pages.

Ramachandran: So what you are saying is that there is some improvement, but....
Chomsky: There is some improvement, but a long, long way to go - and the basic structure is the same.

Ramachandran: How do you see the applicability of the propaganda model to other situations and places, including, for instance, Europe?
Chomsky: In Britain, there is some work. There is an institute in Britain in Glasgow University that does media analysis, but that's about it.
On the Continent, there is virtually nothing. The reason, I feel, is that European intellectuals are so deeply indoctrinated that they cannot perceive that they are servants of power. They see themselves as courageous opponents of

power who stand up for human rights and so on, a perception that is completely false.

The role of intellectuals in Europe is somewhat different from their role in the United States. One of the nice things about the United States is that intellectuals aren't taken very seriously. It shows up in personal relations: if I get gasoline at a gas station, the person who works there and I are equals, and there is no conception that I am at a different level than that person is. In Europe that is not the case. Intellectuals are a caste aside: they are very respected, every nonsensical thing that they produce is front-page news, and their self-image is different.

One consequence of this is that there is virtually no analysis of the media in Europe, because it is not a conceivable topic. On the other hand, the little that exists indicates that the situation is much the same as in the United States. There is somewhat more diversity in Europe, but that is because it is socio-politically different. It has labour-based political parties, and these parties have their presses and representatives, and so you get a little bit of diversity. The U.S. has nothing like that. The very fact that Europe has more of a social market system than the U.S. makes a difference. It is taken for granted, for example, that there has to be some kind of national health service, whereas the United States is such a business-run society that these issues barely even arise in the public arena.

Ramachandran: So overall do you think that the media in Europe covers a wider range of issues and opinions?

Chomsky: Marginally wider, because of the somewhat greater diversity in the social organisation. Take, for instance, the labour movement, which is much stronger in Germany than in the United States. Co-determination, whatever it amounts to, is almost unimaginable in the United States.
You even see it symbolically. As far as I know there is only one country in the world, the United States, where nobody knows what May Day is.

Ramachandran: And that's where it began.

Chomsky: It was a day of solidarity for American workers fighting for an eight-hour day. People know that everywhere in the world; in the United States, I wonder if there is a person in a million who knows what it is.

Ramachandran: How in your opinion should research in the field of media studies proceed? I refer in particular to research on using the media to impose official doctrinal consensuses on the people.

Chomsky: You have to look at cases. This isn't physics. There is no theory behind any of this. We didn't call the propaganda model a theory because it is not entitled to that term. In fact, there is almost nothing in the social sciences that ought to be called a theory. Human affairs are too complicated.

Ramachandran: Well, it is a model in that it is a set of relationships from which predictions can be made.

Chomsky: Okay, it is a set of relationships from which predictions can be made but it is not the kind of thing that you call a theory in the sciences, where you have principles that aren't obvious (in fact, may even seem strange), but from which you derive conclusions that can then be tested in experimental situations. There is very little like that in the social sciences.

That's why we refrained from calling the model a theory. It's just too superficial; in fact it's truisms. What would you conclude about corporations selling audiences to other businesses? The immediate assumption is that the output will probably reflect the interests of the sellers and the buyers. That's almost a null hypothesis. If you find that is true, okay, it is interesting, but the mass of the work lies in showing how it works out in particular cases.

Ramachandran: But each case study is not meant only to illustrate or describe just that particular case.

Chomsky: No, it is not; and in fact we tried to pick the hardest cases. We picked the cases that the media themselves and the ideological system put forth as their strongest.

Ramachandran: In that sense, you are looking for some kind of theoretical conclusions, aren't you?

Chomsky: To try to show that anywhere you look, you are going to find the same thing. We picked historically crucial cases, the cases that the media present as their proudest moments.

Ramachandran: In the light of what you are saying, how, in your view, would research on the Indian media, using the Herman-Chomsky method, proceed?

Chomsky: I would begin by looking at the institutional structure. If it is a family-owned newspaper, ask questions about the family.
Ramachandran: What are you looking for?
Chomsky: Take some question that is crucial for India. Let us say....

Ramachandran: Food and food security.

Chomsky: Okay, a socio-economic question like food and food distribution or a major political issue like Kashmir. Now ask the questions: What would a neutral person - a Martian, someone with no commitments - say about it? What is the human significance? How is it treated in the media? In fact, Kashmir would probably be interesting. You could ask how the Pakistani and Indian media treat the same problem. You can predict without looking what's going to happen. In Pakistan they will be all upset about Indian repression and refusal to allow self-determination; in India, they will be upset about Pakistani terrorism.

Ramachandran: You could use this method, I take it, when dealing with other issues as well, such as food security or the WTO...

Chomsky: The WTO is a perfect example. Does everybody in India read every day that the effect of the neo-liberal programmes has been to slow down growth all over the world? That is, after all, the first thing you should know. Even in cases where there is growth, it is very specific growth. It is growth that leaves out most of the population and, in fact, probably harms them. These ought to be things that everybody knows.

Ramachandran: So the methodology would be to choose subjects of great public importance, investigate how the press covers them, and then...

Chomsky: Trace the results to what you can about the institutional structure. That's not profound, but it's straightforward.

Ramachandran: Although the Internet is increasingly being privatised, we wouldn't have had our present access to dissenting opinion without it. It clearly has a dual character.

Chomsky: It has been fantastic, and it has very much of a dual character. It's had a very big impact all over the place. In Indonesia the student rebellion that ended up overthrowing Suharto was able to organise through the Internet. About a year or two ago in Bolivia, the World Bank had more or less compelled the government to privatise the water system. Bechtel, which was going to take it over, instituted user-charges, which are, of course, a disaster. The resistance would have been crushed, but there were a couple of North American activists in Bolivia who made very intelligent use of the Internet. They communicated information of which no one would ever have heard of to people all over the world, and there were big protests everywhere.

Ramachandran: The classic case is Chiapas.

Chomsky: Yes, Chiapas is in fact a more striking case, because they would all be dead if it weren't for the Internet.

Ramachandran: What do you think is going to happen to that space?

Chomsky: That space is contested. There is a very good book on this by Edward Herman and Robert McChesney called Global Media. Have you read it?
Ramachandran: Alas.

Chomsky: The privatisation of the Internet is a very obscure development. Nobody knows how it took place, nobody knows what the decisions were. In 1995, after about 30 years of development in the public sector, the Internet was privatised. How? Who decided? Nothing is known. It's very obscure and was very sudden.
In 1994, one year before the privatisation, Bill Gates was so contemptuous of the Internet that he refused publicly to go to conferences about it. One year later, something happened and they suddenly realised that it is a terrific tool for business and they... took it over! Since then, the question has been whether they are going to be able to control access to it.

It is technically very difficult to just shut down the Internet. But what you can do is to make it difficult for people to go where they want. Say there are only a few points of access and that they are commercially owned. When you open them up, suppose you immediately get a tonne of advertisements and they lead you down different paths. If you are really dedicated and you know what you want, you can wade through it and get to ZNet or whatever. Most people, though, are just going to be distracted and drawn away from it.
The question is whether that space can be protected. It is a very important question because the Internet has been very important.

Ramachandran: As a means of...
Chomsky: Getting around media control. Take the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, for instance. You couldn't learn anything about it through scattered sentences here and there, but there is a lot of material on the Internet.

Ramachandran: To shift the subject, in 1967 you published "The Responsibility of Intellectuals".

Chomsky: Actually, it had been published before, in a student newspaper.

Ramachandran: Which one?

Chomsky: You wouldn't believe it, but it was published in the journal of the Hillel Foundation, a Jewish student group at Harvard.

Ramachandran: If you had to rewrite "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" today, what would you say?

Chomsky: In retrospect, it seems to me there were unclarities and omissions. One has to do with the category of intellectuals. Who are they? Suppose that we take the term "intellectual" to refer to people who think seriously about issues of general human concern, seek and evaluate evidence, and try to articulate their judgments and conclusions clearly and honestly. Then some of the most impressive intellectuals I have known had little formal education, and many of those who are granted great respect as leading intellectuals do not deserve the name. If we adopt this conception, there is no special "responsibility of intellectuals" other than the responsibility of people generally to act with integrity and decency, but there is a responsibility of all of us to work for a society in which everyone is encouraged and helped to become an intellectual, in this sense.

Those who have privilege, training, access to resources and other advantages do have special responsibilities. One formula is that their responsibility is "to speak truth to power". Among those who adopt this stand, there are people I greatly respect and admire. But although I often agree with them in practice, I don't agree with the principle. One reason is that none of us can claim to have The Truth. We have our judgments and conclusions, and maybe good reasons for them. But these are at best tentative, and it is important to make that clear, particularly in cultures in which technical knowledge and training are accorded considerable prestige - sometimes warranted, sometimes not. It is important to make clear the limits of our knowledge and understanding, and not to exploit prestige and authority as a weapon of domination and control. So the idea of "speaking truth" is already flawed. Furthermore, to the extent that we think we have some grasp of the truth about matters of significance, why should our audience be "power"? Is it important to convince the king, or to enlighten his subjects? Or better, not to "enlighten" the subjects but to join with them in a common effort to gain better understanding, and to use it to dismantle illegitimate authority and expand the domains of freedom and justice? The task, then, is not to "speak truth" to the king, or even to the king's subjects, but to learn from them, to contribute what we can, and to participate with them in common struggle for values we discover and uphold. It seems to me that those are the directions in which responsibilities of intellectuals should be sought

HYPERLINK "http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1825/index.htm"