

# Critical Education

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## *Breathing Secondhand Smoke: Gatekeeping for “Good” Education, Passive Democracy, and the Mass Media*

*An Interview with Noam Chomsky*

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### **Abstract**

*Noam Chomsky and I dialogue about various topics grounded in the context of the mass media, democracy, and the neoliberal privatization of education. The topics discussed were understood in terms of dichotomies (i.e., at ends of a spectrum) related to paradigms with different purposes of education, different conceptions and functions of democracy, and different types of thinking that are ingrained in our patterns of thought. These patterns serve the function of gatekeeping through good education that imposes constraints on thinking that is “supportive of power that just becomes second nature. Just like the air you breathe, so you can’t question it.” Thus, this dialogue works to clear the air of secondhand smoke clogging our potential for what it might do to think about “bad” education—that is, to maximize the air (advantage) for the least advantaged in society. Future directions for inquiry are briefly discussed.*



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Most exposure to secondhand smoke occurs in public places, such as education, democracy, and mass media. Continued exposure to this secondhand smoke is evidenced by the inculcation of “individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 1). A goal, thus, for the critical theorists, is to dig beneath and critique surface level knowledge by exposing the power and the political, economic, and social structures of society—that is, the critical theorist works to open up space to breathe clean air. As Ford (2014a) writes, “Air is an entirely immersive substance; it envelops us even as it constantly eludes us (p. 6). By considering, as Ford notes, the *conditions* of our air, education, democracy, and news media, we can move to separate ourselves from the smokers and their secondhand smoke that encompasses our air space—thus, recursively spacing the air for thinking about education, democracy, and mass media.

Mass news media’s depiction of the neoliberal privatization of education is a nascent area of scholarship (Cabalin, 2013; Cohen, 2010; Feuerstein, 2014; Goldstein, 2010) while the themes of education and democracy have run through the century. In linking with the emergence of mass news media and its connection to democracy and education, on April 1, 2014, I engaged in a dialogue with Noam Chomsky at his MIT office in Cambridge, MA. I met with Professor Chomsky to discuss conditions abounding my dissertation on mass media, neoliberalism, and education. To start, I explicated some ideas on dichotomies conceptualized at different ends of a spectrum: purposes of education, conceptions and functions of democracy, types of thinking, and the mass media’s role in blanketing inherent contradictions between these dichotomies. Professor Chomsky takes the concept of gatekeepers and embeds it in mass news media, “good” education, and democracy. In sum, Professor Chomsky critiques the air we breathe, so that we might want to think about *repositioning* (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2010) ourselves for “bad” education.

### Noam Chomsky Interview

**ZCW:** I want to discuss some ideas I’ve been mulling over for my dissertation: dichotomies and neoliberalism: democracy, thinking, and education depicted by the mass media.

For example, the United States Department of Education’s definition of innovation is a process, product, strategy, or idea that meets the needs of the status quo so that it can be disseminated to the masses.<sup>1</sup> Kids are being educated with someone else’s divergence handed down by the status quo, testing based on convergent thinking, someone else’s thoughts. There’s little to no divergent thinking. And, what does that do? If you don’t practice, how can you be expected to have unexpected thoughts... innovation that is, some freedom in thought?

And, the media seem to cover up these inherent contradictions between types of education. Look at the mission statement of Sidewell Friends School in D.C., for example, where President Obama, Clinton, and Nixon’s children went to school. The school philosophy talks of God being in each person. If you take the Bible, in Genesis God created the Heavens and the Earth, that’s a

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation Fund (i3; 2013) states in the *Guidance and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)* that their definition of innovation is: “A process, product, strategy, or practice that improves (or is expected to improve) significantly upon the outcomes reached with status quo options and that can ultimately reach widespread effective usage” (p. 2).

divergent act. But next, darkness and night, daytime and light, was a convergent act. It's interesting. These private schools promote creative inquiry.

**Noam Chomsky:** Well, what do they mean by creative inquiry?

**ZCW:** Well, they don't specify. But, I assume kids creating democracy, creating economy, whereas when you look at mission statements of public schools, charter schools especially, they talk of high levels of student achievement, and that term, that concept, it's convergent, it's measurable, it's risk-free, it's expected.

**Noam Chomsky:** This goes way back to the origins of the public education system. Have you looked at the historical work, like Bowles and Gintis? There's an interesting book, it's about 30 years old by now, by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, two economists who did a study on the early stages of the American public education system, general education system, and they pointed out something similar, that the mass education system was oriented toward obedience and conformity.<sup>2</sup> But, that there was an elite education system that did try to foster independence and creativity, because you know that's where the economic growth comes from. There's a two-tiered system, and it goes right to the present.

**ZCW:** Do you think that links directly to how you conceptualize democracy?

**Noam Chomsky:** It's a conception of elite democracy, an elite-run democracy. But, that's the dominant view. The dominant view of democracy is that most of the population should just be passive and obedient. In fact, that's pretty explicit. If you read the leading democratic theorists, say Walter Lippmann, it says that the responsible men have to run the government, they have to be protected from the ignorant meddles of the majority, and that we should not have the democratic dogmatism that people are able to run their own affairs, they can't, we have to do it for them; that's the fundamental thesis of democracy, progressive democracy. Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy, the liberals, that goes back to the way the Constitution was setup. The Constitution was setup so that power, as Madison put it, would 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. That's the design of the Constitutional system.

**ZCW:** So, it's a supportive role? Support democracy, as opposed to create democracy...

**Noam Chomsky:** It's a kind of democracy. Democracy means that every couple of years that the mass of the population is supposed to lend their weight to one or another of the elite groups, and then they're supposed to go home and forget about it, and that's democracy. You see it at every level. Take the primaries, the New Hampshire primaries are the next election. In a democratic system, what would happen is that the people in New Hampshire would get together in whatever organizations they have: town meetings, churches, unions, and work out what they want policy

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<sup>2</sup> Bowles and Gintis' (1976, 2011) posited a *correspondence principle* (or theory) in capitalist societies "between the social relations of education and those of the economic system" (p. 237). Jean Anyon (1980, 1981) extended Bowles and Gintis' theory with ethnographic work documenting hidden curriculum and different types of knowledge according to social class. More recently, Golann (2015) updated Bowles and Gintis' theory for the postindustrial economy by documenting how charter schools, such as KIPP (e.g., Knowledge Is Power Program), treat students as a commodity by reinforcing cultural inequality by producing worker-learners to close an achievement gap through highly prescriptive teaching practices in order to generate financial profit from public tax payer funding.

to be. Then, if some candidate wants to appeal to them, he could ask to be invited, and they would invite him to New Hampshire and tell him what they want. And, if they could get a commitment from him that they could believe in, they might decide to vote for him. That would be a democratic society. But that's not what happens. What happens is the candidate sends his PR gang into New Hampshire, and they organize meetings, they flood the television with ads, and so on and so forth. He finally comes in a celebratory campaign appearance, and he talks to them, they don't talk to him. He talks to them and tells them all sorts of stories, which if they're serious they don't believe. And then he goes home. That's very different from a democratic system. But, by now that's just taken for granted, nobody even criticizes because it's kind of deeply ingrained that democracy means that we are passive and obedient, and they kind of run things.

**ZCW:** If we legitimized these two different paradigms of types of democracy, types of education—the type we think we have and the type that we actually have, we could analyze media institutions and discourses against these models. For example, for creativity in schools they try to pull from one paradigm. Oh, here are some things for creativity, but the paradigm is self-reinforcing, it's self-validating. So integrating a little creativity into an opposite purpose of education. It doesn't work. It's an illusionary crisis.

**Noam Chomsky:** Well it does work in turning people into obedient, passive creatures; which is after all the purpose [of education]. Creativity is for the elites.

**ZCW:** Right. So, you can't mix these paradigms. But, the media seems to cover up these inherent contradictions that, like you said, we just take for granted and don't really think about. Take charter schools, they represent 5 or 6% of the entire schooling in the United States. If you look at the media, there's an illusion that public schools are the minority or even 50/50. This is intentional reproduction of neoliberalism.

**Noam Chomsky:** Well it makes good sense.

**ZCW:** Yeah? What about the role of gatekeepers, their function in this system [In the context of mass media, liberal bias, good education, and democracy]?

**Noam Chomsky:** A lot of the liberal intellectual communities do provide a gatekeeping function. Take say, NPR. NPR is considered the liberal branch of the media. And it is, but they have very strict limits and they won't go beyond it. For example, a couple days ago, I was reading an article by an American poet, Espada, who was a regular contributor to NPR in *All Things Considered*, until he wrote a poem about—Mumia Abu-Jamal and they wouldn't run it. He's a black prisoner who has been on death row for years on a pretty fake conviction. There were a lot of protests about it, and even Amnesty International regards the trial as a farce. So, he wrote a poem about it, and NPR wouldn't run it, and that's the limit you can't go beyond. I've had exactly the same experience with them. The producer of *All Things Considered* was actually on record as saying that I'm one person that he will never allow on. There are limits that they can't go beyond. I can more easily be a guest on *Fox News* than NPR, because they don't care. But, that's true all through the media.

Take for example, the current Führer of the Ukraine. There's no doubt that Russia violated international law by taking over Crimea. And, there's a lot of hysteria about that. Occasionally someone will point out that the U.S. does it all the time, like Iraq, and there are some excuses as

to why that's different. But, if you think about it, there's one case that's pretty similar to Crimea that's never mentioned, never.

One hundred years ago, the U.S. took over Eastern Cuba, it's what we call Guantanamo, took it over at gunpoint. The Cubans were forced to accept it. It was under military occupation. They've been trying to get it back for 50 years, ever since they got independence. The U.S. won't release it to them. It's their major port; Guantanamo is a major Cuban port. It's the only port oriented toward Europe, which is where their trade would be. And, the U.S. just uses it as a detention center and torture chamber and will not give it back.

Well, that's like taking over Crimea, except that the Russians have a case that Crimea was apart of Russia until a couple decades ago. Most of the population is supportive of Russia. It's of great strategic significance to Russia—it's their only warm water port. It's the base for their Mediterranean fleet, and NATO military alliance is right on their border, next to Ukraine. They have strong arguments [for Russia]; we have no arguments for Guantanamo. It's a parallel case, but you never find anyone bringing this up; well, the gatekeepers wouldn't permit it. In fact, they wouldn't permit themselves to even think it.

This was actually pointed out by George Orwell in an interesting essay, which nobody reads. I'm sure you read *Animal Farm* when you were in school, but you didn't read the introduction. And, that's because it wasn't published. It was found about 30 years later in his unpublished papers. The introduction is kind of interesting. Of course, *Animal Farm* is a satire on totalitarianism, but the introduction was called "Literary Censorship in England." What he says is, yes this is about the horrors of the totalitarian enemy, but people in free England shouldn't feel so self-righteous about it, because, in England, unpopular ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. He goes onto discuss it, and he gives a couple of reasons: one reason is that the press is owned by wealthy men who have every interest in not allowing certain ideas to not be suppressed, but the other reason, which is more important I think, is a good education.

**ZCW:** So, good education. It's a statement of function. It's relative to position.

**Noam Chomsky:** [George Orwell] says, if you've gone to the best schools, you've graduated from Oxford and Cambridge, you just have instilled into you the understanding that there are certain things that wouldn't do to say. That's right. And, it wouldn't even do to think. That's what a good education is, and it trains you to be a gatekeeper. So nobody, for example, no commentator in the *New York Times*, or NPR, or anywhere else, is ordered not to bring up the Guantanamo analogy, it's just inconceivable. You can't think it. You know? That's what a *good education* [emphasis added] is, and that's what education really is about, I think—it's about imposing constraints that are supportive of power that just becomes second nature. Just like the air you breathe, so you can't question it.

Take [for example,] does the U.S. support democracy? It's like saying I'm breathing. Does the U.S. support democracy? Well no, in fact, it doesn't. But, it doesn't matter; it's a mantra. I think that's what education is really about. Now a democratic education system, would start from kindergarten and ask kids to challenge these things. Take any standard doctrine, let's think about it, is that the way it works? Let's look at the record. It's a free country; we can get records and look at the cases. If the U.S. is a free country, how come it's based on slavery and extermination of the indigenous population? Well, that's a slight interference with freedom. But, that's the basis of our society. Well, what about that? That's what an independent education would be, but it's very far from what's done. I happened to go to a progressive school myself as a kid, a

Deweyite school that fostered independence and creativity. But, I remember as a kid, my friends and I used to play cowboys and Indians, where we were the cowboys and we were killing the Indians. That was just natural. We were never asked, well what does this mean?

**ZCW:** Thank you. I really appreciate you, your time, your work.

**Noam Chomsky:** Good luck. I'm interested in hearing how it comes out.

## **Conclusion and Future Recommendations**

Noam Chomsky addressed a triad of topics: education, mass media, and democracy. In doing so, he demonstrated how the concept of gatekeepers permeates through education, mass media, and democracy. Chomsky (1989) writes, “necessary illusions ... must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means. ... [T]here is always the danger that independent thought might translate into political action, so it is important to eliminate the threat at its root” (p. 48). Gatekeepers serve an important societal purpose for eliminating threats at the root level by inculcating the populace, through education, politics, and mass media to not extend beyond “the bounds of the expressible.” That is, the “spectrum of opinion allowed expression ... bounded by the consensus of powerful elites while encouraging tactical debate within it” (Chomsky, 1989, p. 59). From an elite perspective, good education, a passive and obedient populace who lend their weight for an elite group in the democratic process, and mass media production and performance within institutional parameters evidences the landscape of reproduction where education is in a continual mode of crisis causing risk to the U.S. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; U.S. Department of Education, 2008) while evidence to the contrary is suppressed and ignored (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993).

Ford's (2014a) notion of air is particularly useful for understanding the crises of education. Professor Chomsky stated, “education really is about ... imposing constraints that are supportive of power that just becomes second nature. Just like the air you breathe, so you can't question it.” The condition of this air today is neoliberalism: “privatizing subjects, spaces, goods, services, and social relations that were once public” (Ford, 2013, p. 300). For citizens to become active in the affairs that govern their lives, they must extend their thinking beyond the “spectrum of opinion” and lift the veil covering inherent contradictions of mass media's coverage of different types of schooling: education for the mass population and education for the elites. Thus, critical educators must engage in repositioning (Apple, et al., 2009) of what it might *do* to think about “bad” education. This bad education can work to maximize the *air* (advantage) for the most disadvantaged people in society.

Perhaps future areas of inquiry should examine the spatial relationship of education (Ford, 2014b) and mass news media (institutions) in regard to “good” and “bad” education. One area of particular interest is the knowledge presupposing mass news media's discourse (Van Dijk, 2014) about different types of schooling (i.e., private schools, charter schools, and public schools). Further, question(s) of inquiry should address how the boundaries of news content are constructed by mass media to direct objective debates about educational reforms that ultimately serve to reproduce elite domination. For example, one case in particular that elicits critical investigation is in Washington state, where “wealthy individuals were able to leverage significant influence on the adoption of charter school policy” (Au & Ferrare, 2014, p. 16).

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