

# Toxic Sludge Is Good for You - Corporate Propaganda and Public Relations

Part 14 of 'Elephants in the room' series

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Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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*This is the second in a series of 4 posts about propaganda. The title of the previous post is 'You are Surrounded by Propaganda'. The title of this post is taken from the book of the same name by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton.*

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"The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance. The growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Alex Carey(1)).

## Public Relations (PR) - The Scale of Corporate Propaganda

Whilst government 'spin' is sometimes mentioned in the media, there is much less discussion of corporate spin. In practice, a huge amount of propaganda comes from corporations.(2) One of the leading critics of our economic and political system, Jonathan Cook, wrote that when corporate activities are particularly harmful:

"it becomes necessary for a company to obscure the connection between cause and effect, between its accumulation of profit and the resulting accumulation of damage caused to a community, a distant country or the natural world - or all three. That is why corporations - those that inflict the most damage - invest a great deal of time and money in aggressively managing public perceptions...Much of the business of business is deception, either making the... harm invisible or gaining the public's resigned acceptance that the harm is inevitable."(3)

Much of what we see on TV, hear on the radio, read in newspapers and magazines, and see on mainstream internet sites has a bias in favor of big corporations, and economic ideas that help those corporations make immense profits. One of the leading experts on propaganda, Alex Carey, once said that:

"One of the great achievements of business propaganda has been to make us believe that we are free from propaganda".(4)

Most people are simply unaware of the scale of the manipulation, and the extent to which businesses influence governments and their citizens. The key to success is that propaganda

is ideally delivered through multiple channels targeted at multiple audiences. This includes lobbying aimed at political leaders and decision-makers; influencing (or 'capturing') regulators; controlling or influencing the media; manipulating academics, grass roots activists and members of the public; and advertising.(5)

A long-term example is the US National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). This was formed by a group of the biggest US businesses in 1895. They have bombarded the public with propaganda for over a century. In one year alone NAM broadcast on the radio for 1,350 hours.(6) That is 4 hours per day. They placed stories in newspapers and magazines throughout the country. They distributed millions of leaflets in schools. They provided briefings to editors, journalists and radio commentators. All of this is intended to increase public acceptance of corporate power. This was described some time ago as "a 75-year-long multi-billion dollar project in social engineering on a national scale".(7) A similar UK organisation, Aims of Industry, has bombarded British media with corporate propaganda for many years.(8)

In the US, the number of people employed in the PR industry now outnumbers the people employed in the media, and estimates in the UK suggest that there are 3 times as many PR people as journalists.(9) It is impossible to know how much is spent on PR because there is an overlap between PR and advertising. One estimate in the US is \$14 billion each year,(10) but as the annual advertising budget is almost \$250 billion,(11) the true figure is likely to be much more. The biggest PR firms operate globally:

"In 2015, three publicly traded mega PR firms—Omnicom, WPP, and Interpublic Group—together employed 214,000 people across 170 countries, collecting \$35 billion in combined revenue".(12)

Much of this activity is secret. In the same way that intelligence agencies have connections with the mainstream media, former insiders from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have admitted that offices of PR companies have provided useful cover for CIA agents to operate overseas.(13)

### Crisis Management and Whitewashing Reputations

One of the specific roles of PR companies is called crisis management. This is where a corporation or a government has made a big mistake and wants to cover it up, or has a bad reputation in general and wants to polish its image. The PR company's job is to convince you that Union Carbide (now part of The Dow Chemical Company) is a caring corporation after an explosion at one of their plants in Bhopal, India has killed thousands of people; to convince you that the military dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s were reasonable people, while they were murdering their citizens; or to convince you that torture in Turkey, Guatemala, Nigeria, Kuwait, Indonesia, Egypt, Peru, Columbia or Pakistan is not so bad.(14) Whitewashing the reputations of foreign governments is a major source of revenue for some PR companies.(15) They were even employed by the Saudi Arabian government after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 because many of the attackers were Saudis.

Whitewashing reputations is not just something carried out by governments and global corporations. It happens on a more local level too. For example, following an incident where campus security personnel pepper-sprayed peaceful protestors, the University of California Davis spent \$175,000 trying to eradicate mentions of the incident on the internet in

2011.(16)

#### No ethical standards in PR

PR companies have sent spies into campaign organisations and political groups to find out what they are planning. If these groups are thought to be a threat to a client then PR companies will try to undermine them, using smears, legal intimidation and other forms of manipulation. For example they have tried to set up animal rights protestors by becoming members and then persuading other members to commit acts of violence, which ends up generating bad publicity for the genuine protestors.(17)

PR companies also employ people who appear to be independent experts, when their true role is just to support the PR company. There is a huge amount of junk science being put out by people paid by corporations. In the 1960s there were claims that chemicals like DDT, and materials like asbestos, were safe. We now know this was not true. The corporations knew at the time that they were unsafe, but they paid experts to lie.

#### Astroturf Lobbying – Fake Organisations

One of the main techniques used by PR companies is to create, train and finance fake grassroots movements and other campaign organisations to influence policymakers, journalists and the public.(18) These are known as front groups or ‘astroturf’ lobbying.(19) They post fake information on the internet, send fake letters to politicians, and make advertisements that look like news programs, or articles in newspapers. These fake groups are usually given misleading names, like the ‘American Council on Science and Health’, which was a front for many companies, and has defended poisonous chemicals such as asbestos.(20) The ‘Campaign for Creativity’ was a front for Microsoft and other companies trying to get stronger patent laws in Europe.(21) The ‘Save Our Species Alliance’ was a fake group representing the cattle and timber industries trying to weaken the Endangered Species Act.(22)

Kuwait’s leaders are one of the most repressive regimes in the world, yet before the first Gulf War began, a huge propaganda campaign was undertaken to present them as a reasonable government. A fake organisation called ‘Citizens for a free Kuwait’ was set up. They made-up a story about Iraqi soldiers taking babies from incubators and murdering them, in order to convince US politicians to invade Iraq.

#### Bell Pottinger – Fake everything

One of the UK’s biggest PR firms, Bell Pottinger, collapsed in 2017, after revelations that it was involved in serious corruption, and deliberately exacerbated racism, in South Africa.(23) Among other activities the firm were paid \$540 million by the Pentagon to make fake terror videos and other propaganda. They used a wide range of internet manipulation techniques. They used networks of fake bloggers and Twitter accounts to spread misleading information. They changed content on Wikipedia to make their clients look good by adding favourable comments and removing negative ones. At the same time they maliciously altered other people’s Wikipedia pages. They manipulated search engines so that positive articles about their clients would come first, and negative comments would appear much further down the rankings. The firm had close connections with senior British politicians, and they polished the reputations of countries accused of human rights violations.

## Tobacco – The Best Weapon Is Doubt

The tobacco industry set up one of the most notorious fake organisations – the ‘Council for Tobacco Research’.(24) This was a front for the tobacco companies making sure that they could cast doubt on anyone who criticised them. They had no interest in genuine tobacco research. Where there is evidence of something that corporations do not want you to accept, such as ‘smoking is bad for you,’ the standard ploy used by PR companies is to cast doubt and create confusion. If there is any doubt in the mind of the public, they will believe whatever they choose. If they want to believe that smoking is not bad for their health, they will. This is much easier for PR companies than actually denying or disproving anything. The tobacco industry has a long history of using PR. In the 1920s, women did not smoke very much. The tobacco companies were keen to encourage them, so they set up one of the earliest examples of corporate PR – a smoking stunt during the 1929 Easter parade in New York. Lots of debutantes who marched in the parade were given cigarettes to smoke while they marched. This was hyped as an example of female emancipation.(25) The taboo against female smoking had been broken.

### Deny, Doubt, Delay, Discourse

Sugar, alcohol and gambling companies (sometimes called addiction industries), together with industries that contribute to climate change, now use the same tactics as the tobacco companies to resist legislation. First they deny that there is a problem. At the same time, these companies will ‘attack’ their critics, accusing them of being anti-business, or nanny state. They make false claims about how regulations will cause job losses, or affect the economy.(26) When they can no longer deny the problem, they create doubt using misleading data. Then they present themselves as a responsible industry that is trying to deal with the problem, so they are invited to help draft legislation. They set up industry-funded research organisations so that they control our understanding of the problem. They focus on ineffective solutions such as ‘education’ and ‘awareness’ programs. This long-term strategy is sometimes described as ‘deny, doubt, delay, discourse’(27) and is deliberately intended to block effective legislation for as long as possible.

### Nuclear Industry

A good example of an industry that has used PR for many years is the nuclear industry. When nuclear energy first became a possibility, its supporters realised that the total cost would be much greater than the cost of coal. Despite that, they came up with slogans like “energy too cheap to meter”(28) and persuaded governments to build reactors. Third world governments spent large sums on these ‘white elephants’(29) (this means something that appears valuable but whose costs exceed its usefulness). Studies showing how unsafe nuclear reactors are have been kept secret. Many nuclear accidents, some very serious, have never been reported in the mainstream press.

### It’s Getting Worse

Corporate propaganda is very complex. It includes issues such as misrepresenting their activities, corporate social responsibility, covering up unethical and criminal activity, and fraudulent accounts. Some of this will be examined in more detail in future posts. The extent of manipulation by PR companies is growing. For example, if you’ve ever attended a public consultation, perhaps about a planned supermarket in your area, it is quite likely that the consultation was a sham, organised by a PR company.(30) The consultation gives the

impression of the company engaging with the local population, but in practice the company is intending to go ahead with its plans whatever local people say.

The truth is out there

The availability of information on the internet has enabled ordinary people to begin to see through propaganda more easily. Wikileaks provides many documents that expose government and corporate crimes, and show what decision-makers in government and business are actually saying to each other when they are lying to the public. Some genuine campaign organisations (listed below) are now trying to expose the deceptions of the PR industry by explaining misleading activity, by creating databases showing which groups are funded by which companies, and other databases showing how networks of individuals are connected to each other.

Propaganda aimed at ordinary people to manage public opinion is sometimes called grassroots propaganda, but the really important work is treetops propaganda, which is used to manage politicians and other policymakers; journalists, editors and broadcasters; economists, academics and anyone else who might influence your opinion. In particular, a considerable amount of PR effort goes into systematically targeting and manipulating politicians and journalists behind closed doors. If they can persuade these two groups to repeat corporate propaganda, they are more likely to be successful. Manipulating politicians is usually called lobbying and is discussed in a later post.

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*Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the fourteenth in a series entitled Elephants In The Room, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.*

## Notes

1) Alex Carey, *Taking The Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*, 1996, p.18

2) John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, 1995

3) Jonathan Cook, 'Capitalism is double-billing us: We pay from our wallets only for our future to be stolen from us', 25 Oct 2020, at <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/2020-10-25/capitalism-double-billing/>

I have made slight changes to the quote to make it easier to read.

4) Alex Carey, *Taking the risk out of democracy*, 1996. The exact quote is "The success of business propaganda in persuading us, for so long, that we are free from propaganda is one of the most

significant propaganda achievements of the twentieth century”

5) Jeff Connaughton, *The Payoff: Why Wall Street Always Wins*, 2012, p.125

6) Alex Carey, *Taking The Risk Out Of Democracy*, 1996, p.28

7) Alex Carey, *Taking the risk out of democracy*, 1996, p.20

8) Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell, *A quiet word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*, 2014, p.28

9) Joan Pedro-Caranana, Daniel Broudy and Jeffery Klaehn, (eds.) ‘The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception an Awareness’, 2018, London: Westminster University,  
at <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/39c0f5fe-db05-4670-94a2-0091c9c920f1/UWP-027-REVISED.pdf>

10) A. Guttman, ‘Estimated aggregate revenue of U.S. public relations agencies from 2000 to 2018’, 3 Dec 2019,  
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11) A. Guttman, ‘Advertising spending in the United States from 2010 to 2012’, Statista, 25 Feb 2020,  
at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/236958/advertising-spending-in-the-us/>

12) Peter Phillips, ‘The Diabolical Business of Global Public relations Firms’, Project Censored, 15 March 2017, at <https://www.projectcensored.org/propaganda-fake-news-media-lies/>

13) Robert T. Crowley, cited in Johan Carlisle, ‘Public Relationship: Hill and Knowlton, Robert Gray and the CIA’, Covert Action Quarterly, No.44, Spring 1993,

14) Carmelo Ruiz, ‘Europa Bio’s PR Friends Burson-Marsteller: PR For The New World Order’, (now known as Burson Cohn & Wolfe) at [https://www.bhopal.net/old\\_bhopal\\_web/oldsite/burson.html](https://www.bhopal.net/old_bhopal_web/oldsite/burson.html)

15) Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell, *A quiet word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*, 2014

16) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UC\\_Davis\\_pepper\\_spray\\_incident](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UC_Davis_pepper_spray_incident)

17) John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, 1995, pp.62-64

18) Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell, *A quiet word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*, 2014, p.116

19) ‘Astroturf’, at [www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Astroturf](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Astroturf)

20) ‘American Council on Science and Health’, Sourcewatch,  
at [https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/American\\_Council\\_on\\_Science\\_and\\_Health](https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/American_Council_on_Science_and_Health)

21) Corporate Europe Observatory, ‘How the Campaign for Creativity morphed into the Innovation and



Creativity Group: habits of deception die hard', Nov 2006,  
at <http://archive.corporateeurope.org/c4c-icg.html>

22) 'Astroturfing', at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>

23) 'Bell Pottinger', at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell\\_Pottinger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell_Pottinger)

24) 'Council for Tobacco Research', at  
[www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Council\\_for\\_Tobacco\\_Research](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Council_for_Tobacco_Research)

25) Richard Curtis, 'Century of the Self Part 1: Happiness Machines',  
at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmg0R1M04>

26) Simon Capewell and Ffion Lloyd-Williams, 'The role of the food industry in health: lessons from tobacco?', British Medical Bulletin, Vol.125, Issue 1, March 2018,  
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27) Juliet Roper, Shiv Ganesh and Theodore E. Zorn, 'Doubt, delay and discourse: Skeptics strategies to politicize climate change', Science Communication, 23 Nov 2016,  
at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1075547016677043>

28) John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, 1995, p.36

29) Zia Mian and A.H.Nayyar, 25 July 2004, 'Another Nuclear White Elephant', South Asians Against Nukes, Dawn magazine, available at  
[http://www.mail-archive.com/saan\\_@yahoogroups.com/msg00024.html](http://www.mail-archive.com/saan_@yahoogroups.com/msg00024.html)

30) Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell, *A quiet word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*, 2014

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