

War On Truth
The Secret Battle For The American Mind—An Interview With John Stauber
by Derrick Jensen, March, 1999

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Australian academic Alex Carey once wrote that “the twentieth 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.”

In societies like ours, corporate propaganda is delivered through advertising and public relations. Most people recognize that advertising is propaganda. We understand that whoever paid for and designed an ad wants us to think or feel a certain way, vote for a certain candidate, or purchase a certain product. Public relations, on the other hand, is much more insidious. Because it’s disguised as information, we often don’t realize we are being influenced by public relations. But this multi-billion-dollar transnational industry’s propaganda campaigns affect our private and public lives every day. PR firms that most people have never heard of—such as Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton, and Ketchum—are working on behalf of myriad powerful interests, from dictatorships to the cosmetic industry, manipulating public opinion, policy making, and the flow of information.

As editor of the quarterly investigative journal *PR Watch*, John Stauber exposes how public relations works and helps people to understand it. He hasn’t always been a watchdog journalist, though. He worked for more than twenty years as an activist and organizer for various causes: the environment, peace, social justice, neighborhood concerns. Eventually, it dawned on him that public opinion on every issue he cared about was being managed by influential, politically connected PR operatives with nearly limitless budgets. “Public relations is a perversion of the democratic process,” he says. “I knew I had to fight it.”

In addition to starting *PR Watch*, Stauber founded the Center for Media and Democracy, the first and only organization dedicated to monitoring and exposing PR propaganda. In 1995, Common Courage Press published a book by Stauber and his colleague Sheldon Rampton titled *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies, and the Public Relations Industry*. Their second book, *Mad Cow U.S.A.: Could*

the Nightmare Happen Here?, came out in 1997 and examined the public-relations coverup of the risk of mad-cow disease in the U.S.

I interviewed Stauber over dinner at the home he shares with his wife, Laura, in Madison, Wisconsin. He can be reached at: *PR Watch*, 3318 Gregory St., Madison, WI 53711, (608) 233-3346, or at www.prwatch.org.

Jensen: How is a propaganda war waged?

Stauber: The key is invisibility. Once propaganda becomes visible, it’s less effective. Public relations is effective in manipulating opinion—and thus public policy—only if people believe that the message covertly delivered by the PR campaign is not propaganda at all but simply common sense or accepted reality. For instance, there is a consensus within the scientific community that global warming is real and that the burning of fossil fuels is a major cause of the problem. But to the petroleum industry, the automobile industry, the coal industry, and other industries that profit from fossil-fuel consumption, this is merely an inconvenient message that needs to be “debunked” because it could lead to public policies that reduce their profits. So, with the help of PR firms, these vested interests create and fund industry front groups such as the Global Climate Coalition. The coalition then selects, promotes, and publicizes scientists who proclaim global warming a myth and characterize hard evidence of global climate change as “junk science” being pushed by self-serving environmental groups out to scare the public for fund-raising purposes.

Another industry front group is the Hudson Institute, a prominent far-right think tank espousing the view that global climate change will be beneficial! The Hudson Institute is funded by the American Trucking Association, the Ford Motor Company, Allison Engine Company, Bombardier, and McDonnell Douglas, among others. The Global Climate Coalition and the Hudson Institute are routinely quoted in the news media, where they promote their message of “Don’t worry, burn lots of oil, gas, and coal.”

In order to confuse the public and manipulate opinion and policy to their advantage, corporations spend billions of dollars a year hiring PR firms to cultivate the press, discredit their critics, spy on and co-opt citizens' groups, and use polls to find out what images and messages will resonate with target audiences.

For obvious reasons, public relations is a secretive industry. PR firms don't like to reveal their clients. Some of them, though, can be identified. Here's a list of just a tiny fraction of the clients represented by Burson-Marsteller, the world's largest PR firm: NBC, Philip Morris, Trump Enterprises, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels in Angola, Occidental Petroleum, American Airlines, the state of Alaska, Genentech, the Ford Motor Company, the Times Mirror Company, MCI, the National Restaurant Association, Coca-Cola, the British Columbia timber industry, Dow Corning, General Electric, Hydro-Québec, Monsanto, AT&T, British Telecom, Chevron, DuPont, IBM, Warner-Lambert, Visa, Seagram, SmithKline Beecham, Reebok, Proctor & Gamble, Glaxo, Campbell's Soup, the Olympics, Nestlé, Motorola, Gerber, Eli Lilly, Caterpillar, Sears, Beretta, Pfizer, Metropolitan Life, McDonnell Douglas, and the governments of Kenya, Indonesia, Argentina, El Salvador, the Bahamas, Italy, Mexico, Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria.

Jensen: That list encompasses everything from biotechnology to genocide to jet-skis.

Stauber: In its latest reporting year, Burson-Marsteller claimed more than a quarter of a billion dollars in net fees from its clients. And it's only one of a number of PR firms owned by the Young & Rubicam advertising agency. Other top-ten PR firms include Hill & Knowlton, Shandwick, Porter/Novelli, Fleishman-Hillard, Edelman, and Ketchum—companies that most of us have never heard of, but whose influence we've all felt.

Burson-Marsteller alone has twenty-two hundred PR flacks—that's slang for a public-relations practitioner—in more than thirty countries. In its promotional materials, the firm says its international operations are "linked together electronically and philosophically to deliver a single standard of excellence." It claims that "the role of communications is to manage perceptions which motivate behaviors that create business results," and that its mission is to help clients "manage issues by

influencing—in the right combination—public attitude, public perceptions, public behavior, and public policy."

The PR industry just might be the single most powerful political institution in the world. It expropriates and exploits the democratic rights of millions on behalf of big business by fooling the public about the issues.

Jensen: Why don't we read more about these hidden manipulations in the news?

Stauber: Primarily because the mainstream, corporate news media are dependent on public relations. Half of everything in the news actually originates from a PR firm. If you're a lazy journalist, editor, or news director, it's easy to simply regurgitate the dozens of press releases and stories that come in every day for free from PR firms.

Remember, the media's primary source of income is the more than \$100 billion a year corporations spend on advertising. The PR firms are owned by advertising agencies, so the same companies that are producing billions of dollars in advertising are the ones pitching stories to the news media, cultivating relationships with reporters, and controlling reporters' access to the executives and companies they represent. In fact, of the 160,000 or so PR flacks in the U.S., maybe a third began their careers as journalists. Who better to manipulate the media than former reporters and editors? Investigative journalist Mark Dowie estimates that professional PR flacks actually outnumber real working journalists in the U.S.

Jensen: How does politics figure into this equation?

Stauber: Public relations is now inseparable from the business of lobbying, creating public policy, and getting candidates elected to public office. The PR industry just might be the single most powerful political institution in the world. It expropriates and exploits the democratic rights of millions on behalf of big business by fooling the public about the issues.

Unfortunately, there's no easy remedy to the situation. When Sheldon Rampton and I wrote *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*, our publisher said, "This book is going to depress readers. You need to offer a solution or they'll feel even more disempowered." But there is no simple solution. Propaganda will always be used by those who can afford it. That's how the powerful maintain control. In defense, the rest of us need to develop

our critical-thinking capabilities and maintain a strong commitment to reinvigorating democracy.

Jensen: But if it's not illegal and everyone uses it, what's wrong with public relations?

Stauber: There's nothing wrong with much of what is done in public relations, like putting out press releases, calling members of the press, arguing a position, or communicating a message. Everyone, myself included, who's trying to get an idea across, market a product, or influence other citizens uses techniques that fit the definition of public relations. After all, the industry grew out of the democratic process of debate and decision making.

Today, however, public relations has become a huge, powerful, hidden medium available only to wealthy individuals, big corporations, governments, and government agencies because of its high cost. And the purpose of these campaigns is not to facilitate democracy or promote social good, but to increase power and profitability for the clients paying the bills. This overall management of public opinion and policy by the few is completely contrary to and destructive of democracy.

In Washington, D.C., issues are no longer simply lobbied. They are "managed" by a triad composed of (1) public-relations experts from firms like Burson-Marsteller; (2) business lobbyists, who bankroll politicians, write legislation, and are often former politicians themselves; and (3) phony grass-roots organizations—I call them "astroturf groups"—that the PR industry has created on behalf of its corporate clients to give the appearance of public support for their agendas.

Jensen: How do people in the PR industry respond to these charges?

Stauber: In private, their response to me is invariably "You're right, only it's even worse." In public, they say, "What are you, against freedom of speech? Corporations and the wealthy have a right to make their voices heard, and that's what we do. This is just democracy in action."

Jensen: But how do they defend promoting the interests of torturers and murderers?

Stauber: PR executives compare themselves to lawyers. They say, "People come to us with a need to be represented in the arena of public affairs, and we have an obligation to represent them."

Jensen: To lie for them.

Stauber: To "manage issues and public perception" is how they would put it.

Jensen: How did all this come about?

Stauber: The PR industry is a product of the early twentieth century. It grew out of what was then the world's largest propaganda campaign, waged by Woodrow Wilson's administration to get the American public to support U.S. entry into the First World War. At that time, the country was much more isolationist than today. A huge ocean separated us from Europe, and most Americans didn't want to get dragged into what was seen as Europe's war.

In fact, citizens are almost always reluctant to go to war. Take the Persian Gulf War of 1991. We now know that the royal family of Kuwait hired as many as twenty public-relations, law, and lobbying firms in Washington, D.C., to convince Americans to support that war. It paid one PR firm alone, Hill & Knowlton, \$10.8 million. Hill & Knowlton set up an astroturf group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait to make it appear as if there were a large grass-roots constituency in support of the war.

The firm also produced and distributed dozens of "video news releases" that were aired as news stories by TV stations and networks around the world. It was Hill & Knowlton that arranged the infamous phony Congressional hearing at which the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador, appearing anonymously, falsely testified to having witnessed Iraqi soldiers pulling scores of babies from incubators in a hospital and leaving them to die. Her testimony was a complete fabrication, but everyone from Amnesty International to President George Bush repeated it over and over as proof of Saddam Hussein's evil. Sam Zakhem, a former U.S. ambassador to Bahrain, funneled another \$7.7 million into the propaganda campaign through two front groups, the Freedom Task Force and the Coalition for Americans at Risk, to pay for TV and newspaper ads and to keep on payroll a stable of fifty speakers for pro-war rallies.

The Hill & Knowlton executives running the show were Craig Fuller, a close friend and advisor to President Bush, and Frank Mankiewicz—better known as a friend of the Kennedys and former president of National Public Radio—who managed the media masterfully, particularly television: a University of Massachusetts study later showed that the more TV people watched, the fewer facts they actually knew

about the situation in the Persian Gulf, and the more they supported the war.

But back to the history of the industry. After the Wilson administration succeeded in getting the public behind World War I, public-relations practitioners who'd been involved in the campaign—like Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays—began looking for business clients. The tactics of invisible persuasion that they'd honed working for the War Department were put to use on behalf of the tobacco, oil, and other industries. And with each success, the public-relations industry grew. Tobacco propaganda has surely been the most successful, longest-running, and deadliest public-relations campaign in history.

Jensen: Wasn't Bernays central to that?

Stauber: He was, although, to his credit, he later recognized the deadly effects of tobacco and condemned colleagues who worked for tobacco companies.

Edward Bernays was surely one of the most amazing and influential characters of the twentieth century. He was a nephew of Sigmund Freud and helped to popularize Freudianism in the U.S. Later, he used his relation to Freud to promote himself. And from his uncle's psychoanalysis techniques, Bernays developed a scientific method of managing behavior, to which he gave the name "public relations."

Believing that democracy needed wise and hidden manipulators, Bernays was proud to be a propagandist and wrote in his book *Propaganda*: "If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without them knowing it." He called this the "engineering of consent" and proposed that "those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. . . . In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons . . . who pull the wires which control the public mind."

It appears not to have dawned on Bernays until the 1930s that his science of propaganda could also be used to subvert democracy and promote fascism. That was when journalist Karl von Weigand told Bernays that Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels had read all of his

books, and possessed an even better library on propaganda than Bernays did.

Jensen: Let's get back to tobacco. How did that industry use public relations to promote its products?

Stauber: Prior to the 1950s, the tobacco industry actually hired doctors to promote tobacco's "health benefits." It calms the nerves, soothes the throat, and keeps you thin, they said. We have Bernays, Ivy Lee, and other early PR experts to thank for that. Then, when major news outlets began reporting tobacco's links to cancer—some publications even curtailed tobacco advertising—the tobacco industry launched what's called a "crisis-management campaign," primarily under the leadership of John Hill of Hill & Knowlton. Hill's goal was to fool the public into believing that the tobacco industry could responsibly and scientifically investigate the issue itself and, if it found a problem, somehow correct it and make tobacco products safe. What really happened, we all know, is that tobacco companies spent hundreds of millions of dollars funding and publicizing "research" purporting to prove tobacco doesn't cause cancer, and at the same time created one of the most powerful political lobbies in history to prevent tobacco regulation.

The wheels of media are greased with more than \$100 billion a year in corporate advertising. . . . Journalists find themselves squeezed between advertising money coming in the back door and press releases coming in the front.

Jensen: This strategy of funding biased or phony research to support corporate profitability seems ubiquitous: the timber industry funds forestry schools, for example, where they teach that logging is needed to "improve forest health."

Stauber: Another proven strategy is polling the public to find what messages will resonate with people's values and desires. If they find, for example, that women have a desire to be free from male domination, the strategy might be to market cigarettes as "torches of liberty," as Bernays did in the twenties, when he arranged for attractive New York City debutantes to walk in the Easter Fashion Parade waving lit cigarettes. That single publicity stunt broke the social taboo against women smoking and doubled the tobacco industry's market overnight.

It's even better if you can put your message in the mouth of someone the public trusts. This is called the "third-party technique" and was also pioneered by Bernays. Surveys show that scientists are widely trusted,

so the public-relations industry hires “scientific experts” to say things beneficial to the industry’s clients. PR firms also deliver messages through journalists, doctors, and others who appear to be independent, trustworthy sources of information. For example, the public is naturally suspicious when pesticide companies claim their poisonous products are safe. But if former surgeon general C. Everett Koop, one of the nation’s most trusted public figures, says pesticides are safe, we’re more likely to believe the message. After all, Koop warned us about AIDS and tobacco, so wouldn’t he be up-front about pesticides, too? Sadly, no. PR strategists scored a major victory in 1990 when Koop spoke out against Big Green, a referendum that would have regulated or banned many pesticides. His opposition was considered an important factor in the referendum’s defeat.

Jensen: We ought to remember what’s at stake here. What we’re really talking about is corporations promoting death for profit.

Stauber: The most powerful PR firms, such as Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller, often work for brutal dictatorships. Most Washington lobbying firms are willing to represent dictatorships.

Jensen: How do these people live with themselves?

Stauber: Apparently, very well. They have prestigious positions, nice wardrobes, six-figure salaries, and expensive homes. They hobnob with celebrities and politicians and corporate executives. They tell themselves that what they do is beneficial to society, or that if they didn’t do it, someone else would. Some PR flacks invoke the Nuremberg defense: “I was just following orders.”

I have a friend who was recruited right out of college by a major PR firm. They liked what she’d written about environmental issues, and they said to her, “All you have to do is write, and we’ll pay you a nice salary.” It was just what she wanted to do, and she was paid much more than most writers. She rose to be a vice-president. Then one day, she woke up in a cold sweat and couldn’t go on. She quit and went to work in journalism. But few people opt out the way she did.

Jensen: How did you get started doing this sort of work?

Stauber: Ironically, I owe my inspiration to Burson-Marsteller, because it was after I caught them infiltrating and spying on a meeting of public-interest activists that I decided to start PR Watch and shine a light on this sordid industry.

In 1990, I organized a meeting of citizen groups opposed to the Monsanto company’s genetically engineered bovine growth hormone, called rBGH. Surveys of consumers and farmers showed overwhelming opposition to injecting a hormonal drug into cows to force more milk out of them. Unfortunately, thanks to the hundreds of millions of dollars spent by Monsanto on public relations and on influencing the Clinton administration, rBGH was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1993 and is now in wide use. What’s worse, milk and dairy products produced with the use of the drug are not labeled, which means consumers have almost no way of avoiding it. Some companies, like Ben & Jerry’s and Stonyfield Farm, that have refused to accept milk from cows injected with rBGH have been threatened with legal action by Monsanto.

Back in 1990, when rBGH was still just a billion-dollar gleam in Monsanto’s corporate eye, I organized a meeting in Washington, D.C., of the Consumers Union, the National Family Farm Coalition, the Humane Farming Association, and other groups. Shortly before the meeting, I received a call from a woman who identified herself as “Lisa Ellis, a member of the Maryland Citizens Consumer Council.” She said she’d heard of the meeting and asked if her organization could send a representative; it wanted to make sure schoolchildren could avoid rBGH-produced milk. I said they were certainly welcome, and a woman named Diane Moser attended our meeting.

A few months later, a reporter told me that Monsanto was bragging about having placed a spy in our meeting. A little sleuthing revealed that the Maryland Citizens Consumer Council was a ruse, and that both Diane Moser and Lisa Ellis were working for Burson-Marsteller on the Monsanto account. A former employee of that firm later told me that it routinely sends new employees into deceptive and unethical situations to see if they’re willing to be dishonest on behalf of its clients. At the time, though, I’d never heard of such a thing. I felt invaded and swore I would find out what kind of scum went around spying this way. Who was Burson-Marsteller?

Through the Freedom of Information Act, I was able to obtain thousands of pages of internal documents from their PR campaign. I found I was up against one of the largest, most effective, best-funded, best-connected public-relations campaigns in history. Few people even knew the battle was going on, however, because most Americans had

never heard of genetically engineered bovine growth hormone. Many of those who did hear about the drug heard about it under a different name. A 1986 survey done for the dairy industry—which has worked hand in hand with Monsanto to promote rBGH—showed that the term “bovine growth hormone” caused consumers to worry, so the industry began calling the drug bovine somatotropin, which is Latin for “growth hormone.” Then a PR firm that monitors reporters began giving positive marks to those who called it bovine somatotropin, and negative marks to those who referred to it by its proper name, bovine growth hormone.

Jensen: I’ve seen the same thing happen in logging. Timber-industry and Forest Service representatives try not to use the term “old growth,” preferring instead to call ancient trees “overmature” or “decadent.” There are also a number of euphemisms for clear-cuts; my favorite is “temporary meadows.”

Stauber: If you can control the terms of the debate, you’ll win every time. If you read something about bovine somatotropin, a “natural protein” used to enhance yields in dairy farming, your response will likely be more positive than if you read about injecting dairy cows with a genetically engineered growth hormone.

Jensen: How do PR firms get away with planting these terms in news stories?

Stauber: Journalism is in drastic decline. It’s become a lousy profession. The commercial media are greed-driven enterprises dominated by a dozen transnational companies. Newsroom staffs have been downsized. Much of what you see on national and local TV news is actually video news releases prepared by public-relations firms and given free to TV stations and networks. News directors air these PR puff pieces disguised as news stories because it’s a free way to fill air time and allows them to lay off reporters. Of course, it’s not just television that’s the problem. Academics who study public relations report that half or more of what appears in newspapers and magazines is lifted verbatim from press releases generated by public-relations firms.

Jensen: That doesn’t surprise me. But maybe I’m just cynical.

Stauber: Frankly, if you’re not cynical, you’re not understanding what’s happening. The reality is that the wheels of media are greased with more than \$100 billion a year in corporate advertising. The advertisers’ power to dictate the content of what we see as news and entertainment

grows every year. After all, the real purpose of the media as a business is to deliver an audience to advertisers. Journalists find themselves squeezed between advertising money coming in the back door and press releases coming in the front.

Not only this, they’ve become dependent on PR firms for the stories they do write. All journalists know, if you want to investigate a corporation, you eventually have to talk with someone there. Unless you belong to the same country club as the top executives, you’re going to pick up the phone and get the “vice-president of communications”—i.e., a public-relations flack. You need this person’s help. This probably isn’t the last story you’ll do on this corporation. If you write a hard-hitting piece, no one at that corporation will ever speak to you again. What’s that going to do to your ability to write about that industry? What’s it going to do to your career?

Some PR companies—such as Carma International and Video Monitoring Service—specialize in monitoring news stories and journalists. They can immediately evaluate all print, radio, and television coverage of a subject to determine which stories were favorable to corporate interests, who the reporters were, who their bosses are, and so on. The PR firms then rank reporters as favorable or unfavorable to their clients’ interests, and cultivate relationships with cooperative reporters while punishing those whose reporting is critical. Certain PR firms will provide dossiers on reporters so that, between the time a reporter makes an initial phone call and the time a company’s vice-president of communications calls back, the company will have found out the name of the reporter’s supervisor, all about the reporter’s family and background, and other pertinent information.

Corporations want us to believe that they are concerned, moral “corporate citizens”—whatever that means. So businesses pump millions of dollars into charities and nonprofit organizations to deceive us into thinking that they care and are making things better.

Jensen: We often hear charitable giving referred to as “good public relations.” How does this work?

Stauber: Corporations want us to believe that they are concerned, moral “corporate citizens”—whatever that means. So businesses pump millions of dollars into charities and nonprofit organizations to deceive us into thinking that they care and are making things better. On top of that, corporate charity can buy the tacit cooperation of organizations

that might otherwise be expected to criticize corporate policies. Some PR firms specialize in helping corporations to defeat activists, and co-optation is one of their tools.

Some years ago, in a speech to clients in the cattle industry, Ron Duchin, senior vice-president of the PR firm Mongoven, Biscoe, and Duchin (which represents probably a quarter of the largest corporations in the world), outlined his firm's basic divide-and-conquer strategy for defeating any social-change movement. Activists, he explained, fall into three basic categories: radicals, idealists, and realists. The first step in his strategy is to isolate and marginalize the radicals. They're the ones who see the inherent structural problems that need remedying if indeed a particular change is to occur. To isolate them, PR firms will try to create a perception in the public mind that people advocating fundamental solutions are terrorists, extremists, fearmongers, outsiders, communists, or whatever.

After marginalizing the radicals, the PR firm then identifies and "educates" the idealists—concerned and sympathetic members of the public—by convincing them that the changes advocated by the radicals would hurt people. The goal is to sour the idealists on the idea of working with the radicals, and instead get them working with the realists.

Realists, according to Duchin, are people who want reform but don't really want to upset the status quo; big public-interest organizations that rely on foundation grants and corporate contributions are a prime example. With the correct handling, Duchin says, realists can be counted on to cut a deal with industry that can be touted as a "win-win" solution, but that is actually an industry victory.

Jensen: Why does this strategy keep working?

Stauber: In part, because we don't have a watchdog press that aggressively investigates and exposes PR lies and deceptions. Its success is also a reflection of the sorry state of democracy in our society. We really have a single corporate party with two wings, both funded by wealthy special interests. On the critical issues—taxation, health care, foreign policy—there's rarely much disagreement. If there is, more special-interest money floods in to make sure the corporate agenda wins out.

On a deeper level, we all want to believe these lies. Wouldn't it be great to wake up and find ourselves living in a functioning democracy?

To be truly represented by our so-called Representatives? Not to have to worry about the destruction of the biosphere or the safety of the water we drink and the food we eat? I think we all buy in because we want to believe things aren't as bad as they really are.

The reality is, though, that the U.S. political and social environment is corrupt and deeply dysfunctional. Structural reforms must be made in our political and economic system in order to assert the rights of citizens over corporations. But since big corporations dominate the media, we're not going to hear about this on network news or in the New York Times. We're not going to hear about it from politicians who are bought and paid for by wealthy interests. The beginning of the solution is for people to recognize that it's not enough to send checks in response to direct-mail solicitations from politicians and public-interest groups. We need to become real citizens and get personally involved in reclaiming our country.

Big environmental organizations, socially responsible investment funds, and other groups perpetuate the myth that if we just write checks to them, they'll heal the environment, reform the corrupt campaign-finance system, protect our freedom of speech, and reign in corporate power. This is a dangerous falsehood, because it implies that we don't have to sweat and struggle to make democracy work. It's so much easier to write a check for twenty-five or fifty dollars than it is to integrate our concerns about critical issues into our daily lives and organize with our neighbors for democracy.

Many so-called public-interest organizations have become big businesses, multinational nonprofit corporations. The PR industry knows this and exploits it well with the type of co-optation strategies that Duchin recommends.

Jensen: This seems especially true of big environmental groups.

Stauber: E. Bruce Harrison, one of the most effective public-relations practitioners in the business, knows that all too well. He's made a lucrative career out of helping polluting companies defeat environmental regulations while simultaneously giving the companies a "green" public image. In the industry, they call him the "Dean of Green."

As a longtime opponent of the environmental movement, Harrison has developed some interesting insights into its failures. He says, "The environmental movement is dead. It really died in the last fifteen years, from success." I think he's correct. What he means is that, in the

eighties and nineties, environmentalism became a big business, and organizations like the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the Natural Resources Defense Council became competing multi-million-dollar bureaucracies. These organizations, Harrison says, seem much more interested in “the business of greening” than in fighting for fundamental social change. He points out, for instance, that the Environmental Defense Fund (whose executive director makes a quarter of a million dollars a year) sat down and cut a deal with McDonald’s that was probably worth hundreds of millions of dollars in publicity to the fast-food giant, because it helped to “greenwash” its public image.

Jensen: How so?

Stauber: After years of being hammered by grass-roots environmentalists for everything from deforestation to inhumane farming practices to contributing to a throwaway culture, McDonald’s finally relented on something: it did away with its styrofoam clamshell hamburger containers. But before the company did this, it entered into a partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund and gave that group credit for the change. Both sides “won” in the ensuing PR lovefest. McDonald’s took one little step in response to grass-roots activists, and the Environmental Defense Fund claimed a major victory.

Another problem is that big green groups have virtually no accountability to the many thousands of individuals who provide them with money. Meanwhile, the grass-roots environmental groups are starved of the hundreds of millions of dollars that are raised every year by these massive bureaucracies. Over the past two decades, they’ve turned the environmental movement’s grass-roots base of support into little more than a list of donors they hustle for money via direct-mail appeals and telemarketing.

It’s getting even worse, because now corporations are directly funding groups like the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the National Wildlife Federation. Corporate executives now sit on the boards of some of these groups. PR executive Leslie Dach, for instance, of the rabidly anti-environmental Edelman PR firm, is on the Audubon Society’s board of directors. Meanwhile, his PR firm has helped lead the “wise use” assault on environmental regulation.

Corporations and public-relations firms hire so-called activists and pay them large fees to work against the public interest. For instance, Carol Tucker Foreman was once the executive director of the Consumer Federation of America, a group that itself takes corporate dollars. Now she has her own lucrative consulting firm and works for companies like Monsanto and Proctor & Gamble, pushing rBGH and promoting the fake fat Olestra, which has been linked to bowel problems. She also works with other public-interest pretenders like the Washington, D.C.–based organization Public Voice, which takes money from agribusiness and food interests and should truthfully be called Corporate Voice.

The beginning of the solution is for people to recognize that it’s not enough to send checks in response to direct-mail solicitations from politicians and public-interest groups. We need to become real citizens and get personally involved in reclaiming our country.

Jensen: It seems the main thrust of the PR business is to get the public to ignore atrocities.

Stauber: Tom Buckmaster, the chairman of Hill & Knowlton, once stated explicitly the single most important rule of public relations: “Managing the outrage is more important than managing the hazard.” From a corporate perspective, that’s absolutely right. A hazard isn’t a problem if you’re making money off it. It’s only when the public becomes aware and active that you have a problem, or, rather, a PR crisis in need of management.

Jensen: How does your work at PR Watch help?

Stauber: The propaganda-for-hire industry perverts democracy. We try to help citizens and journalists learn about how they’re being lied to, manipulated, and too often defeated by sophisticated PR campaigns. The public-relations industry is a little like the invisible man in that old Claude Rains movie: crimes are committed, but no one can see the perpetrator. At PR Watch, we try to paint the invisible manipulators with bright orange paint. Citizens in a democracy need to know who and what interests are manipulating public opinion and policy, and how. Democracies work best without invisible men.

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