

Goebbels and mass mind control: Part Two

How PR opinion-shapers undermine environmental protection

By Carla Binion

April 25, 2001—In part one, we examined the fact that Hitler’s propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, admired Edward Bernays, a self-proclaimed founder of the public relations industry. Goebbels used Bernays’ book “Crystallizing Public Opinion” in his campaign against Germany’s Jewish population. Now we’ll look at specific propaganda techniques shared by Goebbels and today’s corporate PR teams, and at how those techniques undermine today’s environmental movement.

Public relations can be used for good or ill. When PR spin is used to convince people that harmful things are good for them, or to turn people against their own best interests, it is used for ill. Goebbels practiced propaganda as a black art.

He helped organize Hitler’s “brown shirts,” and incited them to violence. He instigated the events leading to “Kristallnacht,” the infamous nights of widespread brutal attacks against the Jews, November 8–9, 1938. He helped create the “fuhrer cult,” spinning Hitler as Germany’s great redeemer and convincing millions that the Nazi state was vital to their well-being.

Goebbels believed in using stealth tactics, or “institutional lying,” and in using “fronts” to promote anti-Semitism and Nazi policies. For example, Goebbels set up a film office in July 1933, made it part of a branch of the Reich Cultural Chamber, and then used films to influence mass audiences. Klaus P. Fischer writes in “Nazi Germany: A New History” that most of the entertainment films “presented a sanitized image of carefree life under the protective umbrella of the Nazi regime.”

When pro-Nazi or anti-Semitic propaganda came from the mouth of a popular German movie star on the screen, instead of directly from Goebbels, the public perceived it differently. In the same way, today’s PR firms use front groups (fake grassroots, or “astroturf” groups) or so-called “third parties” to speak for corporations.

In “Global Spin,” (Chelsea Green Publishing, 1997) science lecturer Sharon Beder writes that Merrill Rose, executive vice-president of the PR firm Porter/Novelli, said: “Put your words in someone else’s mouth . . . There will be times when the position you advocate, no matter how well framed and supported, will not be accepted by the public simply because you are who you are. Any institution with a vested commercial interest in the outcome of an issue has a natural credibility barrier to overcome with the public, and often with the media.”

John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton point out in “Toxic Sludge Is Good For You,” that on behalf of tobacco company Philip Morris, the PR company, Burson-Marsteller, “created the [front group] ‘National Smokers Alliance’ to mobilize smokers into a grassroots lobby for smoker’s rights . . . To defeat environmentalists, PR firms have created green-sounding front groups such as “The Global Climate Coalition” and the “British Columbia Forest Alliance.”

Both Goebbels and today’s PR firms have used euphemisms and Orwellian newspeak and doublespeak to influence the public mind. For example, corporate PR spinners have told the public that polluting-corporations are friends of nature; that weapons-manufacturer General Electric does no harm but merely “brings good things to life;” that spreading sludge on farm fields is “beneficial use;” that human beings killed in war-for-profit are “collateral damage.”

American corporations have at times managed to circumvent the U.S. Constitution and ignore laws designed to protect our own workers and the environment by moving their companies offshore, in the name of “freedom.” In Hitler’s Germany, the euphemistically named “Law for Terminating the Suffering of People and Nation” (or, the “Enabling Law”) gave governments such “freedoms” as the right to deviate from the constitution, ultimately helping Hitler undermine democracy and gain political power.

Goebbels presided over a communications monopoly in Germany by denouncing “intellectualism” and urging book burning. Today, U. S. corporations have a Goebbels-like communications monopoly, because virtually all television networks and the vast majority of other media outlets in the country are owned by a handful of corporations.

Klaus Fischer writes, “On May 10, 1933, an appalling event in the history of German culture took place—the burning of the books . . . This particular ‘cleansing action’ (Sauberung) was carried out by the German Student Union.”

Of the book burning, Goebbels said, “The age of extreme Jewish intellectualism has now ended, and the success of the German revolution has again given the German spirit the right of way.” (J. M. Ritchie, “German Literature Under National Socialism,” 1983.) Today corporations discourage Americans from educating themselves about corporate wrongdoing by, as Stauber and Rampton say, “burning books before they’re printed.”

For example, science writer David Steinman obtained obscure government research from the Freedom of Information Act and used the information in his book, “Diet For A Poisoned Planet.” Steinman wrote that many U.S. foods contained contaminants and gave readers a chance to make safer food choices by comparing the amounts of toxins contained in various foods.

Right away, corporate PR firms, including a “pesticide industry front group with deep Republican connections” went to work attacking the book. The Ketchum PR agency (representative of Dole Foods, the Beef Industry Council, Miller Brewing and many other corporate food clients) markets itself as a specialist in “crisis management,” according to Stauber and Rampton.

A Ketchum memo to the CALRAB food safety team read: “The [Ketchum] agency is currently attempting to get a tour schedule so that we can ‘shadow’ Steinman’s [book promotional] appearances; best scenario, we will have our spokesman in town prior to or in conjunction with Steinman’s appearances.”

Stauber and Rampton’s source inside Ketchum said the PR firm called every talk show where Steinman was booked, saying the shows shouldn’t allow Steinman to appear without also presenting “the other side of the issue.” The firm also tried to portray Steinman as an “extremist” without credibility.

According to Sharon Beder (“Global Spin”) corporate front groups are a fairly recent phenomenon in America . . . a response to the rise of genuine citizen public interest organizations. One front group, the American Council on Science and Health, receives funds from Burger King, Coca-Cola, NutraSweet, Monsanto, Dow, Exxon and other corporations.

Dr. Beder, author of numerous books, and a professional engineer and senior lecturer in Science and Technology Studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia, writes that “the American Council on Science and Health is one of many corporate front groups which allow industry-funded experts to pose as independent scientists to promote corporate causes. Chemical and nuclear industry front groups with scientific sounding names publish pamphlets that are ‘peer reviewed’ by industry scientists rather than papers in established academic journals.”

On the subject of corporate front groups, Beder quotes Mark Megalli and Andy Friedman (“Masks of Deception: Corporate Front Groups in America,” 1991): “Contrary to their names, these groups often disregard compelling scientific evidence to further their viewpoints, arguing that pesticides are not harmful, saccharin is not carcinogenic, or that global warming is a myth. By sounding scientific, they seek to manipulate the public’s trust.”

The goal of pseudo-scientific corporate front groups, says Beder, is to cast doubt on the legitimacy of authentic environmental problems. For example, the Global Climate Coalition is a front group for various gas, oil, coal, automobile and chemical corporations; and it has battled restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions.

Global Climate Coalition has sent journalists videos claiming increased carbon dioxide levels will help feed the world’s hungry by increasing crop production. The coalition has lobbied against mandatory emissions controls and asked the Clinton administration to avoid agreements that would reduce greenhouse emissions, claiming they “would damage the U. S. economy.”

Corporations have worked to shape the next generation’s environmental perceptions “through the development and distribution of ‘educational’ material to schools,” writes Beder. Of course, the “educational” materials promote a corporate slant on environmental problems.

Conservative think-tanks have also opposed environmental legislation, working to cast doubt on greenhouse warming, industrial pollution and ozone depletion. These think-tanks mingle with lobbyists, consultants, interest groups and others and, as Beder says, “seek to provide advice

directly to the government officials in policy networks and to government agencies and committees.”

The think-tank employees ultimately “become policy makers themselves,” and act more as pressure groups or interest groups than as academic institutions. Even so, says Beder, think-tank employees are treated by the media as “independent experts” and sources of expert opinion. Most conservative think-tanks promote free-market ideas, including corporate deregulation and lower taxes for the wealthy.

Corporate and think-tank PR spin doctors typically show little respect for the targets of their propaganda, and little regard for democracy. In another book by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, (“Trust Us, We’re Experts!” - Tarcher/Putnam, 2001) the authors write, “If you ask the managers of these ever-more-expensive propaganda campaigns why they have vulgarized the democratic process [with, for example, fake grassroots campaigns], they will frequently tell you that the problem is not with them but with the voters who are too “irrational,” “ignorant,” or “apathetic” to respond to any other kind of appeal.”

Stauber and Rampton quote Bill Greider’s “Who Will Tell The People:” “On issue after issue, the public is belittled as self-indulgent or misinformed, incapable of grasping the larger complexities known to the policymakers and the circles of experts surrounding them. The public’s side of the argument is said to be ‘emotional’ whereas those who govern are said to be making ‘rational’ or ‘responsible’ choices . . . The reality, of course, is that the ability to define what is or isn’t ‘rational’ is itself loaded with political self-interest.”

Hitler’s spin doctor, Joseph Goebbels, also expressed contempt for the people and democracy. Klaus Fischer quotes the propagandist: “We go into the Reichstag in order to acquire the weapons of democracy from its arsenal. We become Reichstag deputies in order to paralyze the Weimar mentality with its own assistance. If democracy is stupid enough to give us free travel privileges and per diem allowances for this service, that is its affair. We do not worry our heads about this.”

Fischer also points out that the Nazis were beneficiaries of popular anti-democratic theories of their time, and of a “totalitarian mood,” which included “a wish to dismantle the egalitarian welfare state.” Again, Goebbels’ techniques and attitudes and the fruits of his propaganda were different in degree from those of today’s corporate propagandists, but they were clearly of the same basic nature.

Goebbels and today’s corporate PR firms often practice public relations as a black art, however some citizens inform people in helpful ways that produce the fruits of increased public health, safety and well-being.

For example, registered nurse and environmental activist Terri Swearingen worked to prevent the building of one of the world’s largest toxic waste incinerators, eventually inspiring the Clinton administration to declare a national moratorium on new incinerator construction. When accepting the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, Swearingen said, “There are experts who are

working in the corporate interest, who often serve to obscure the obvious and challenge common sense; and there are experts and non-experts who are working in the public interest.”

Swearingen added, “Citizens who are working in this arena—people who are battling to stop new dump sites or incinerator proposals, people who are risking their lives to prevent the destruction of rain forests or working to ban the industrial uses of chlorine and PVC plastics—are often labeled obstructionists and anti-progress. But we actually represent progress—not technological progress but social progress. We have become the real experts, not because of our title or the university we attended, but because we have been threatened and we have a different way of seeing the world.”

In part three, we’ll take a closer look at propaganda and politics.

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