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STILL NOT THE NEWS: SECOND CMD INVESTIGATION REVEALS TV STATIONS OVERWHELMINGLY FAIL TO DISCLOSE VNRs

by Diane Farsetta and Daniel Price

Television news audiences are still routinely deceived by false TV news, according to our second report this year on video news releases (VNRs).



In a Washington, D.C. press conference on November 14, 2006, CMD senior researcher Diane Farsetta and research consultant Daniel Price announced that 46 television stations in 22 states have aired corporate-sponsored VNRs dressed up as news during the past six months. These incidents were documented by tracking a mere one to two percent of the total number of VNRs offered to newsrooms during the investigation.

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FLACK ATTACK

According to the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), CMD is “an organization that is unrelenting in its hostility to the principles of free speech and a free press. . . . And in a linguistic twist that would have earned the admiration of George Orwell himself, this group refers to itself as the Center FOR Media and Democracy.”

These words come from an October 2006 RTNDA filing with the Federal Communications Commission, responding to CMD’s “Fake TV News” study and subsequent FCC investigation. But we wonder whether anyone at RTNDA undertook to read Orwell—or any of the First Amendment cases dealing with the FCC—before penning those words.

One of the central themes of Orwell’s book, *1984*, was “doublethink”: the propensity of a desensitized public and polity to insist that “black is white” even when they know that this is impossible. RTNDA itself seems to be practicing doublethink when it demands that the FCC end its investigation into fake news, claiming that covert VNR broadcasts are a First Amendment right.

Part of the problem is that RTNDA doesn’t seem to know fake news even when it sees it: RTNDA president Barbara Cochran infamously once said that video news releases are “kind of like the Loch Ness Monster. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it.” In FCC filings, they still don’t seem to get it, despite our online video files of VNRs and the “news” segments derived from them, such as an anti-global warming VNR paid for by lobbyists for ExxonMobil.

It is a dark day, indeed, when news media representatives deceive themselves and the public by saying that covertly putting fake news on the public airwaves is a protected First Amendment right. Former FCC general counsel Henry Geller (who served in various capacities under Presidents Johnson and Nixon), recently wrote, “It is shocking that RTNDA has joined the PR industry in condemning the ongoing federal investigation, instead of upholding journalistic standards.” We hope you’ll find the enclosed excerpts of CMD’s new report as shocking as did FCC commissioners and real reporters from across the country. To read the full report, see the videos, and convey your concern to the FCC, go to www.stopfakenews.org.

The new report adds momentum to CMD's groundbreaking April 2006 investigation, which led the Federal Communications Commission to investigate practices at some 77 news outlets nationwide.

CMD's findings demonstrate that station and industry codes of conduct—and even an ongoing investigation by the Federal Communications Commission—are not sufficient to ensure the public's right to know who seeks to persuade them via television news, the most widely used information source in the United States.

Among the findings of CMD's new report:

- WTOK-11 in Meridian, MS aired without disclosure a VNR titled, "Global Warming: Hot Air?" The segment ridiculed claims that increased hurricane activity could be related to global warming. The VNR was funded by TCS Daily, a website then published by the PR and lobbying firm DCI Group, which counts among its clients the oil giant ExxonMobil.
- In 12 instances, television stations actively denied disclosure to their news audiences by editing out on-screen and verbal client notifications included in the original VNRs. (The built-in notifications are a new practice at the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions.) WMGM-40 in Philadelphia aired a D S Simon VNR after making just one edit—to remove the on-screen disclosure. A WMGM-40 reporter revoiced the VNR, following the original script nearly verbatim, but omitting the verbal disclosure at the end of the script.
- In four instances, television stations not only aired VNRs without disclosure, but showed PR publicists on screen, as though they were reporters. KHON-2 (Honolulu, HI) and KFMB-8 (San Diego, CA) showed publicist Mike Morris "reporting" on Halloween traditions, while KVCT-19 (Victoria, TX) and KSFY-13 (Sioux Falls, SD) showed publicist Kate Brookes "reporting" on medical advancements.
- Ten television stations named in this study were also cited in the April 2006 "Fake TV News" report for undisclosed VNR broadcasts, including such major market stations as New York City's NY1 and WPIX-11, WDAF-4 in Kansas City, MO, and WSYX-6 in Columbus, OH. Only two of the 10 stations previously cited—Philadelphia's KYW-3 and Cincinnati's WCPO-9—provided clear disclosure of their more recent VNR broadcasts.

Forty-eight of 54 VNR broadcasts (or 89 percent of the total) contained no disclosure whatsoever of the nature or source of the sponsored video. In the six other cases, disclosure was often fleeting and ambiguous.

In April 2006, CMD issued its first VNR report, "Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed." In it, we documented 98 instances when television stations broadcast fake news produced by public relations firms in the form of VNRs or related satellite media tours (SMTs).

Television newscasts—the most popular news source in the U.S.—continue to air video news releases. Overwhelmingly, stations fail to offer any disclosure of the nature or source of the sponsored video.

Public relations firms responded by creating their own front group, the National Association of Broadcast Communicators, to campaign against disclosure requirements. Representing broadcasters, the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) also weighed in against the FCC investigation, claiming that the mere investigation—even prior to FCC issuing any ruling or judgment—is already having a "chilling" effect on free speech.

The free speech objections raised by industry groups are specious. CMD has never opposed the use of VNRs. Moreover, our continuing research into the use of VNRs by television stations shows that they have continued to use them, even after our April report exposed and documented the extent of the practice and the FCC launched its investigation.

VIDEO THAT LOOKS JUST LIKE NEWS

VNRs are segments designed to look like television news stories, but are funded by and scripted for corporate or government clients. Undisclosed use of this material is certainly a violation of journalistic ethics, as even the RTNDA admits in its own code of ethics (although it does nothing to enforce this guideline).

Undisclosed VNRs also represent a breach of the FCC's sponsorship identification rules. It is also, we believe, illegal under the terms of FCC licensing for television stations to broadcast VNRs without disclosure to news audiences.

According to the FCC's April 2005 Public Notice, TV stations airing VNRs "must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material."

Previous public scrutiny of VNRs has not resulted in meaningful change. After the release of CMD's 2006 report, therefore, we continued to research VNR usage

to determine whether the broadcast PR firms that produce VNRs and/or the TV newsrooms that air them were changing their practices. The 54 VNR broadcasts documented in CMD's new report were uncovered by tracking 109 VNRs. Since 109 VNRs represent just 2% of the estimated 5,000 VNRs sent to U.S. television newsrooms over six months, the 54 broadcasts documented constitute only a small fraction of total VNR use.

The strongest level of disclosure seen came from KSFY-13 in Sioux Falls, SD, though it can hardly be attributed to the station's initiative. KSFY-13 aired an entire, uncut VNR from the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions, complete with narration by publicist Sonia Martin. At the end of the VNR—and of the KSFY-13 segment—the words “Video provided by American College of Physicians, publisher of *Annals of Internal Medicine*” briefly flashed on the screen and Martin signed off, “On behalf of the American College of Physicians, I'm Sonia Martin.”

This built-in client notification appears to be a new practice at D S Simon, likely in reaction to CMD's first “Fake TV News” report. While a step in the right direction, most stations airing D S Simon VNRs actively denied disclosure to their news audiences by editing out the notifications. In 12 of 15 broadcasts of D S Simon VNRs originally containing client notifications, TV stations failed to provide any disclosure to news audiences. It's hard to imagine how this could be due to simple mistakes on the stations' part, as many claimed following the release of our “Fake TV News” report.

CMD also saw a number of questionable approaches to disclosure, such as ambiguous on-screen labels. Such

marginal attempts, coupled with the variety of approaches used, suggest that the FCC needs to clarify what constitutes the requisite “clear” disclosure of a VNR's “nature, source and sponsorship”—and for the agency, in concert with TV stations and broadcast PR firms, to work to ensure that that minimum standard is met in practice.

We also noticed some subtle changes in TV newsrooms' use of VNRs, compared to what CMD documented in our previous “Fake TV News” report. Stations cited in our follow-up research were more likely to edit VNRs and to re-voice them using local reporters or anchors (85 percent of VNRs were edited, versus 64 percent in the earlier report; and 85 percent were re-voiced, versus 61 percent). Stations were also more likely to include video footage outside of the pre-packaged VNR in the aired segment (22 percent of segments included outside video, versus 13 percent in the earlier report). However, in one case, the outside video appears to have come from other VNRs. Other segments included what looks like promotional video or generic background footage.

In sum, television newscasts—the most popular news source in the United States—continue to air VNRs. Overwhelmingly, stations fail to offer any disclosure of the nature or source of the sponsored video. Broadcast PR firms and TV stations appear to have done little to constructively address the serious problems documented in the “Fake TV News” report, even following the August 2006 launch of the ongoing FCC investigation into undisclosed VNRs. ■

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Executive Director: John Stauber

Associate Director: Judith Siers-Poisson

Research Director: Sheldon Rampton

Senior Researcher: Diane Farsetta

Research Consultant: Daniel Price

Research Analyst and *PR Watch* Editor: Jonathan Rosenblum

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Congresspedia Editor: Conor Kenny

Webmaster: Patricia Barden

Office & Outreach Manager

and *PR Watch* Layout: Sari Williams

CMD Board of Directors: Ellen Braune, Anna Lappé,

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Stauber and Inger Stole

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CMD's VNR CATCHES: FOUR CASE STUDIES

The following are a few examples of VNRs from our new report. The entire report, including VNR footage and video of the newscasts that used them, is available at stopfakenews.org.



CASE STUDY ONE

“Oil Lobbyist’s ‘News’ Denies Inconvenient Truth: WTOK-11’s Hot Air Misleads Viewers”
Client(s): TCS Daily
Released: May 2006

There is virtually no scientific doubt that global warming is a real phenomenon, largely caused by human activities—although the oil industry would have you believe otherwise. Much like the tobacco industry—whose campaign to deny the health dangers of smoking can be summed up by an infamous internal memo stating “doubt is our product”—the oil industry funds scientists, think tanks and organizations who dutifully challenge the large, varied and growing base of evidence of climate change. These unassailable truths might have led Big Oil to fake news.

In June 2006, the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide put out a VNR, “Global Warming and Hurricanes: All Hot Air?” In accompanying materials, the firm identified “TCS Daily Science Roundtable” as the client behind the segment. But Medialink didn’t disclose that TCS Daily was a website then published by Tech Central Station, which is itself a project of the DCI Group, a Republican lobbying and PR firm. Or that the DCI Group counts among its clients ExxonMobil. Or that ExxonMobil gave the Tech Central Science Foundation \$95,000 in 2003, for “climate change support.”

The VNR features Dr. William Gray and Dr. James J. O’Brien, who are identified as “two of the nation’s top weather and ocean scientists.” Gray denies that there’s

any link between global warming and the severity of recent hurricane seasons. “We don’t think that’s the case,” he says. “This is the way nature sometimes works.” The VNR attributes increased hurricane activity to “the cycle of nature.”

In reality, the link between climate change and hurricane severity has not been disproved. “No one doubts that since the early 1990s storms have increased in their intensity and no one doubts that average sea temperatures have increased slightly over the past 30 years,” explained Andrew Buncombe in an August 2006 article for *The Independent*. “Whether there is a link between these two phenomena remains unanswered.”

Peer-reviewed scientific studies on the issue have reached conflicting conclusions, though an in-depth analysis reported in September 2006 found “a large human influence” on rising sea-surface temperatures, which lead to stronger hurricanes. The same month, *Nature* magazine reported on a position paper from federal scientists that linked intensified hurricanes to global warming; the report was reportedly quashed by the Bush administration.

The TCS Daily VNR is correct in identifying Drs. Gray and O’Brien as meteorologists with extensive experience predicting hurricanes. However, Gray appears to have an ideological axe to grind with regard to climate change. In June 2006, he told the *Denver Post* that global warming is a “hoax,” something that “they’ve been brainwashing us [about] for 20 years.”

O’Brien has a history of associating himself with corporate-funded climate change skeptics. He’s on Tech Central Station’s “Science Roundtable” and is also listed as an expert at the George C. Marshall Institute, which receives ExxonMobil funding (including \$170,000 in 2004 for “climate change activities”).

Sadly, none of these affiliations, caveats or complexities was communicated when WTOK-11 (Meridian, MS) aired as “news” an edited and re-voiced version of the TCS Daily VNR, on May 31, 2006.

WTOK-11 anchor Tom Daniels introduced the segment by saying, “Hurricane seasons for the next 20 years could be severe. But don’t blame global warming.” Viewers were not told that what followed was nothing but hot air, paid by and scripted for oil company lobbyists.

In August 2006, the DCI Group was linked to a short, amateur-looking movie posted on the popular video-sharing website YouTube. The clip belittled the threat from global warming and ridiculed Al Gore’s climate change documentary “An Inconvenient Truth.” *Wall Street Journal* reporters Antonio Regalado and Dionne Searcey noted that “through Tech Central Sta-

tion . . . DCI has sought to raise doubts about the science of global warming and about Mr. Gore's film, placing skeptical scientists on talk-radio shows and paying them to write editorials."

Thanks to WTOK-11, the disinformation campaign also reached TV news audiences



CASE STUDY TWO

**“Signaling Support for Siemens:
Warning: Pilots and XETV-6 Viewers
May See Red”**

Client(s): Siemens

Released: June 2006

“Thanks to new technology, air travelers may soon be a little bit safer,” said XETV-6 (San Diego, CA) anchor Brian Christie. “Not in the air, but on the runway.”

In the June 20, 2006, segment, Christie casually mentioned that “the FAA reports about 300 runway accidents a year.” That’s a bit of an overstatement.

According to the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, recent years have seen some 300 runway *incursions* annually. An incursion includes “any occurrence in the airport runway environment involving an aircraft, vehicle, person or object . . . that creates a collision hazard.” Nearly 90 percent of incursions “involved little or no risk of a collision,” according to the FAA.

Such are the dangers of re-voicing a VNR.

In the original VNR, produced by Medialink Worldwide for Siemens, publicist and fake reporter Kate Brookes says that “the FAA reports about 300 runway *incidents* every year.” When XETV-6 edited and re-voiced

the VNR, the station’s word switch misrepresented the usually-minor glitches in flight protocols as fiery crashes.

Siemens might not mind the blunder, however. The purpose of its VNR was to promote the company’s new Runway Status Light System, an—ahem—pilot program using sensors and red lights to visually warn airplanes approaching an occupied runway.

The VNR featured Ed Runyon, who works for Siemens’ “Airfield Solutions” division. In the XETV-6 segment, anchor Christie claimed that Siemens’ runway system “is considered very revolutionary.” The station then showed Runyon describing the product that his employer would like to install at thousands of airports across the United States. A similarly-skewed story on the website of WABC-7 (New York City) asks why the Siemens system is “still so far from being installed here.”

Siemens’ runway light system is currently being tested at the Dallas-Fort Worth and San Diego international airports. According to an April 2006 *USA Today* article, “The money-strapped FAA has not yet committed to fund the system,” though an FAA official called it “very promising.” The VNR appears to be part of Siemens’ efforts to secure FAA approval—and funding.

Yet one warning system completely failed: Although every frame of the aired segment came from the Siemens VNR, XETV-6 did not provide disclosure to its San Diego viewers. Perhaps the station’s newsroom had its signals crossed?

CASE STUDY THREE

**“Fake Newshounds with Worms:
Once Again, WCTI-12 Hosts Hidden Interests”
Client(s): Companion Animal Parasite Council
Released: July 2006**

Even with the relatively modest number of VNRs tracked by CMD, a few television stations stand out as frequent VNR broadcasters. Oklahoma City’s KOKH-25 was singled out as the worst repeat offender of CMD’s “Fake TV News” report. But WCTI-12 of New Bern, NC, isn’t far behind.

On July 18, 2006, WCTI-12 reporter Besa Tafilaj introduced a segment on pet parasites. “Those parasites that infect your pets also could get to you and your family,” she warned. “According to the CDC [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], up to three million people will get infected with internal parasites this year.” What followed was an edited VNR that she had re-voiced, closely following the VNR’s original script.

The broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions produced the VNR for the Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAP-C). Like other D S Simon VNRs released

following the “Fake TV News” report, the CAP-C video included two client notifications at its end—an on-screen label and the narrating publicist’s sign-off, “On behalf of the Companion Animal Parasite Council, this is Sonia Martin.” WCTI-12 edited out both, actively denying disclosure to its news audience. Yet, following the segment, the station anchor directed viewers to CAP-C’s website, for “more information on preventing animal parasites and keeping your pets healthy year-round.”

D S Simon—and WCTI-12—presented CAP-C as a “non-profit veterinary group,” which is correct but not the entire story. Like many patient groups for human diseases, CAP-C receives funding from pharmaceutical and other companies whose market is the target group—in this case, pet owners. CAP-C’s 2006 “platinum” sponsors include Bayer, Merial, Novartis and Pfizer Animal Health, while its “silver” sponsors include Hartz, Idexx Laboratories, Schering-Plough Animal Health, VCA Antech, and Virbac Animal Health.

Of the mere 18 media mentions of “Companion Animal Parasite Council” in the Nexis news database, three involve endorsements of products or programs from CAP-C sponsors Bayer or Novartis. While the CAP-C VNR doesn’t mention specific products, it does repeatedly encourage viewers to take their pets to the veterinarian regularly—a message that must make CAP-C sponsors pretty happy—including VCA Antech, which runs “a nationwide clinical laboratory system and over 375 free-standing animal hospitals” (NASDAQ symbol: WOOF).

Between the “Fake TV News” report and this study, CMD has documented WCTI-12 airing four different VNRs. Not once did the station disclose the source or nature of these segments to its news audiences. Will

CMD’s new study help an old dog learn new ethics? Stay tuned.

CASE STUDY FOUR

“General Motors Gets a Free Ride in New York: WPIX-11 Adds Soundtrack, But No Disclosure, To Fake News”

Client(s): General Motors

Released: August 2006

On August 4, 2006, WPIX-11 anchor Tiffany McElroy asked morning news viewers, “OK, you want a hybrid car, but the Toyota Prius just doesn’t do it for you? Well, you’re in luck.” But the segment wasn’t so auspicious for New York City viewers who want honesty in their newscasts.

What followed was a VNR from Toyota competitor General Motors (GM). The segment was filmed at the first-ever Hybrid Fest, a real event organized by volunteers and held in Madison, WI, in July 2006. The VNR featured Wisconsin state representative Joe Parisi and GM engineer Pete Savagian, who extolled the increasing variety of hybrid models available and the fuel savings enjoyed by hybrid owners.

For General Motors, the VNR was a soft sell. Its models weren’t mentioned by name, although the camera lingered over a Saturn hybrid and the only auto expert interviewed is from the company.

The VNR is likely part of GM’s efforts to establish itself in the hybrid market. In an April 2006 piece titled, “Challenging Toyota’s Hybrid Hegemony,” the *New York Times* reported on a new hybrid system jointly developed by BMW, Daimler Chrysler and General Motors, to “finally” give the three auto makers the “technology to counter Toyota, which is developing its third-generation hybrid.”

Whatever GM’s rationale, the VNR suited WPIX-11 just fine. The station re-voiced the narration, shaved a few seconds off the VNR, shuffled the order of the scenes and soundbites, and, just for kicks, added a soundtrack—“Free Ride,” performed by the Edgar Winter Group. WPIX-11 didn’t add any of its own reporting to the segment, just standard B-roll footage of cars and gas stations. Yet the TV station failed to tell viewers that this “news” segment came courtesy of GM.

WPIX-11 is used to letting outside interests steer its newscasts. The station was cited in CMD’s “Fake TV News” report, for airing a VNR from a computer security company without disclosure. And GM is certainly used to being in the driver’s seat. The Hybrid Fest VNR is GM’s seventh of eight tracked by CMD, all of which were produced by the PR firm Medialink Worldwide. ■



CONGRESSPEDIA KEEPS GROWING (AND NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!)

by *Conor Kenny*



Since CMD's co-launch with the Sunlight Foundation of Congresspedia, the "citizen's encyclopedia on Congress," our new site has quickly become one of the most valuable resources on the web for constituents to learn about their members of the U.S. Congress.

On election night, November 7, 2006, more than a dozen volunteer bloggers helped us update races, add links and work on member profiles. This election not only focused the electorate and altered the congressional cast of characters, it gave Congresspedia all the more work to do to keep up with members' deeds, misdeeds, and, yes, statistics.

Congresspedia profiles every member (along with some former members whose actions, often corrupt, live on in committee investigations and reports), offering information about voting records, campaign contributions, committee assignments, interest group ratings and contact email addresses and phone numbers. We have issued special reports on 15 current and former members under investigation for everything from covering up sex scandals to accepting bribes.

Since its launch in April 2006, the number of articles has climbed from 539 (one for each member of Congress and the four non-voting delegates) to more than 750. Congresspedia articles quickly climb to the top of Google search results, be they searches for "Dennis Hastert," "network neutrality legislation" or "Mark Foley" and the congressional page scandal. Internet traffic to CMD's primary website, SourceWatch, which includes Congresspedia, has more than doubled to as many as 80,000 visitors a day. We welcome associate

editor Elliott Fullmer, who has recently come on board to help with this expansion.

Scandals aren't everything, and they can even distract from the actions that have a much more profound effect on people's lives. In that vein, Congresspedia editors have been working with citizen journalist contributors to provide coverage of some of the significant bills considered by Congress in the last six months, including War on Terror detainee legislation, the federal marriage amendment, the flag burning amendment and network neutrality legislation.

However, Elliott and I cannot do it alone. If Congresspedia is to become a truly comprehensive resource, we need our citizen journalist list to keep growing to fulfill the promise of "many hands make light work." It doesn't take a lot of time – many volunteers will come on for just 10 or 15 minutes and make valuable edits. SourceWatch and Congresspedia are built on a "wiki" platform, which allows users to draft, edit and otherwise participate without complicated computer programs. It can be as easy as seeing something in the morning newspaper that you think ought to be permanently documented, finding an appropriate article on the website, and clicking the "edit" tab at the top of the page. Those needing a primer on how to get started can click the "help" link at the top of any SourceWatch or Congresspedia page. The paid editors are also always happy to assist citizen editors with any questions they might have (I can be reached at conor@sourcewatch.org).

Congresspedia articles quickly climb to the top of Google search results, be they searches for "Dennis Hastert," "network neutrality legislation" or "Mark Foley" and the congressional page scandal.

The current, fairly low ratio of volunteer contributors to readers means that there is no better time to get involved in Congresspedia if you are seeking to get the word out on a specific issue or viewpoint. Citizen journalists can create Congresspedia or SourceWatch articles, which will then rise through Google and potentially be read by tens of thousands of people who find their way to the website every day. It is also a fantastic way simply to keep tabs on your own member of Congress. In fact, one of the most effective uses of the website for many citizens is to occasionally add a few lines to their representative's or senators' profiles any time they see something in the news that deserves to be remembered. Your

contribution to the website may be the one that provides essential information to voters in the next election—or on a day-to-day basis, helps constituents (and journalists) keep up with issues.

In addition to citizen journalists, Congresspedia offers activists, academics, bloggers and students a unique opportunity to get their research and writing out to a much larger audience than if it was posted only on their own websites (or not posted at all). We are actively reaching out to various communities of potential contributors. If you or someone you know might have an interest in participating, please contact us so we may assist you in utilizing this powerful resource.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Every year, millions of university students research and write papers on Congress, national politics and the federal government. Usually this research is turned in, graded and then put in a file drawer to gather dust. The Congresspedia Student Contributor Program seeks to harness these millions of hours of underutilized research in a way that contributes to society's understanding of government while providing an avenue for students' work to be viewed and supplemented on Congresspedia and SourceWatch.

This can take one of two forms: either posting full-length writing assignments as articles or parts of articles on Congresspedia or posting summary points from papers in Congresspedia papers while linking back to the full papers (CMD will provide a place to post the papers if needed).

The program can be used as a way to introduce undergraduates to research practices since they will have to provide information not already on Congresspedia and build upon the research of others. Congresspedia can also serve as a teaching tool in and of itself by doing away with the intermediary step and making direct contributions to the wiki the assignment itself rather than first writing a paper.

While students still retain the copyright to their papers in the program, the license Congresspedia operates under does allow others to use the research for their own purposes. All writing contributed, however, is registered with several counter-plagiarism tools used by professors.

**For further information,
or to book a speaker, contact the
Center for Media and Democracy
www.prwatch.org**

WONKS INVITED

It is often the activists and organizations working on an issue (or the academics studying it) who know it best. While maintaining a website is now requisite for organizations, it is often difficult to get readers to that site. Congresspedia provides an avenue for activists and organizations to re-post material to a place where there is often significantly higher traffic and where topics like proposed or actual legislation are linked back to congressional profiles, enabling local citizens to make the connection between their representatives and the behind-the-headlines deals. However, all information must meet Congresspedia's sourcing and fairness standards.

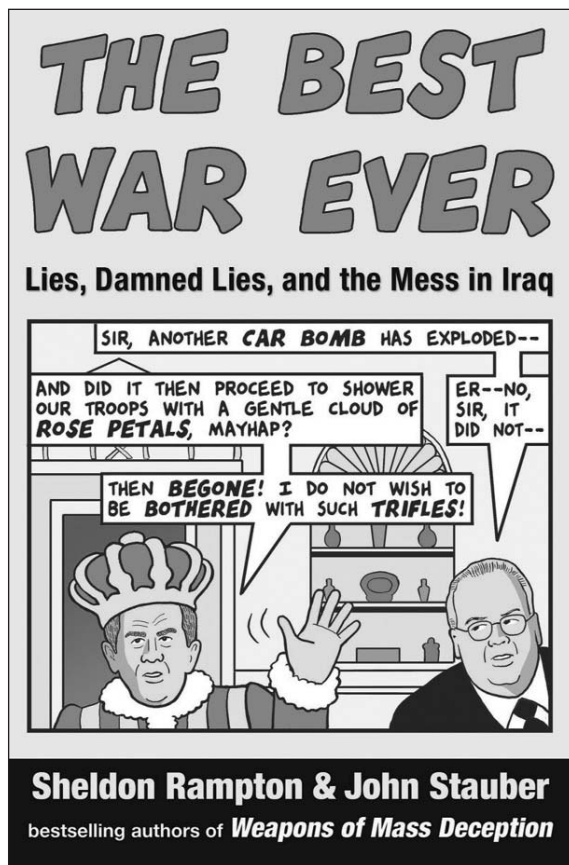
The Internet has offered increasing opportunities for academics to be more involved in public debate if only by raising the level of debate and injecting research once isolated to scholarly journals into the discourse. Congresspedia and the public at large would greatly benefit from the contributions of academics who are experts in areas relevant to current debates. These need not be only political science professors—an ecology professor, for example, may have valuable insight into the effects of proposed environmental legislation.

LOCAL MUCKRAKERS AND OPINION-MAKERS

As valuable as it is having staff in Washington, D.C. to keep an eye on Congress, nothing can substitute for the expertise gained by long-term observations of one's local members of Congress and the ability to document how national legislation affects local communities. In that spirit, CMD is actively reaching out to bloggers and other citizen journalists who write about national politics from a local perspective. The tools available on Congresspedia can make that journalism more powerful by centralizing information, for example, by bringing together how a member of Congress votes with the identities of their main campaign contributors. By cross-posting the results of their research on Congresspedia, citizen journalists also help create a permanent history of their representatives, which then allows other citizen journalists to build on that research and help build a more vibrant, fact-based citizen journalism community.

Congresspedia also provides links to local blog and discussion sites that cover that member on Congress, helping citizens discover the sites and driving up their readership. Additionally, Congresspedia's cosponsor, the Sunlight Foundation (sunlightfoundation.com), is constantly developing new, free tools and resources that we make available to all the blogs on our list. If you operate a local blog, please contact us to make sure you're on it. ■

REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS ABOUT *THE BEST WAR EVER*



Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber's new book, *The Best War Ever* (Tarcher/Penguin), was published in September 2006. The following is a sample of reviews and press coverage the book has received.

BUZZFLASH.COM REVIEWS

“. . . In a reign of government propped up by propaganda, deception and fantasy, Rampton and Stauber are keen guides into understanding how so many Americans are misled over and over and over again. In short, they are experts in unraveling ‘spin.’ One of our favorite conclusions in *The Best War Ever* is, ‘The question of whether they were liars or fools, however, is less important than the question of whether they have shown themselves qualified to lead. Clearly, they have not.’”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, OCTOBER 2, 2006

“Having dissected the events and reporting that led to the invasion of Iraq in 2003’s *Weapons of Mass Deception*, Rampton and Stauber now unravel the Bush administration’s ‘web of disinformation’ around its handling of the war. In the tradition of Austrian journalist Karl Wiegand, who observed after WWI that ‘Politicians lie to journalists and then believe those lies when they see them in print,’ the authors detail the work of Bush’s PR apparatus and the media’s uncritical response. They

provide elegant, effective analysis of examples including the media’s approach to Colin Powell’s now infamous UN speech affirming the existence of Saddam Hussein’s WMDs, the politics behind the outing of Valerie Plame Wilson as a CIA agent, the Pentagon’s use of Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi as an inside source, and the complicated relationships *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller (who also reported on Iraq’s possession of WMDs) had with the high ranking people in the administration. Rampton and Stauber make their argument with verve while carefully documenting their claims; this is muckraking without mudslinging.”

FAIR/COUNTERSPIN, INTERVIEW WITH JOHN STAUBER, SEPTEMBER 15-21, 2006

“Every administration seems to take propaganda to a new level. . . . I think what’s so frightening about the current situation is that what worked in selling the Iraq war was something called the big lie tactic. . . . The people in power state the most audacious sorts of information, that they know to be false, but that they know will incite the public: ‘Saddam was behind 9/11. Saddam has weapons of mass destruction. Saddam is in league with Al Qaeda.’ . . . Because the mainstream media echoed and repeated those statements in the United States, and because the mainstream media refused to challenge those lies and deceptions, the big lie tactic was allowed to work. There’s not much more you can say that’s a worse indictment of a nation’s news media.”

WILLAMETTE WEEK (PORTLAND, OREGON), INTERVIEW WITH JOHN STAUBER, SEPTEMBER 20, 2006

“We need a lot more critical thinking and media criticism taught in schools at a very early age. What we see happening with people not being skeptical and not demanding good journalism, not being held accountable for their lies, is that we’re really losing our democracy—which is ultimately ironic, because the basic claim that the administration makes is that they’re pursuing the war on terror to preserve freedom and democracy.”

BILL BERKOWITZ, “IS IT THE PR, OR THE POLICY?” WORKING FOR CHANGE, SEPTEMBER 21, 2006

“‘The United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on media campaigns that have been spectacularly ineffective,’ Rampton told me in a telephone interview. ‘That the enemy has been more effective in communicating its message to the world is not so much a reflection of their media savvy as it is on the ineffective message of the United States.’” ■

Catching Up With Eric Schlosser: A CMD Interview

by Jonathan Rosenblum



Eric Schlosser

When *PR Watch* recently caught a cell phone signal from Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation* and the new *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food*, Schlosser was rushing from car to car in New York City, after London, which was just after Berkeley, where he was giving students a preview of the new film based on *Fast Food Nation*. We didn't ask when he had time to eat, but we did speak with him about fast food, the U.S. childhood obesity epidemic, and the public relations industry's techniques in attacking his work. Schlosser has been likened to a latter day Upton Sinclair—exposing the abattoirs and abuses in the meat-packing and calorie-packing processed food industry.

PR Watch: What led you to write about fast food, not just its effects on our bodies but our broader well being?

Eric Schlosser: I didn't set out to write a jeremiad about the [fast food] industry at all. It started as an assignment from *Rolling Stone* that I wasn't even sure I wanted to accept. Once I realized how powerful the [fast food] industry had become and how different it was in reality from the images it was marketing—that's when I became intrigued. Whenever there's something that I think deliberately is being kept from people or deceptive that's when I become curious. . . .

The editor of *Rolling Stone*, Jann Wenner, called me into his office. They had read my [*Atlantic Monthly*] piece about illegal immigrants and migrant farm workers in California. It was a very complicated piece with all these big issues but it was told through something very simple and concrete, which was the strawberry.

[*Rolling Stone*] just wanted to know where fast food comes from. What does it mean? I didn't know anything about it. I didn't take the assignment right away—I like

hamburgers and fries. I went to McDonald's. I didn't want to write something elitist that was a putdown of what ordinary people eat. I went to the library and began reading. The more I learned about it, the more I was amazed at how powerful the industry had become in a very brief period of time and how much impact it had on society in a very brief period of time.

Your new book with Charles Wilson, *Chew on This*, reads like a spin control manual on fast food. It could be for kids or a number of audiences . . . Did you intend to, and how does one, debunk spin for younger audiences?

The chapter on marketing especially is an attempt to provide some kind of media literacy for kids and to help them be aware they're being targeted. I didn't see it in the context so much of the PR industry. It was that kids are bombarded every day, everywhere we go, by marketing. I wanted just to make them aware of that fact, and to help make them aware of some of the tactics being used.

I have a nine-year-old kid, who, like everyone, is bombarded by marketing. Kids tend to—well, we all react. We often react to our society by doing the opposite of what we're told. How do you break through [to a young audience]?

We tried really hard not to present information as a lecture and not to present it in a hectoring way, to write the book in a way that respects the intelligence of readers and isn't condescending to them. It's offered as information, it's offered as, here's the other side. At the end, it encourages [younger readers] to make up their own minds, and shows connections to what they're doing and the bigger world. Unless it's your own child you cannot prevent them from doing anything. With my own kids once I did this research, it was like, okay no more. That was it for them and McDonald's. My son was six and my daughter was seven.

How did your kids feel about cutting off McDonald's?

They were really unhappy, you know. But that's the way it goes. It's a form of high-risk behavior for kids, this fast food diet. So far, there isn't any rebellion in the household. I don't see any signs that one of them will become a McDonald's franchisee to just kind of stick it to me.

In terms of writing the book for kids, it doesn't set out to try to tell them what to do. It tries to give them information, and what more can you do?

The tone really does draw one in—you get a picture of the entrepreneurial mom and pop success story that is always part of the [*American*] dream.

I'm actually more optimistic with the kids than I am with adults, for a couple of reasons. . . . The age group this book is aimed at is a really interesting moment in

kids' lives, where they're just starting to look beyond their family and their friends and just starting to look at the wider world. I don't think all children are perfect and childhood is a golden age at all. [But] kids are more likely to have empathy and to be angry at injustice. There is often a purity there. They're less likely to be cynical and ironic, less likely to be jaded. Maybe kids who read this are more likely to be pissed off than 48-year-old middle-aged guys like I am—almost.

What's your experience with PR front groups like the so-called "Center for Consumer Freedom"—and what are they doing following you around?

I think it's really important that these front groups not be treated like they're legitimate organizations. Even the name "Center for Consumer Freedom" is deceptive, because it implies it's a consumer group. It's not. It's run out of a lobbying firm in Washington D.C. I think there need to be tougher rules in how front groups can present themselves. There needs to be much more transparency. I think there has to be a requirement that they reveal their funding sources. I think the media has to be more energetic in not just accepting at face value who these people say they are. That was one of the problems I dealt with: all these groups suddenly attacking me,

coming out of the woodwork, and some journalists being misled that these might truly be legitimate groups. Thank God for SourceWatch as a resource—seriously!—so I could tell [journalists] about front groups and they could take two minutes on line and see that this is true.

These groups exist to create controversy. . . . At New York University today, I'll be talking about a Brown and Williamson PR person [describing] their strategy—this is from 1969, but it could come from [the 2006 movie] "Thank you for Smoking." Here's the quote from the marketing person, in terms of how to deal with critics of tobacco: "Doubt is our product since it's the best means for competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy. If we are successful in establishing a controversy at the public level then it creates an opportunity to put forward the real facts about smoking and health."

Basically these are the industry's facts. So if they can make something controversial, they are already beginning to undermine their critics. For example, the ads that were put out recently by the Center for Consumer Freedom about trans fats in New York City were totally deceptive.

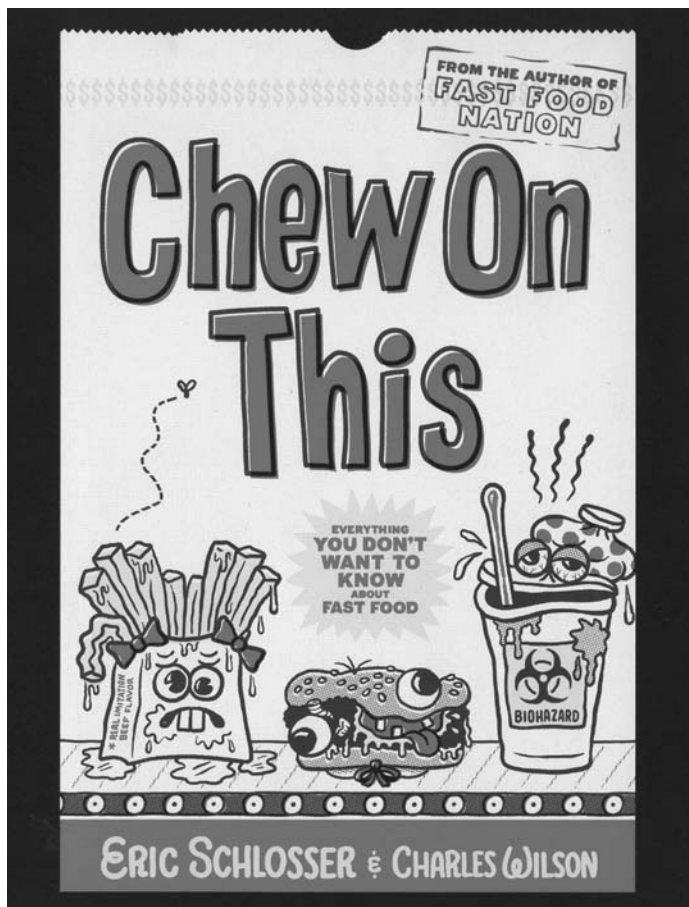
"Thank God for SourceWatch as a resource about front groups."

Trans fats are acknowledged to be toxic. Period. There is no health benefit of trans fat. There is no reason to have it in food. Yet they portray [critics] as the "food police" and the "nanny state." Don't get me going on this. . . . [T]hese guys need to be outted at every opportunity.

You're talking to groups in New York City right now, a city that's on the verge of creating a new policy to ban trans fats—what is the atmosphere like and do you think this represents a trend in public action about food safety?

I talked to the New York City health commissioner. I tried to support him in this. I think what he's doing is absolutely terrific. I think it also shows we're having an impact. KFC already announced its [2007 planned] elimination of trans fats and it's just a matter of time before McDonald's does. There is no reason not to. They did it in Copenhagen—McDonald's didn't have to shut all of a sudden when Denmark banned these things in 2004.

In 2002, the National Academy of Sciences concluded that there is no safe amount in eating trans fats. That's almost five years ago. They could have really saved a lot of lives if they had acted a lot sooner.



There's a really good article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* about the dangers of trans fats, a really good summary. And in one of the articles, Danish researchers are visiting KFC and McDonald's all over the world, analyzing trans fat content. They found enormous—enormous—variations in the levels of trans fats. [For each restaurant] it depended on what oils were available and what oils were less expensive for cooking. But the levels in New York City were incredibly high.

So the New York City health commissioner asked a year ago for a voluntary ban, to stop using the stuff. He checked up a year later and found that nobody agreed with the voluntary ban. So he's taken action.

On our website, www.prwatch.org, we just did a "Spin of the Week" on the angles that the industry is taking on trans fats, including developing an angle of ethnic discrimination.

They're going to bring in the Latinos and make it as though it's a race issue. That's completely cynical, totally and completely cynical on their part.

Why do you think change seems to be happening now?

I just think there's been a steadily growing awareness about our food system and some of the harm it's causing. Think of Mike Huckabee, the conservative Republican governor of Arkansas, leading a campaign against junk food and soda, or the Republican governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, defying soda industry lobbyists who came to Sacramento. He defied them and banned soda and junk food from the California schools.

When I wrote *Fast Food Nation* this was inconceivable, and now it's happening. It doesn't mean we live in a perfect world and all these problems are going to be solved, but it looks like there really is going to be action at local and state level—mainly because of the failure of the federal government to take action to protect the public health.

One of the most intriguing stories in Chew on This is your account of the front groups of food flavoring (mostly in New Jersey for some reason). We've heard about industry front groups. You write that the flavoring experts use "umamis" to measure flavor and "mouthfeel" to judge what we like. What is the role of the flavorers in determining what we eat?

It's a sign of how processed our food has become that you need a separate industry to provide us with flavor. In some ways, I don't hold the flavor industry for health harms in the same way [as the fast food companies]. If you go to Whole Foods and get processed foods that are organic they often have flavor additives too. . . . You need flavor additives to give good taste to [processed] healthy food and unhealthy food. Ideally you would have food that isn't that heavily processed. These flavor additives

are generally regarded as safe by the Food and Drug Administration because individual components are considered safe. We don't know what happens when they mix 30 or 40 of these different flavor chemicals together. Do you get something new? There is some indication [from studies] in England that mixing them together may cause hyperactivity in children. It's really unknown. But the flavor industry was interesting and most important to me because it symbolized how different this food is from real food, how flavor additives get children to eat things they might otherwise never want to eat.

So you wouldn't ascribe a distinction to the Whole Foods version of flavorings and those in fast food?

Whole Foods uses natural flavors, which means they're synthesized from natural sources as opposed to being made through a combination of chemicals. They reduce natural substances down to these flavor chemicals. It's a very fine point of distinction. The same factories making the tastes of fast foods are making the tastes of health foods. Ideally people would go back to eating fresh ingredients, and the fewer chemicals of all kinds, the better. I haven't seen any proof that the flavor chemicals are dangerous. It's the food that the flavor chemicals are being added to that raises a health question.

Back to a basic PR industry question. As a result of your criticism of the fast food industry, you've been tailed. You caused a lot of fits in the industry, from McDonald's on. Who has sought to confront you and your message?

Young Americans for Freedom, the Center for Individual Freedom, the Liberty Institute, the Heartland Institute, an outfit called the National Minority Health Month Foundation, with the leaders calling me a socialist and implying that I was a racist. And that New York group, the American Council on Science and Health.

They use that classic tobacco industry tactic, trying to create doubt, trying to create controversy. Most important of all, as Rick Berman of the Center for Consumer Freedom has argued, if you can attack the messenger you can discredit the message. So there have been a lot of personal attacks on me by trying to make me the issue and imply I'm a bad American or anti-American. They don't talk about issues. It was unpleasant but it wasn't effective. I certainly never attack these executives by name or say they're bad people or anything like that. Their business practices, not the human beings, are what I'm attacking.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported at one point that McDonald's had a plan to use "truth squads." By attacking me, and trying to discredit me, they could discredit my message. McDonald's denied it. So I called up the reporter for the *Journal*. He had the memo right there.

His name is Dick Gibson, and he's covered the industry for years and years.

So McDonald's is lying?

One of them is lying. Either McDonald's is lying or Dick Gibson who's written about the food industry for years is lying. You know, *The Wall Street Journal* is not really this left wing socialist rag that goes out after big businesses. . . .

McDonald's has just announced about five years of consecutive profit growth. Have their PR techniques and damage control worked?

A lot of their profits are from promotions for the World Cup in Europe which were very effective. And they're targeting the poor. In the U.S., much of their profits are coming from dollar hamburgers, cheeseburgers and Cokes which make a lot of money. Right now, they're making a lot of money.

But from a business model perspective, it's not one that I would invest in. Morality and business ethics aside, I think that unless they change they may really have problems. We'll see what happens. ■

FAST FOOD NATION: THE MOVIE

by Judith Siers-Poisson

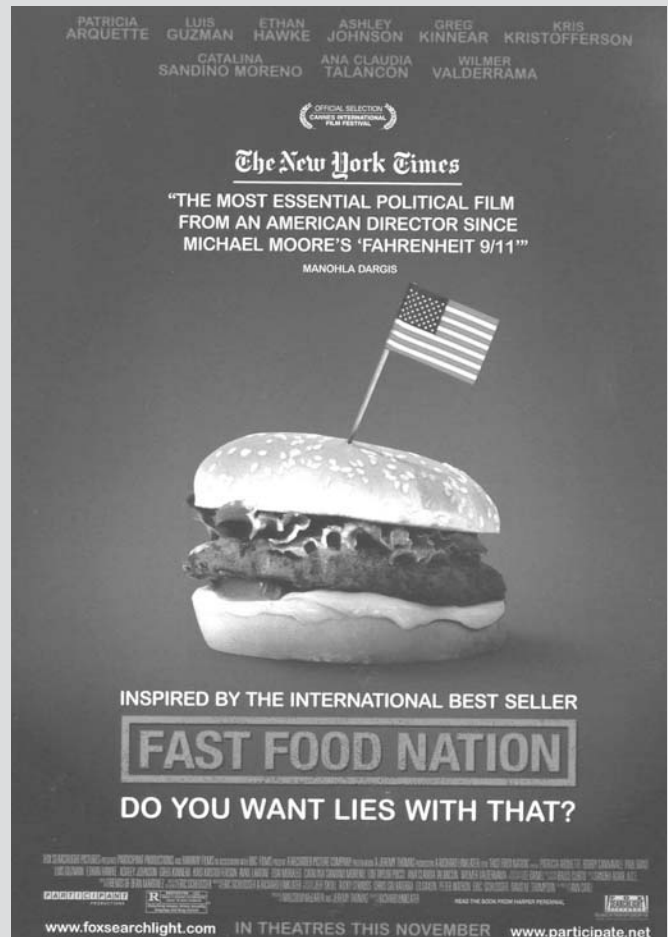
John Stauber and I attended a special pre-release campus screening in Berkeley, CA of "Fast Food Nation," the film based on Eric Schlosser's groundbreaking 2001 bestseller. In the book, Schlosser documented the links between exploitation of migrant workers, the meatpacking industry, fast food consumption, and the manipulation and outright toxicity of much mass-produced food.

In adapting *Fast Food Nation* for the big screen, Schlosser and director and co-writer Richard Linklater created a narrative screenplay, rather than a documentary, that would widen the audience for the original non-fiction book.

With an impressive cast that includes Academy Award nominee (for her role in *Maria Full of Grace*) Catalina Sandino Moreno, Greg Kinnear, Patricia Arquette, Wilmer Valderrama (cast very differently than his comic role in *That 70s Show*), singer Avril Lavigne, Ethan Hawke, Bobby Cannavale, Kris Kristofferson, and Bruce Willis, "Fast Food Nation" presents a fictionalized but all too recognizable industry of dirty secrets and cynical marketing.

One hundred years after the publication of Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, which revealed the horrors of the meat trade in Chicago's stockyards, "Fast Food Nation" shows that while the immigrants' ethnicity may have changed and the locations may be different, much of the worker abuse and consumer deception has stayed the same in the last century.

In 2000, *Publishers' Weekly* described the book this way: "Schlosser's incisive history of the development of American fast food indicts the industry for some shocking crimes against humanity, including system-



atically destroying the American diet and landscape, and undermining our values and our economy." The same can be said about the movie. Grab a friend who needs to know what's between those seeded buns and go see the show.

MORTALITY COMBAT: THE WAR OVER COUNTING THE DEAD IN IRAQ

by Sheldon Rampton



*Mourners in Sadr City, August 2005
(AP Photo/Karim Kadim)*

I was shocked when *The Lancet*, a highly respected British medical journal, published a study in October estimating that 655,000 Iraqis have died since 2003 as a result of the war. The number seemed huge, much larger than I had imagined possible.

The study, with Gilbert Burnham as its lead author, was conducted by some of the same researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Al Mustansiriya University in Baghdad who conducted a previous study in 2004 which estimated that 98,000 people had died. The earlier study was attacked at the time by supporters of the war and was largely ignored by the mainstream news media in the United States, as John Stauber and I noted in our recent book, *The Best War Ever: Lies, Damned Lies and the Mess in Iraq* (for an excerpt, see the Third Quarter 2006 issue of *PR Watch*). The new study suggests that some half a million additional lives have been lost in the subsequent two years.

Are these numbers credible? I looked at reactions to the *Lancet* study from several groups: American political pundits, scientists with expertise in health and mortality research, and Iraqis (as reflected in the views of Iraqis with English-language weblogs). Many of the political pundits (even those with anti-war views) either rejected the study or questioned its conclusions and methodology. The scientists, however, gave it high marks, and most of the Iraqis thought the number sounded like it was in the right ballpark.

WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

The full *Lancet* study is available online. Although it is a scientific paper, I found it easy to read and jargon-free. However, a couple of terms might need explanation.

The study uses a “cluster sampling” methodology that is commonly used in health and mortality research, especially in places hit by war or other humanitarian dis-

asters such as floods or earthquakes. The methodology is somewhat less precise — but more cost-effective and practical — than simple random sampling, in which individual members of the population being studied are selected and interviewed at random. Rather than individuals, researchers interview randomly-selected clusters of individuals and use standard statistical techniques to reach conclusions about the entire population. As Daniel Engber explained in *Slate* magazine, “It’s the same basic method used for political polls in America, which estimate the attitudes of millions of people by surveying 1,000 adults.”

Currently the most comprehensive alternative attempt to compile statistics on Iraqi deaths is being done by the Iraq Body Count website, which as of November 2, 2006, had tallied 45,061 to 50,022 deaths — less than a tenth of the *Lancet* result. As the *Lancet* paper itself notes, “Our estimate of excess deaths is far higher than those reported in Iraq . . . This discrepancy is not unexpected. Data from passive surveillance (counting the dead by external sources such as government or media) are rarely complete, even in stable circumstances, and are even less complete during conflict, when access is restricted and fatal events could be intentionally hidden. Aside from Bosnia, we can find no conflict situation where passive surveillance recorded more than 20% of the deaths measured by population-based methods.”

Lancet editor Richard Horton explains the “active surveillance” methodology used in its study in a commentary published in the *Guardian*:

Only when you go out and knock on the doors of families, actively looking for deaths, do you begin to get close to the right number. This method is now tried and tested. It has been the basis for mortality estimates in war zones such as Darfur and the Congo. Interestingly, when we report figures from these countries politicians do not challenge them. They frown, nod their heads and agree that the situation is grave and intolerable. The international community must act, they say. When it comes to Iraq the story is different. Expect the current government to mobilise all its efforts to undermine the work done by this American and Iraqi team. Expect the government to criticise the *Lancet* for being too political. Expect the government to do all it can to dismiss this story and wash its hands of its responsibility to take these latest findings seriously.

ASSESSMENTS FROM SCIENTISTS

Here are some of the reactions from scientists who work in the field of mortality research:

- Ronald Waldman, an epidemiologist at Columbia University who worked at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for many years, told the *Washington Post* that the *Lancet*'s survey method was "tried and true" and said its findings were "the best estimate of mortality we have."
- According to Professor Frank E. Harrell Jr., chairman of the biostatistics department in the School of Medicine at Vanderbilt University, "The investigators used a solid study design and rigorous, well-justified analysis of the data. They used several analytic techniques having different levels of assumptions to ensure the robustness of mortality estimates and the estimated margin of error. The researchers are also world-class."
- Francisco Checchi, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine who has worked on mortality surveys in Angola, Darfur, Thailand and Uganda, said that he found the survey's estimates "shockingly high," but added that dismissing it "simply on gut feeling grounds seems more than irrational." He noted that its "choice of method is anything but controversial" and found its results "scientifically solid" and "compelling."
- In Australia, 27 of the country's leading scientists in epidemiology and public health signed a letter supporting the study, noting that it "was undertaken by respected researchers assisted by one of the world's foremost biostatisticians. Its methodology is sound and its conclusions should be taken seriously. ... The study by Burnham and his colleagues provides the best estimate of mortality to date in Iraq that we have, or indeed are ever likely to have."

Asked about the study at a news conference, President Bush dismissed it out of hand, calling it "not credible" and saying its methodology was "pretty well discredited."

"That's exactly wrong," responded Richard Garfield, a public health professor at Columbia University who works closely with a number of the authors of the report. "There is no discrediting of this methodology. I don't think there's anyone who's been involved in mortality research who thinks there's a better way to do it in unsecured areas. I have never heard of any argument in this field that says there's a better way to do it."

POLITICIANS AND PUNDITS

Most of the methodological criticisms of the *Lancet* study actually come from people like Bush who have no

expertise in epidemiology, and of course the boldest attacks have come from supporters of the war.

Writing in the conservative *National Review*, Richard Nadler called the *Lancet* paper a "cooked up study." His only methodological critique, however, consisted of an odd claim that the researchers were guilty of "baseline bungling": they "chose their 'base-line' for pre-invasion Iraq as January 2002 through March 2003," a period Nadler argues was less violent than earlier periods of Saddam Hussein's rule.

President Bush said the study was "not credible," and its methodology was "pretty well discredited."

Fred Kaplan in *Slate* magazine wrote that *The Lancet*'s pre-war death estimate (5.5 Iraqis per 1,000) was flawed because it differed from an estimate of 10 per 1,000 published by the United Nations. Moreover, he says, a 5.5 per thousand prewar mortality rate would have been "lower than that of almost every country in the Middle East" (a claim made also by columnist William M. Arkin in the *Washington Post*). However, Australian computer scientist Tim Lambert has demolished the Kaplan-Arkin criticism in great detail, pointing out that in fact, 5.5 deaths per thousand is actually higher than the mortality rate in "all but one" of the other countries in the Middle East.

Another attempt at methodological criticism came from Republican pollster Steven E. Moore, who conducted surveys in Iraq and served as an advisor to Paul Bremer. Writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, Moore blasted the *Lancet* paper, calling it a "bogus study." His criticism focused on the study's allegedly too-small sample size and imprecision. "Survey results frequently have a margin of error of plus or minus 3% or 5%—not 1200%," he wrote. This is generally true — with regard to the sort of opinion surveys that Moore performs (although his research in Iraq left Bremer forced to admit belatedly that "we really didn't see the insurgency coming"). The *Lancet* study, however, was studying mortality, and its sample size was dictated in part by the limited funds available to finance it and in part by concern for the safety of the Iraqi researchers who conducted the survey.

Similar vitriol came from Christopher Hitchens, the former Trotskyist turned pro-war polemicist, who dashed off a column that didn't so much critique the *Lancet* paper as urinate on it. After accusing the epidemiologists of "moral idiocy," Hitchens mocked the

name “*Lancet*,” called its editor an “Islamist-Leftist,” and went on to claim that its mortality estimate is “almost certainly inflated” and actually justifies the war. Why? The study found that 31 percent of deaths were attributed to coalition forces, while 24 percent were attributed to “other” causes and 45 percent were “unknown” (because either the responsible party was not known, or the surveyed households were hesitant to specifically identify them). From this evidence, Hitchens concluded that insurgents are the true killers in Iraq and that the *Lancet* study is therefore “a reminder of the nature of the enemy we face.”

IRAQ BODY COUNT

Other criticism of the study came from a source that may seem surprising: Iraq Body Count (IBC), the anti-war, London-based organization that has been tracking Iraqi deaths since the beginning of the war. IBC issued a news release questioning the wide gap that separates its own numbers and official Iraqi government statistics from the *Lancet*'s much larger estimate. The discrepancy, they argued, is so large as to be implausible. For example, IBC doubts that the number of deaths estimated by the *Lancet* could have occurred “with less than a tenth of them being noticed by any public surveillance mechanisms.” A gap that large, they argue, can only mean that either there has been “incompetence and/or fraud on a truly massive scale by Iraqi officials in hospitals and ministries,” or else the *Lancet* authors “have drawn conclusions from unrepresentative data.”

Les Roberts, one of the authors of the *Lancet* study, has responded to these criticisms in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation. Citing examples from other wars, he points out that “It is really difficult to collect death information in a war zone! . . . I do not think that very low reporting implies fraud.”

It should be noted that IBC's own methodology follows rules that should be expected to lead to a lower count than the *Lancet* survey:

- Whereas the *Lancet* study attempts to estimate all deaths — including the deaths of insurgents, police and Iraqi military — IBC only counts civilian deaths and excludes combatants.
- IBC only counts deaths that are reported in English-language news media, and Iraq is not an English-speaking nation. Many more deaths are reported in the Iraqi press in Arabic than in the Western-language wire services.

As for the gap between the *Lancet* figure and deaths reported by the Iraqi Health Ministry, a number of Iraqi commentators (some of whom I quote below) have noted

that conditions in many parts of the country are so unstable as to prevent reliable government accounting. Moreover, the question of how many people have died in Iraq has been politically charged since the start of the war, and the United States has not only avoided issuing statistics of its own but on a number of occasions has also pressured Iraqi officials against doing so. Shortly after the invasion in 2003, Baghdad's medical officials were forbidden to release morgue counts. In December of that year, Iraq's Health Ministry ordered a halt to counting civilian deaths and told its statistics department not to release figures, according to the Associated Press.

IRAQIS WEIGH IN

Among Iraqi bloggers, the strongest challenge to the *Lancet* study came from Omar Fadhil, one of two brothers who contributes to a pro-occupation website called “Iraq the Model” (ITM). Fadhil emotionally blasted the study, accusing the *Lancet* researchers of

exploiting the suffering of people to make gains that are not the least related to easing the suffering of



*Another coffin in Baghdad, November 2006
(AP Photo/Karim Kadim)*

those people. . . . They shamelessly made an auction of our blood, and it didn't make a difference if the blood was shed by a bomb or a bullet or a heart attack because the bigger the count the more useful it becomes to attack this or that policy in a political race and the more useful it becomes in cheerleading for murderous tyrannical regimes.

These comments prompted an equally emotional outpouring from dozens of other Iraqi bloggers, who called ITM “a holocaust denier,” “sucking up to the Americans,” “a traitor,” “like the Baathist apologist that they so despise,” and “shameful.” An Iraqi housewife declared that she was full of “Guilt and anger because

the Iraq I always dreamt of has become one big nightmare. . . . Guilt and anger because outside these walls are trashbins filled with decapitated bodies of women, children and men. . . . Guilt and anger because after all the years of tyranny, people are now wishing for Saddam the criminal to come back. . . . The so called freedom that everyone, every single person was hoping and dreaming of has gone.”

I spent some time sampling discussions of the *Lancet* study from among the more than 200 blogs listed at the Iraq Blog Count website. Many of the bloggers there noted that they themselves have seen widespread death due to the war, including the loss of personal friends and family: “I don’t know of anyone who hasn’t lost at least some members of their extended family,” wrote Iraqi blogger Raed Jarrar.

Riverbend, an anti-occupation blogger, wrote that she found the figure of 650,000 dead entirely plausible:

For American politicians and military personnel, playing dumb and talking about numbers of bodies in morgues and official statistics, etc, seems to be the latest tactic. But as any Iraqi knows, not every death is being reported. As for getting reliable numbers from the Ministry of Health or any other official Iraqi institution, that’s about as probable as getting a coherent, grammatically correct sentence from George Bush — especially after the ministry was banned from giving out correct mortality numbers. . . . The chaos and lack of proper facilities is resulting in people being buried without a trip to the morgue or the hospital. During American military attacks on cities like Samarra and Falujah, victims were buried in their gardens or in mass graves in football fields. Or has that been forgotten already?

We literally do not know a single Iraqi family that has not seen the violent death of a first or second-degree relative these last three years. Abductions, militias, sectarian violence, revenge killings, assassinations, car-bombs, suicide bombers, American military strikes, Iraqi military raids, death squads, extremists, armed robberies, executions, detentions, secret prisons, torture, mysterious weapons – with so many different ways to die, is the number so far fetched?

Similar comments came from Zeyad at Healing Iraq. Zeyad’s reaction is interesting in part because he initially supported the war as a means of getting rid of Saddam Hussein and bringing democracy to his country. After reading the *Lancet* study, he questioned whether its

methodology was appropriate “in Iraq’s case, where the level of violence is not consistent throughout the country,” and he thought its estimate of 650,000 deaths was too high. “My personal guesstimate would be half that number,” he wrote, “but then I have a limited grasp on statistics and I stress that I may be wrong. . . . The people who conducted the survey should be commended for attempting to find out, with the limited methods they had available. On the other hand, the people who are attacking them come across as indifferent to the suffering of Iraqis, especially when they have made no obvious effort to provide a more accurate body count.” He added:

There also seems to be a common misconception here that large parts of the country are stable. In fact, not a day goes by without political and sectarian assassinations all over the south of Iraq, particularly in Basrah and Amara, but they always go unnoticed, except in some local media outlets. The ongoing conflict between political parties and militias to control resources in holy cities and in the oil-rich region of Basrah rarely gets a nod from the media every now and then, simply because there are very few coalition casualties over there. The same with Mosul and Kirkuk, both highly volatile areas. I am yet to see some good coverage on the deadly sectarian warfare in Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, which has the highest rate of unknown corpses dumped on the streets after the capital, and which was about to be announced an Islamic Emirate by the end of Ramadan. There are absolutely no numbers of civilian casualties from Anbar. There is no one to report them and the Iraqi government controls no territory there, while American troops are confined to their bases. And much, much less data from other governorates which give the impression of being ‘stable.’

I have personally witnessed dozens of people killed in my neighbourhood over the last few months (15 people in the nearby vicinity of our house alone, over 4 months), and virtually none of them were mentioned in any media report while I was there. And that was in Baghdad where there is the highest density of journalists and media agencies. Don’t you think this is a common situation all over the country?

A few days later, Zeyad noted the recent killing of another close friend before adding, “I now officially regret supporting this war back in 2003. The guilt is too much for me to handle.” ■

SAVING GENERAL WASHINGTON

by Judith Siers-Poisson

I spoke with author J.R. Norton in June about his book, *Saving General Washington: The Right Wing Assault on America's Founding Principles*. The following excerpts are from my interview with him on "A Public Affair" on WORT (89.9 FM), community radio in Madison, WI, and from a follow up in-person interview.

PR Watch: Why do George Washington and the rest of the Founding Fathers need to be saved?

J.R. Norton: Well, it's a bit of metaphor. It's in part aimed at rehabilitating and reintroducing these founding figures of American history, but on a broader level, on a more important level, it's about reintroducing the values that these guys stood for. Certainly over the last five or six years, I think we've really lost sight of those virtues.

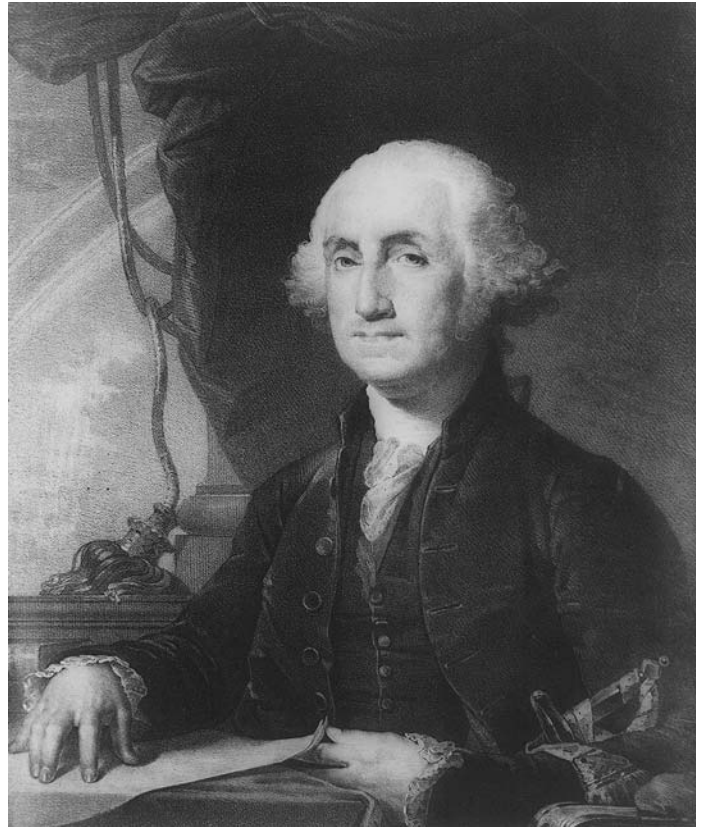
As I researched the book it struck me that these guys shared a lot of the values that I find to be really important. There were a lot of progressive values inherent in the way this country was founded. I would say a lot of libertarian values as well. The thing that you don't see is an interest in being authoritarian. The founding of America was a giant step away from authoritarianism, and I think we are stepping back towards it in the modern day.

WAR AND PEACE

Let's talk about war and peace. The Founding Fathers were coming out of a revolution that took a huge toll on this new country, and were faced with both trying to rebuild and build a new nation. It seems in your book that they were really focused on maintaining peace, and saw it as critical to give this nascent nation a chance to grow. How would you compare that with the current administration seeming eager to be drawn into any conflict that presents itself?

Tom Paine wrote very articulately on the horrors of war and why it should be avoided.

There does seem to be a real willingness to go to war and that very much conflicts with the way that the Founding Fathers approached it. I think part of that lies in personal stake. By going to war in the Revolutionary War, the Founding Fathers had everything to lose – they could have lost their lives very easily on the battle field or swinging from the gallows, they could have lost their property, had it burned down or confiscated by the British authorities. It was a very dangerous situation for them to be in. No one wants their family killed or have to be a fugitive from justice for years and years.



***George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, 1828
(Library of Congress)***

You can draw a contrast with the current administration and look at a situation like Iraq, where not only is no one from the administration personally in danger, and neither are their family members, but they actually stand in many cases to gain property and money as a result of this shift toward war. Everyone knows about Dick Cheney's connections with Halliburton, KBR, and the shadiness surrounding that. Richard Perle did very well for himself while serving on the Defense Policy board advising the Pentagon and helping push for the war there. So these are guys for whom war is not a bad thing and who don't have much personally to lose.

The Founding Fathers were very conscious of the fragility of their new country and its relatively small size compared to the European powers. There was a very pragmatic interest in not revisiting war if they could avoid it. But there were also moral objections to it. Tom Paine wrote very articulately on the horrors of war and why it should be avoided. James Madison, in 1795 in his "Political Observations," was reflecting on war and said, "No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." He saw the danger that war presented to civil liberties and that's something that the Founding Fathers were certainly cognizant of. If you look at what's

happened since September 11th and the invasion of Iraq, and civil liberties in the U.S., there's been a real relationship between government programs that rescind civil liberties and this rhetoric that the nation is under attack, the nation is under threat.

You keep hearing from this administration over and over again that the war on terror may never end. Future presidents will have to decide what to do with Iraq – there's this idea that this is just going to be an endless situation. Combine this with the idea put forth by [Attorney General] Alberto Gonzales, John Yoo, and other people in the Justice Department, that the Executive has basically unchecked powers during a time of war because he's the Commander in Chief – welcome to the military dictatorship! Welcome to a situation where the Chief Executive has unchecked powers forever. Are we there yet? No, of course not, there are still some checks, there are still some balances, there are still some restraints. But the fact that they were able to advance this argument and not get shouted down or impeached is a sign that we're

living in dangerous times in terms of maintaining American liberty.

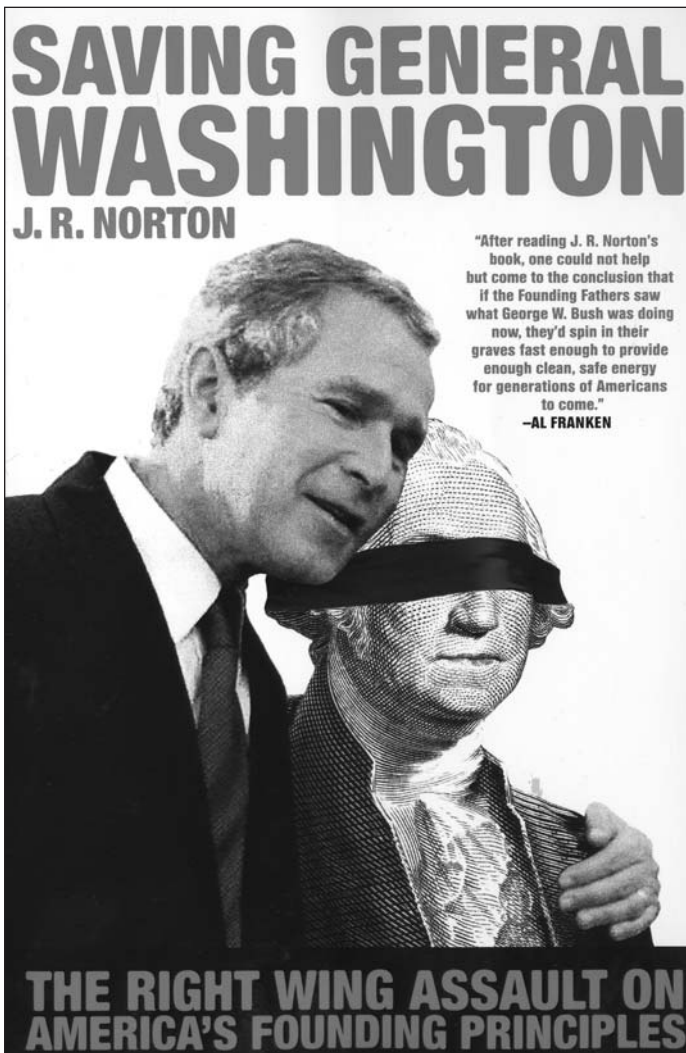
ON RELIGION

The Founding Fathers have been invoked to support many of what I would call the co-opted or twisted uses of religion by the current administration. Were the Founding Fathers, as a whole, men of faith? How did faith play into their writing of the constitution and their structuring this new country?

The majority of the Founding Fathers had intense personal relationships with, if not religion, then with God. This was not a group of atheists. They were what would best be classified as deists, who believe in some sort of god, but not necessarily in a religious system that stems from that god. So they were respectful of people who had faith, but also were interested in putting together a government that worked, as opposed to a government that was just an arm of a church or worked hand in glove with the church. They had seen what happened in Europe in the preceding centuries, which is that religion essentially just became another way to make a power play, a way to gather money, and a way to gather military support. It touched off a string of horrific wars and they thought the best way to prevent this sort of situation, the best way to actually protect people who believe in religion and want to worship according to their own conscience, was to separate the Church and the State. The Constitution itself is a godless document – the only time religion and God really come into play is when it's suggested that religious oaths can't prevent you from taking office – which is almost a negative interpretation.

And that was a pretty radical idea . . .

It was a very radical idea, and the 18th century equivalent of the Religious Right hated the Constitution. They said it disdained belief in a higher power, or in a heaven and a hell, and that's an accurate read – it's an extremely secular document and that was done with very deliberate intent. If you look at the way religion has flourished in America since the era of the country's founding, clearly, the Founding Fathers knew what they were doing. Religion has been very robust and very healthy, and it doesn't suffer from not being part of the State – it actually benefits. So do people who believe in anything other than what might be the majority, most powerful, religious perspective. I think the Founding Fathers were very far-sighted in how they handled the separation of Church and State and any attempt to say, "Well the Founding Fathers were Christians and they wanted this to be a Christian nation" is a flat-out lie, and it is done for opportunistic reasons. ■



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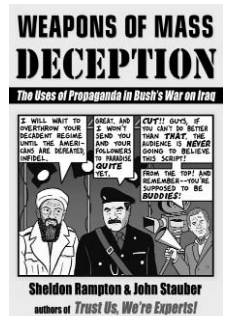
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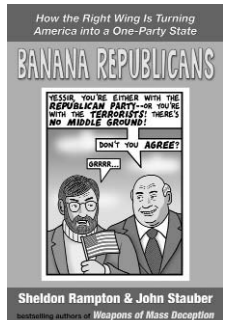


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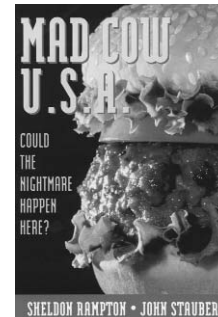
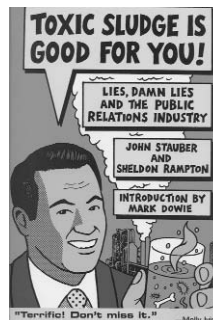


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