

PR WATCH

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WHAT IS THE "DISINFOPEDIA"?

by Laura Miller

In the spring of 2002, Americans for Balanced Energy Choices became a sponsor of National Public Radio. While ABEC acknowledges on their website that "America's coal-based electricity industry (producers, transporters, and electricity generators) have provided the primary initial funding for this worthwhile project," their on-air spot did not mention this support, leading listeners to email the Center for Media & Democracy (CMD), *PR Watch's* publisher.

"Do y'all know anything about Americans for Balanced Energy Choices?" inquired a Texan. And from Maine, we read, "So I happened to hear an underwriting announcement on 'All Things Considered' a few days ago for a non-profit group with the somewhat Orwellian title 'Americans for Balanced Energy Choices' that promotes coal as America's energy choice for the future. Needless to say, I almost jumped out of my seat. . . . It's very clearly a front group for the fossil fuel industry (can't imagine why some civic-minded citizens concerned about energy consumption would decide to form an organization touting the amazing qualities of that stuff Santa leaves us when we're bad), but does anyone have any further information about it?"

CMD staff investigated and found that ABEC's website is registered to the Center for Economic and Environmental Development, a coal industry trade group and an active opponent of the UN Global Climate Treaty (the Kyoto Protocol). We also found that ABEC's PR firm, Denver-based MGA Communications, specializes in public-private

FLACK ATTACK

Attacks on the public interest—whether they be environmental, human rights, public health or other issues—operate under the cover of disinformation campaigns conceived of and executed by public relations experts at PR firms and industry-funded organizations. *PR Watch* has spent ten years exposing these kinds of campaigns. Needless to say, we have never found ourselves short on material.

We initiated our collaborative Disinfopedia project because there are simply too many disinformation campaigns for any one organization to cover. Our online Disinfopedia is designed to have hundreds of organizations and individuals contributing to it. It is easy to update to accommodate the latest crop of front groups and industry-friendly experts, and cross-refer-

enced to keep track of the web of affiliations between think tanks, industry, and PR firms.

We're showcasing a number of collaborative Disinfopedia articles in this issue of *PR Watch*. It has, however, been challenging to represent what is essentially a non-linear, web-based reference tool in print! What you read here is a flatlander representation of a three-dimensional library. What you don't see in these pages are all the text-embedded hyperlinks to other articles both in Disinfopedia and off site. To understand the real potential of Disinfopedia, please visit the website (www.disinfopedia.org). Also, compare the web versions of Disinfopedia articles with the versions printed here in this issue of *PR Watch*. Over time, articles will evolve, incorporating new information. Disinfopedia is a bold experiment in citizen journalism. We hope you participate.

partnerships, “green” product marketing, and crisis communications (among other things). Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Shell Oil were other MGA clients.

We often expose, “Who’s behind this front group?”, but we’ve been frustrated at not having a way to make this research available in an organized fashion to the public. How many other NPR listeners had wondered, “Who is ABEC?” And how many activists, journalists and others have unmasked corporate and PR created front groups? There clearly needs to be a place for this information to be researched, updated, archived and shared. But where? And how?

We think we’ve found the solution: Disinfopedia.

Disinfopedia (www.disinfopedia.org) is a powerful, interactive web-based encyclopedia of propaganda. The truly unique thing about Disinfopedia.org is its emphasis on collaborative, “open document” writing and editing. This means *anyone* can create and edit *any* article on Disinfopedia. (Yes, that sounds scary, but it works.)

Disinfopedia runs on the same software as Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), a “collaborative project to produce a free and complete encyclopedia in every language.” Wikipedia operates under the “GNU open document license,” which is similar to the “open source” license used to develop free software such as the Linux computer operating system. It’s an increasingly popular model of collaborative scholarship that operates according to surprisingly simple principles. The high standards of thoroughness and accuracy to which Wikipedia aspires are realized by allowing everyone to be a contributor and a peer reviewer.

You might think this would lead to anarchy and gibberish, but the quality of the articles on Wikipedia is generally quite good. For every person who makes a malicious or erroneous contribution, numerous others correct errors and make improvements—exactly like the process by which open source software keeps evolving. Furthermore, we’ve recently hired Australian author and

journalist Bob Burton as Disinfopedia’s online editor, ensuring an even higher degree of accuracy.

Wikipedia was launched in January 2001 and already contains more than 180,000 articles, some of which are comparable in detail and accuracy to the Encyclopedia Britannica. Disinfopedia launched March 2003 with 200 articles seeded by CMD staff. It now contains more than 2,500. This is just the beginning.

***The truly unique thing about
Disinfopedia.org is its emphasis on
collaborative, “open document”
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***This means anyone can create
and edit any article on Disinfopedia.***

Using a similar “open document” strategy, Disinfopedia enables activists, journalists and other researchers to collectively maintain it as a directory of propaganda and disinformation campaigns that seek to influence public opinion and public policy on behalf of corporations, governments and other special interests. Others have previously attempted to develop such a directory, but failed. There are thousands of industry-funded think tanks and front groups, with new ones forming all the time and constant shuffling of personnel. Developing a comprehensive directory of these groups, and keeping it current, requires more time and attention than any existing group or individual can bring to bear on the effort. However, an open document approach can enable a community of volunteers and activists to work collaboratively and develop a resource that becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Beyond the immediate goal of developing a resource on propaganda, we’re hopeful that this global, open-source information project can contribute to the development of an alternative model to conventional, mass-media journalism. Traditional media lend themselves readily to a “propaganda” style of communication, in which a small number of individuals produce messages that are broadcast to thousands or millions of information consumers. The Internet has contributed somewhat to breaking down this dichotomy between “broadcaster” and “audience,” but we think it is possible to take this further. Within the PR and journalism professions, you hear quite a bit of concern about the Internet on grounds that it eliminates the “filter” of professionalism and thereby enables garbage to circulate freely. In reality, the traditional filters don’t do a very good job of eliminating garbage. By breaking down the distinction between audience and journalist, we think it should be possible to demonstrate that “the masses” can do as good a job of “filtering” as the so-called pros. ■

Disinfopedia Quiz

1. For which industry did White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card work before joining the Bush administration?
2. From which industries has the Center for Consumer Freedom received money?
3. *Spiked* online is the descendent of what UK publication?

Answers: 1. The auto industry. Card served as director of government affairs at General Motors (1999-2000) and as president and CEO American Automobile Manufacturers Association (1993-1998). 2. Tobacco, restaurant, livestock, soft drink, and agribusiness. 3. *Living Marxism*. *Spiked* is the online organ of the pro-biotech Institute of Ideas.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

From *Disinfopedia*: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Disinfopedia:Overview_FAQ

WHAT IS "DISINFORMATION"?

Like many good questions, this is hard to answer. It may be easier to answer questions like "At what point does opinion or advocacy become disinformation?" or "Can history or ideology remain simplified without being disinforming?" Such distinctions are studied in the fields of conceptual metaphor, information warfare, psychological operations, scientific method, historical method and the sociology of knowledge. One distinction that most students of these topics accept is that someone with an economic self-interest is rarely a neutral observer.

IS DISINFORMATION JUST LYING?

No. The word "lying" usually implies a teller's awareness of spreading untruths. Long study in psychology, e.g. false memory syndrome and groupthink, suggests that honest advocates of a view can rarely tell when they have accepted some questionable premise or evidence along with the valid evidence for that view. Such views may reflect not a desire to disinform, but rather a biased mind-set or paradigm where some central dogma has become accepted as true.

WHY ARE PR FIRMS A THREAT?

Public relations, the profession that trades in "perception management" and in altering mindsets and conceptual metaphors in public life, often has both economic self-interest and a commitment to a point of view. Thus an active scrutiny of activities and ethical codes of such professions is advised: the statements it produces must

usually be considered disinformation by definition, at least by opponents, until proven otherwise.

WHAT IS THE DISINFOPEDIA'S ROLE IN INCREASING PUBLIC SCRUTINY?

Because of its global scope and experience with prior projects like Wikipedia and others by *PR Watch*, a project like Disinfopedia may be able to support the public scrutiny process more effectively than was possible with prior methods. If not, that will become obvious and a more effective successor that will serve public purposes better can evolve, learning from this project's flaws and successes.

WHAT IS "WIKI"?

A WikiWiki is a collection of interlinked web pages, any of which can be visited and edited by anyone at any time using collaborative software. The concept and software was invented by Ward Cunningham.

WHAT IF SOMEONE TRIES TO VANDALIZE OR INSERT DISINFORMATION INTO THE DISINFOPEDIA ITSELF?

The Center for Media and Democracy, which sponsors Disinfopedia, has other channels through which we can expose people who attempt to manipulate its content, such as the Center's *PR Watch* website and its "Weekly Spin" email. The Disinfopedia software also includes a number of features that make it possible to detect and manage vandalism. In keeping with our phi-

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or to book a speaker,
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losophy of creating a community-based “information commons,” these features enable the entire community of Internet users to collaborate in overseeing its content, in effect serving as a sort of online “neighborhood watch committee”:

1. Visitors to the site are invited to create individual user IDs. This makes it easy to track the editing activities of each logged-in user. Anonymous contributions by users who do not log in receive closer scrutiny than known and trusted users.

2. Logged-in users can create their own individual “watch lists” that let them keep an eye on articles that they feel deserve particular monitoring. They can also call up a list of all recent changes to the entire site.

3. The software keeps an archive of all past versions of each article, making it easy to undo malicious or misguided changes by reverting to a previous version.

4. Trusted users can be given “sysop” status, which lets them ban users who engage in vandalism. If a particular page becomes a target for repeat vandalism attempts, sysops can also mark that page as “protected,” so that only other sysops can change it.

5. There are means for public accountability of the sysops and others with privileges, for now by notifying disinfopedia@prwatch.org of activities you consider to be endangering the public policy purpose of the service as described above.

SINCE ANYONE CAN ADD INFORMATION, WHY SHOULD ANYONE TRUST THE DISINFOPEDIA AS AUTHORITATIVE?

As the authors of a book titled *Trust Us, We're Experts*, *PR Watch* editors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber have given quite a bit of thought to the question of what makes information credible. Disinfopedia intentionally avoids invoking “trusted authority figures.” Instead, its credibility will depend on the degree to which articles are well-written and backed with supporting documentation.

HOW WILL THE DISINFOPEDIA ADDRESS QUESTIONS OF BIAS, PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS?

Rather than using the terminology of “objectivity” or a “neutral point of view,” we prefer the concepts of “fairness and accuracy.” It is “fair and accurate,” for example, to say that most climate scientists believe human activities are contributing to global warming, so there is no need to take a “neutral point of view” with regard to this question. Of course, bias is an issue in any information system, but Disinfopedia’s users will constitute

a community of peers whose combined influence helps compensate for the bias of single individuals.

As an “encyclopedia of propaganda,” Disinfopedia is bound to deal with controversial topics. However, the Wikipedia system upon which it is based has shown considerable ability to produce articles that examine controversial topics in a fair and accurate way. Indeed, some of the most controversial topics yield the best articles.

WHEN DID DISINFOPEDIA START?

On December 18, 2002, *PR Watch* editor Sheldon Rampton attended a conference in Amsterdam hosted by World-Information.org and first learned about the successful Wikipedia project to develop a free open content encyclopedia. Using Wikipedia as a model, he created Disinfopedia in January 2003. The project was publicly launched on March 10, 2003.

WHO OWNS DISINFOPEDIA?

The owner of the server and the domain names is the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD). However, the articles are released by their authors under the GNU Free Documentation License, so the articles are open content. Therefore, it cannot be said that the owner of Disinfopedia articles is CMD. See “Disinfopedia:Copyrights” and “Disinfopedia:Readers’ FAQ” for information on how you can use Disinfopedia content. (Please note, however, that other articles on the *PR Watch* website remain copyrighted property of the Center for Media and Democracy and should not be used without permission.)

If you are writing an article or book and are using information from Disinfopedia, we suggest citing the Disinfopedia article as the source along with its URL and the date when you visited it.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ARTICLES ON DISINFOPEDIA?

The Disinfopedia is a collaborative endeavor. Many people have contributed to different parts of this project, and anyone can do so—including you! All you need to know is how to edit a page.

You can learn who is responsible for the most recent versions of any given page by clicking on the “Older versions” link. But remember, if you spot an error in the latest revision and you don’t correct it, then you share responsibility for the error. So be bold in updating pages!

If you are uncertain or find the wording confusing, quote the material on the associated talk page and leave a question for the next more knowledgeable reader or editor. This helps eliminate errors, inaccuracies or misleading wording more quickly and is highly appreciated by the collaborative online community. Thank you! ■

GETTING STARTED ON Disinfopedia

by Laura Miller

Imagine that a hypothetical national non-profit organization called “Biosolids for a Solid Future” (BSF) just opened a branch in your town and is promoting the use of “biosolids” as fertilizer in your community. Having read *Toxic Sludge is Good For You*, you know “biosolids” is an industry term for sewage sludge and there are health and environmental risks associated with it. But in an op-ed piece in the town paper, a representative from BSF says biosolids are “an inexpensive and green solution for local farmers’ and landscapers’ fertilizing needs.”

Being curious about BSF and internet-savvy, you start to collect information on the group. After doing a few internet searches you come across a Disinfopedia entry on “biosolids.” You also find an article called “How to research front groups.” From that, you learn how to look up BSF’s IRS filings and website domain name registrations. What you discover is that BSF has links to a waste industry trade group. You write a letter-to-the-editor calling BSF a front for the waste industry, inspiring a feisty reporter at the paper to investigate. One thing leads to another, BSF’s cover is blown and they quietly close up shop.

A happy ending! Or is it? BSF goes on to open an office in another town in another state. Luckily you’ve already thought of that and have created a Disinfopedia article for Biosolids for a Solid Future. Your research is therefore available to a much wider audience, including BSF’s next target.

Front groups and other PR tactics lose their effectiveness when they are exposed. As people track and share information about disinformation campaigns, it becomes easier to pull them from backroom darkness into the harsh light of public scrutiny. CMD’s Disinfopedia makes it easy for average citizens to be part of this truth seeking process.

If you want to use Disinfopedia, first check out its “Welcome, newcomers” page. (There’s a link to it on the main Disinfopedia page, at www.disinfopedia.org.) Creating Disinfopedia articles is easy, so the best way to learn how is by simply doing it. We’ve posted a number of “help” and “frequently asked questions” pages, discussing the ins and outs of posting article and outlining style and formatting conventions.

To make it as simple as possible, Disinfopedia runs on a “wiki” software platform that minimizes the need for any special computer skills. You will want to learn a handful of wiki markups that allow you to write and edit an entry so it looks sharp in any web browser. The markups help organize your article with headings, bold and italicized words, lists with bullet points, and hyperlinks to both Disinfopedia pages and off-site resources.

New pages are created by linking from a pre-existing, topically related page. So in the above example, you would first go to the “Biosolids” page and click “edit this page.” Using simple wiki mark-ups, you would create a reference with a link to “Biosolids for a Solid Future,” even though that article doesn’t yet exist. Clicking on the new link will then open an editor window, which allows you to enter the text for the new page. Creating new entries this way avoids creating “orphan” pages (which have no links pointing to them), helping to maintain a generally high level of connectedness within the Disinfopedia.

It is important to write articles that focus on documented facts. Please include thorough citations for the supporting facts in your articles. You should also avoid rhetorical or inflammatory language. If you are using or defining a rhetorical or inflammatory term then you should explain it in an article where it can be put in context and balance can be introduced.

An “encyclopedia of propaganda,” by its very nature, is bound to attract controversy and debate. Running parallel to every Disinfopedia article is a “talk” page where users can post a critique of an article, make suggestions for improving it, or explain changes that they have made. Any discussion about topics should be mainly directed at improving articles to the point where they are useful to journalists, activists, and researchers. If you are taking a position on an issue, take it early and overtly so others can see your declared bias. In time we expect multiple points of view to fully develop and compete in a lively but civil fashion.

To work together effectively in building the encyclopedia, the Disinfopedia community has some established policies and guidelines:

- *Be fair.* Propagandists engage in selective presentation of evidence. Articles written for the Disinfopedia should strive for a higher standard, by summarizing all evidence and points of view accurately and thoroughly.
- *Don’t infringe copyrights.* Disinfopedia is a free encyclopedia licenced under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. Submitting the work of others without the copyright holder’s permission is illegal and threatens our goal of building a truly free encyclopedia that anyone can redistribute.
- *Respect other contributors.* Disinfopedia contributors may come from many different countries and cultures, and have widely different views. By treating others with respect we are able to cooperate effectively in building an encyclopedia.

- *Follow conventions.* By following conventions on such things as editing and naming articles, we are able to produce a more consistent and usable encyclopedia.

New contributors are always welcome to Disinfope-dia, and you are encouraged to be bold in editing pages. Don't worry much about making mistakes. It is unlikely that a new user can mess up things too much. Plus, there are always other users checking on new posts and recent changes. If something is wrong, it can be corrected. If something is deleted, it can be retrieved. Look at other articles for cues on formatting and wiki markups. Check back on your work to see how others have improved it. If you're curious about the pages other people are working on, visit the "Recent changes" page.

There is no credentialing process for the Disinfope-dia and you don't even need to log in to start writing arti-cles. Nonetheless, we think registering on the Disinfope-dia is a good idea. Visit the Userlogin page to create your user ID. Practical reasons for doing this:

- It allows you to set and save Disinfope-dia preferences.
- It credits your work in the article history, as well as on Disinfope-dia's "recent changes" page.
- You get a personal Disinfope-dia page for your user name, which you can use this as a spot to tell people about yourself or list the articles you've worked on.
- Finally, it is much easier for your fellow Disinfope-dians to interact with you if you have a registered user name. ■

COLLABORATORS WANTED!

People like you make Disinfope-dia.org a pow-erful resource against disinformation and propa-ganda. To reach its full potential, hundreds of activists, journalists, researchers, and concerned cit-izens need to be involved, tracking corporate and government spin, linking front groups to industry, turning the Disinfope-dia into a comprehensive directory of deceptive PR. The more people are involved, the more useful information it contains and the better protected it is against vandalism and corruption.

The Disinfope-dia needs more articles about the disinformation campaigns being waged against environmentalists, social justice groups, public health advocates, peace activists, farmers and others. If you have experience in these areas, or if you're just curious and willing to do some research, you're heartily invited to contribute.

No special background is needed to become part of the growing community of Disinfope-dians. All you need is the desire to collaborate on a proj-ect dedicated to supporting increased public scrutiny of our institutions, exposing the manipu-lation of public opinion by government and indus-try, and hopefully, paving the way to more democracy and justice.

WATER ENVIRONMENT FEDERATION

From Disinfope-dia: http://www.disinfope-dia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Water_Environment_Federation

The *Water Environment Federation* (WEF) is the main national trade, lobby and PR association for U.S. sewage treatment plants. It has been aggressively involved in pro-moting the so-called "beneficial use" of sewage sludge for fertilizer. To avoid the negative connotations associ-ated with the word "sludge," WEF invented the euphemism "biosolids."

WEF gave PR agent Steve Frank of Metro Wastewater Reclamation District (Denver, Colorado) an award for his PR work which included a campaign designed to malign and attack one of the sewage agency's own board members, Adrienne Anderson, a University of Colorado Environmental Ethics teacher, appointed to represent workers' safety and health concerns. Anderson had turned federal whistleblower, revealing the agency's secret deal to accept wastes from a Superfund Site—the infamous Lowry Landfill southeast of Denver—as

acceptable ingredients for its biosolids product meant to be spread on farmland, parks and public recreation areas in Colorado. Among the permitted ingredients allowed to be part of Metro Wastewater's "MetroGro" fertilizer is plutonium, a radioactive chemical element. Federal Judge David W. Dinardi ruled that Metro Wastewater's campaign against Anderson was illegal and ordered puni-tive damages for actions that "shock the conscience." Among the actions for which the agency was found guilty were lies under oath about the WEF award to Metro Wastewater for its smear campaign against Anderson.

EXTERNAL LINKS

- Eileen Welsome, "Dirty Secrets,"
http://www.westword.com/special_reports/lowry/index.html
- Project Censored,
<http://www.projectcensored.org/stories/2001/9.html> ■

INDUSTRY-FUNDED ORGANIZATIONS

From Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Industry-funded_organizations

An *industry-funded organization* often acts as a mouthpiece for views that serve the industry's economic interests. Industry-funded organizations come in many shapes and sizes. These include trade associations, think tanks, non-profit advocacy groups, and media outlets. Some of these organizations serve as "third parties" for public relations campaigns. The third party technique has been defined by one PR executive as putting "your words in someone else's mouth."

Many organizations purport to represent one agenda while in reality they serve some other party or interest whose sponsorship is hidden or rarely mentioned. For example, the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF), which has a lengthy entry in Disinfopedia, claims its mission is to defend the rights of consumers to choose to eat, drink and smoke as they please. In reality, CCF is a front group for the tobacco, restaurant, soft drink and alcoholic beverage industries and agribusiness, which provide most of its funding.

Not all organizations engaged in manipulative efforts to shape public opinion can be classified as "front

groups." For example, the now-defunct Tobacco Institute was highly deceptive, but it didn't hide the fact that it represented the tobacco industry.

There are also degrees of concealment. The Global Climate Coalition, for example, didn't hide the fact that its funding came from oil and coal companies, but nevertheless its name alone is sufficiently misleading that it can reasonably be considered a front group.

This sort of manipulation doesn't necessarily entail outright *lies of commission*, but it typically entails *lies of omission* that disguise the identity of the message's sponsor. The use of the third party technique tends to corrupt journalism, science and the other institutions that it touches.

Moreover, using lies of omission rather than commission enables the people who participate in front groups to rationalize that they aren't really doing anything wrong. The logic of the third party technique implies that when PR firms set out to manufacture news, they often want to keep their clients (and themselves) out of the story. ■

CITIZENS FOR BETTER MEDICARE

From Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Citizens_for_Better_Medicare

Citizens for Better Medicare (CBM) calls itself "a grassroots organization representing the interests of patients, seniors, disabled Americans, large and small businesses, pharmaceutical research companies and many others concerned with Medicare reform." Public Citizen calls it "a collection of shells, seedy direct-mail operatives and industry-funded research and lobby groups working in tight coordination with the drug lobby."

A coalition founded and largely financed by the pharmaceutical industry, CBM has sponsored television and newspaper ads that lobby against efforts to add a drug benefit to Medicare. Several ads feature "Flo," an arthritic bowler who warns Congress not to let "big government" into her medicine cabinet. Another ad portrays a tour bus en route from Canada to the US in search of a better deal on prescription drugs. (Actually, US citizens, in large numbers, cross the borders—often on special bus tours—to Canada and Mexico to buy drugs.)

PERSONNEL

- CBM's original director was Tim Ryan, a former marketing director for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA).
- Nona Wegner is CBM's current executive director and a registered lobbyist for the group. Wegner has represented other industry front groups including the

Seniors Coalition and the Council for Affordable Health Insurance.

FUNDING

According to the CBM website, "Members of Citizens for Better Medicare include the Kidney Cancer Association, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, United Seniors Association as well as more than 300,000 individual supporters."

Public Citizen says that PhRMA "budgeted at least \$65 million for television advertising since July 1999" through CBM.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Citizens for Better Medicare
P.O. Box 34337
Washington, DC 20043
Phone: 202-872-8627
Fax: 1-800-767-7198
www.bettermedicare.org

OTHER RESOURCES

- John McCoy, "Citizens for Better Medicare: The Truth Behind the Drug Industry's Deception of America's Seniors," *Public Citizen*, June 2000. ■

HOW TO RESEARCH FRONT GROUPS

From *Disinfopedia*: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=How_to_research_front_groups

PR Watch editors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber have written several books about the public relations industry that can be helpful research sources, in particular *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry* and *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles With Your Future*. The Center's website also contains searchable archives of *PR Watch*, daily news items dating back several years in our "Spin of the Day" section, and a public discussion forum.

The PR trade press is another good source for information. Leading publications include *O'Dwyer's PR* (www.odwyerpr.com), *PR Week* (www.prweek.com), and the *Holmes Report* (www.holmesreport.com). If you have access to Lexis/Nexis be sure to include PR trade publications in your search.

In addition to looking for information on specific companies and their PR firms, you can broaden your inquiry somewhat by finding out what trade associations and coalitions the companies belong to, e.g., the American Chemistry Council, Biotechnology Industry Organization, etc. Often PR initiatives for polluting industries are handled by their trade associations rather than by the companies directly. This gives the individual companies a layer of plausible deniability while enabling their trade associations to play hardball.

These are all avenues for getting at the behind-the-scenes aspects of your story. When talking about PR, there are always two things you want to look at:

1. the behind-the-scenes stage management and orchestration that the audience isn't intended to see, and
2. the onstage stuff intended for public consumption.

When you're looking at the onstage stuff, ask yourself, "Is this information accurate? Is this spokesperson who claims to be independent actually someone who was recruited by an industry with vested interests in the topic at hand?" If you find questionable statements, try going in through the front door and asking some probing questions. Trace statements and claims to their source.

If the topic you are studying involves cover-ups of environmental and public health risks, there may be trial lawyers who have gone after these companies with toxic tort litigation. Depending on the nature of the litigation, they may even have internal company documents that they are free to disclose. The following websites may also be useful for unmasking front groups and industry-sponsored organizations:

- The *Internet Archive* provides a way of finding web pages that have changed or disappeared:
<http://www.archive.org>

- *Chemical Industry Archives*, a project of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), is a searchable collection of 37,000 pages of internal chemistry industry documents, plus reports written by the EWG detailing the industry's "high-stakes, high-priced public relations war against the American public."
<http://www.chemicalindustryarchives.org>
- The *National Institute on Money in State Politics* maintains a database on campaign contributions at the state election level (not federal offices). Visitors can search across states and by issue as well as by candidate.
<http://www.ncrp.org>
- *Greenwash Information and Resources* provides a list of anti-environmental front groups along with links to background information.
<http://www.mapcruzin.com/greenwash>
- *GuideStar.org* provides an online database with basic financial data, recent IRS tax statements and sometimes other information about more than 700,000 non-profit organizations.
<http://www.guidestar.org>
- *Integrity in Science*, a project of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, maintains a database of scientists and non-profit organizations with ties to industry.
<http://www.cspinet.org/integrity>
- *MediaTransparency.org* maintains online databases of people, recipients, and funders of the conservative movement. Their website has a nifty feature called the Fund-o-Meter, which lets you evaluate any web page on internet against their databases for signs of bias.
<http://www.mediatransparency.org>
- *NSI-WHOIS Lookup* can be used to find out who is sponsoring an internet domain name.
<http://www.networksolutions.com/cgi-bin/whois/whois>
- *Search Systems* maintains a website listing thousands of free, searchable public records databases.
<http://www.searchsystems.net>
- *Legacy National Tobacco Documents Library*. As part of the 1998 attorney generals' settlement with the tobacco industry, tobacco companies were required to create online repositories containing millions of pages of internal tobacco industry documents and to make those documents searchable by keywords including the names of any organizations or people that they mention. In addition to tobacco itself, these documents are a great place to look for information in general about people and organizations that front for industry. The

Legacy National Tobacco Documents Library, which is hosted by the University of California, San Francisco, offers the most comprehensive single place to search tobacco documents. Separate websites also exist for each tobacco company, as well as for some of its front groups.

<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>

- Search *PRSA's Past Winning Silver Anvil Awards*. The Public Relations Society of America every year awards its Silver Anvils to companies and PR firms to "honor the very best in public relations practices." You can search past award-winning campaigns summaries written by entrants.

http://www.prsa.org/_Awards/silver/search.asp?ident=sil1

PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH AND MANUFACTURERS OF AMERICA

From *Disinfopedia*: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Pharmaceutical_Research_and_Manufacturers_of_America

Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) is one of the largest and most influential lobbying organizations in Washington. Representing 48 pharmaceutical companies, PhRMA has 20 registered lobbyists on staff and has contracted with dozens of lobby and PR firms—including Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, Barbour Griffith & Rogers, DCI Group, Edelman and Bonner & Associates—to promote its members' interests. PhRMA has a record of hiding its lobbying and PR activities, often by paying other organizations, such as United Seniors Association (USA) or the Consumer Alliance, to advocate industry-friendly policies.

On its website PhRMA states that its "mission is winning advocacy for public policies that encourage the discovery of life-saving and life-enhancing new medicines for patients by pharmaceutical/biotechnology research companies. To accomplish this mission, PhRMA is dedicated to achieving in Washington, DC, the states and the world: broad patient access to safe and effective medicines through a free market, without price controls; strong intellectual property incentives; and transparent, efficient, regulation and a free flow of information to patients."

The February 2003 issue of the *AARP Bulletin* reported: "Three nonprofit organizations that claim to speak for older Americans are in fact heavily bankrolled by the pharmaceutical industry, an examination of tax records by the *AARP Bulletin* shows. United Seniors Association, for example, got more than a third of its funds in 2001 from drug-industry sources. The big donors included Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the industry's trade association; Citizens for Better Medicare, a PhRMA-funded nonprofit group; and Pfizer Inc. Total industry contributions: at least \$3.1 million."

PhRMA lobbying activities have extended outside of the United States. "America's big drug companies are intensifying their lobbying efforts to 'change the Canadian health-care system' and eliminate subsidized prescription drug prices enjoyed by Canadians," CanWest News Service reported on June 9, 2003. "A prescription

drug industry spokesman in Washington confirmed to CanWest News Service that information contained in confidential industry documents is accurate and that \$1 million US is being added to the already heavily funded drug lobby against the Canadian system." PhRMA was the leading drug industry trade group behind the increased lobbying and PR campaign. PhRMA was also independently spending \$450,000 to target the booming Canadian Internet pharmacy industry, which has been providing Americans with prescription drugs at lower prices than in the United States.

CONTACT

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EXTERNAL LINKS

- Nicholas Confessore, "Meet the Press: How James Glassman Reinvented journalism—As Lobbying", *Washington Monthly*, December 2003.
- Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Drug Lobby Pushed Letter By Senators On Medicare", *New York Times*, July 30, 2003, p. A15.
- Jim VandeHei and Juliet Eilperin, "Drug Firms Gain Church Group's Aid Claim About Import Measure Stirs Anger", *Washington Post*, July 23, 2003, p. A1.
- Tim Craig, "Community Leaders Decry Lobby Firm's Fax", *Baltimore Sun*, March 9, 2002.
- Peter H. Stone, "PhRMA Fights Back", *National Journal*, July 21, 2001.
- Julian Borger, "USA: The Pharmaceutical Industry Stalks the Corridors of Power", *Guardian Unlimited*, February 13, 2001. ■

Think Tanks

From Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Think_tanks

A *think tank* is an organization that claims to serve as a center for research and analysis of important public issues. In reality, many think tanks are little more than public relations fronts, usually headquartered in state or national seats of government and generating self-serving scholarship that serves the advocacy goals of their industry sponsors. In the words of *Yellow Times.org* columnist John Chuckman, they are “phony institutes where ideologue-propagandists pose as academics . . . [into which] money gushes like blood from opened arteries to support meaningless advertising’s suffocation of genuine debate.” Of course, some think tanks are more legitimate than that. Private funding does not necessarily make a researcher a shill, and some think-tanks produce worthwhile public policy research. In general, however, research from think tanks is ideologically driven in accordance with the interests of its funders.

“We’ve got think tanks the way other towns have firehouses,” *Washington Post* columnist Joel Achenbach once said. “This is a thoughtful town. A friend of mine worked at a think tank temporarily and the director told him when he entered, ‘We are white men between the ages of 50 and 55, and we have no place else to go.’”

Think tanks are funded primarily by large businesses and major foundations. They devise and promote policies that shape the lives of everyday Americans: Social Security privatization, tax and investment laws, regulation of everything from oil to the Internet. They supply experts to testify on Capitol Hill, write articles for op-ed pages of newspapers, and appear as TV commentators. They advise presidential aspirants and lead orientation seminars to train members of Congress.

Think tanks have a decided political leaning. There are twice as many right-wing think tanks as leftist ones,

and the conservative ones generally have more money. This is no accident, since one of the important functions of think tanks is to provide a backdoor way for wealthy business interests to promote their ideas or to support economic and sociological research not taking place elsewhere that they feel may turn out in their favor.

“Modern think tanks are nonprofit, tax-exempt, political idea factories where donations can be as big as the donor’s checkbook and are seldom publicized,” notes Tom Brazaitis, writing for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. “Technology companies give to think tanks that promote open access to the internet. Wall Street firms donate to think tanks that espouse private investment of retirement funds.” So much money now flows in, that the top 20 conservative think tanks now spend more money than all of the “soft money” contributions to the Republican party.

A think tank’s resident experts carry titles such as “senior fellow” or “adjunct scholar,” but this does not necessarily mean that they even possess an academic degree in their area of claimed expertise. Outside funding can corrupt the integrity of academic institutions. The same corrupting influences affect think tanks, only more so. Think tanks are like universities minus the students and minus the systems of peer review and other mechanisms that academia uses to promote diversity of thought. Real academics are expected to conduct their research first and draw their conclusions second, but this process is often reversed at most policy-driven think tanks. As economist Jonathan Rowe has observed, the term “think” tanks is a misnomer. His comment was directed at the conservative Heritage Foundation, but it applies equally well to many other think tanks, regardless of ideology: “They don’t think; they justify.” ■

AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

From Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=American_Enterprise_Institute

The *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research* is a think tank founded in 1943 whose stated mission is to support the “foundations of freedom - limited government, private enterprise, vital cultural and political institutions, and a strong foreign policy and national defense.” It has emerged as one of the leading architects of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. AEI rents office space to the Project for the New American Century, one of the leading voices that pushed the Bush administration’s plan for “regime change” through war in Iraq. AEI reps have also aggressively denied that the war has anything to do with oil.

In June 2003, AEI and another right-wing group, the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies, launched a new website, called *NGOWatch.org*, to critique the funding, operations and agendas of international nongovernmental organizations, and particularly their alleged efforts to constrain US freedom of action in international affairs and influence the behavior of corporations abroad. According to AEI, “The extraordinary growth of advocacy NGOs in liberal democracies has the potential to undermine the sovereignty of constitutional democracies, as well as the effectiveness of credible NGOs.”

Ralph Nader responds, “What they are condemning, with vague, ironic regulatory nostrums proposed against dissenting citizen groups, is democracy itself.”

PERSONNEL

- Douglas J. Besharov, Resident Scholar and a Professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Maryland.
- Robert H. Bork, Senior Fellow and rejected Reagan Supreme Court nominee.
- Karlyn Bowman, Resident Fellow.
- Montgomery Brown, publication staff member.
- Virginia Bryant, publication staff member.
- Kathryn Burrows, publication staff member.
- Lynne Cheney, the wife of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, is an AEI senior fellow.
- Richard Cohen penned a vociferous response to Dennis Kucinich’s assertion that the war is about oil.
- Diana Furchtgott-Roth, Resident Fellow and co-author of *Women’s Figures*.
- Michael Fumento
- Newt Gingrich, Senior Fellow and former Speaker of the House [1995-1999].
- Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, Senior Fellow and former U.S. Representative to the United Nations [1981-1985].
- Kenneth Krattenmaker, publication staff member.
- Michael Ledeen
- Juayne Linger
- John R. Lott, Jr. is a relentless opponent of gun control and the author of a book titled “More Guns, Less Crime.”
- Michael Novak has spent the past twenty years or so working to build a new American Catholicism; one that revolves around unhinged capitalism and the power of the CEO, and countering the religion’s traditional mission of social justice and service to the poor.
- Richard Perle is also a vocal media supporter of the war.
- Lee Raymond, CEO of ExxonMobil, is the vice chair of AEI’s board of trustees.
- Nazanin Samari, Research Assistant.
- Leigh Tripoli
- Ben J. Wattenberg, Senior Fellow and host of the PBS series Think Tank.

FUNDING

The Coors Foundation has been a funder of AEI. Between 1985 and 2001, AEI also received \$29,653,933 from the following funding sources:

- Castle Rock Foundation
- Earhart Foundation
- John M. Olin Foundation, Inc.
- Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation
- Philip M. McKenna Foundation, Inc.
- Scaife Foundations (Scaife Family, Sarah Mellon Scaife, Carthage)
- Smith Richardson Foundation
- Philip Morris

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PUBLICATIONS

AEI publishes *American Enterprise*, a bi-monthly review of politics, business, and culture:

<http://www.theamericanenterprise.org/>

EXTERNAL LINKS

- Scholars & Fellows — List of Scholars and Fellows from AEI web site.
- Archive of Scholars and Fellows pages from web.archive.org
- Media Transparency — For a funding history of AEI.
- Brian Whitaker, “US Think Tanks Give Lessons in Foreign Policy,” *Guardian* (UK), August 19, 2002. ■

PLEASE CONSIDER US IN YOUR Will

Bequests can be designated to the non-profit
Center for Media & Democracy
520 University Avenue, Suite 227
Madison, WI 53703

Help Peel the BANANA Republicans

From Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Banana_Republicans

PR Watch editors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber are working on a new book, titled *Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing Is Turning America Into a One-Party State*. As they did with their previous bestselling book, *Weapons of Mass Deception*, Rampton and Stauber aim to show how propaganda and public relations are undermining democracy and the public interest. *Banana Republicans* will investigate how the “right-wing conspiracy,” as represented by the GOP and its mouthpieces in media, lobbying groups, and the legal system, is undermining dissent and squelching pluralistic politics in America.

THE PROBLEM

The U.S. budget surplus has turned into a massive deficit, billions of taxpayer dollars are funneled into the coffers of Halliburton, millions of jobs have been lost, fears grip the nation, and we are embroiled in two overseas military entanglements with no end in sight. Outside our borders, anti-American sentiment has reached unprecedented levels.

For the first time in living memory, a single party, Republican, controls every major institution of the federal government: the White House, the Supreme Court, the Senate and House of Representatives—not to mention the “fourth branch of government,” the mass media. How did this come to pass? Is it a good thing for the country?

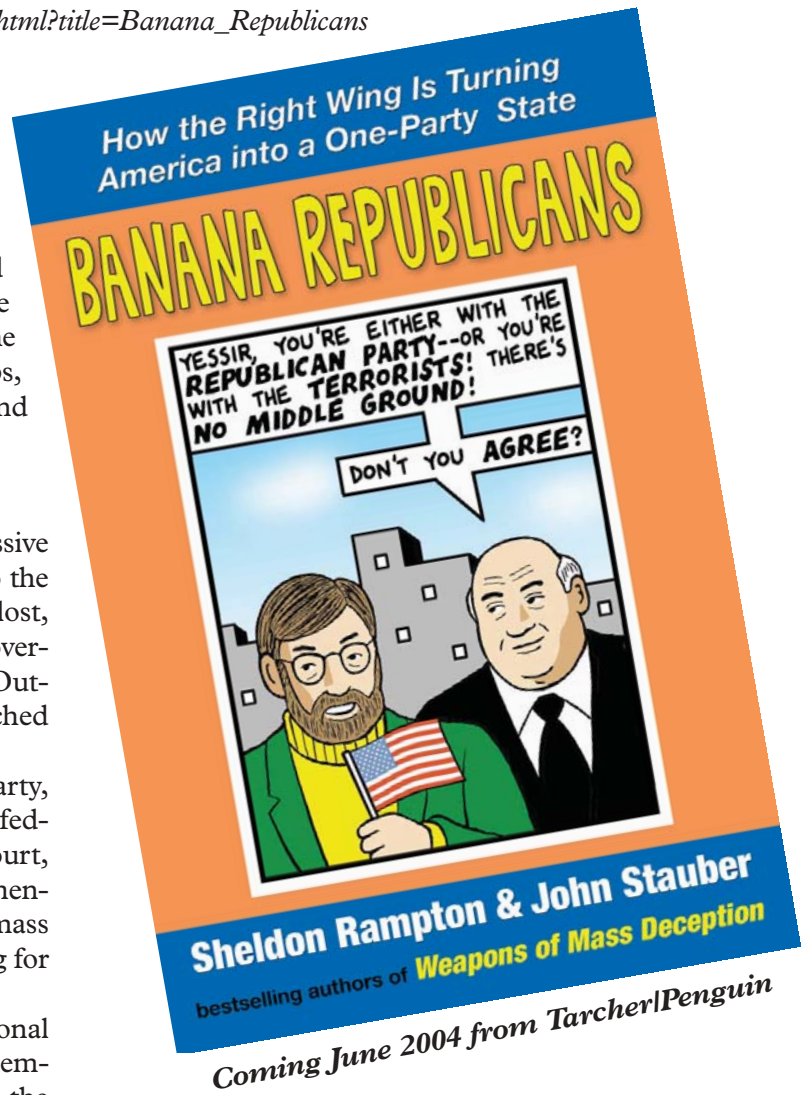
Banana Republicans will investigate how the national GOP maintains its hold on power through the systematic manipulation of the electoral system, the courts, the media, and the lobbying establishment.

TOPICS TO BE EXPLORED

- The rise of the far right
- The plumbers of public opinion
- Undermining elections
- The echo chamber
- Subverting the courts
- The one-party state
- Treating dissent as treason
- War on activism
- The loyal opposition

HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help with the research for the book by contributing your knowledge to the articles linked to the



“Banana Republicans” page. Of course, the actual content of the published book may differ from the summary in Disinfopedia, depending in part on the research and ideas that you provide.

Authors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber will appreciate any information that you add, but will of course do their own fact-checking and synthesis, using their own research and analysis to determine which information is appropriate for inclusion in the book. While they will not be able to acknowledge (except in the aggregate) individuals who contribute information via Disinfopedia which is incorporated into the book, we hope that you will consider participating in what we see as an important experiment in developing democratic information systems.

As with past books written by Rampton and Stauber, all royalties and other proceeds from the sale of *Banana Republicans* will go to their employer, the non-profit Center for Media & Democracy. ■