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## Keeping America Safe from Democracy

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

During the 1998 elections, a frightening new trend in the public relations industry's efforts to manipulate democracy has come to fruition. Throughout the United States, corporations and other vested interests have dumped hundreds of millions of dollars of "soft money" into hard-hitting TV advertisements attacking one candidate or praising another.

What makes these soft money ads different from the political propaganda in past elections is that there are no financial limits, no reporting requirements, and business can spend secretly and directly to determine an election's outcome. Journalists and the public often have no way of knowing which wealthy interests are backing these sophisticated political ads, because they hide behind cleverly invented names

*continued on next page*

## Flack Attack

Is it real grassroots democracy, or is it corporate "astroturf," the appearance of democracy bought and paid for with millions of dollars from wealthy special interests? Unfortunately, it's astroturf.

The marriage and merger of PR and politics over the past two decades has spawned scores of PR/lobby firms that can (given enough cash) create the appearance of citizen involvement, while in fact driving genuine grassroots activism into the far dark corner, drowning it out of the political debate.

The current U.S. political process is a sham, a disgrace and dangerous to democracy. What used to involve citizens now primarily involves wealthy individuals and interest groups; the citizenry simply votes, and then only a minority of those eligible.

This may seem an extreme assessment, but it's easily documented by a mountain of sad but solid statistics that confirm the steadily increasing cost of running for office; the demise of face-to-face candidate appearances and debates; and the funding of most campaigns by a small number of rich individuals and groups that provide most of the billions now spent on elections.

Efforts to reform the process are caught in the most hellish of Catch-22s. Incumbent politicians are part of a two-party monopoly that benefits from the process, yet they are the officials in charge of deciding whether to pass campaign finance reforms that would eliminate the corrupt advantages that won them their power.

How bad can it get? Unfortunately, much worse. Media pundits chide the public for failing to clean up the process, ignoring the gulf that separates the public from the levers of power. Of course, media corporations are not disinterested parties. Many of the billions spent on elections land in their coffers, paying for the barrage of brief and often nasty and misleading advertisements from candidates and interest groups.

As this election subsides, and the predictable results are tallied (most incumbents will be re-elected, spending records will be shattered, a stay-at-home-don't-vote majority will be larger than ever), remember that for political operatives the campaign frenzy continues behind the scenes. It is carried on daily through the astroturf activities described in this issue.

This ain't democracy, folks; it ain't even close.

such as “Citizens for Reform,” “Citizens for the Republic Education Fund” and “Coalition for Our Children’s Future.”

These anonymous groups are the latest incarnation of the PR industry’s genius at creating phony “grassroots” political movements. Unfortunately, court rulings have exempted these groups from the reporting requirements that apply to candidates themselves and to political action committees (PACs).

Federal judges have ruled that “issue advocacy advertising campaigns” which blast or praise a candidate can be broadcast during election races, provided that the TV spots do not specifically advocate *voting* for or against a particular candidate. This giant loophole allows corporations a secretive way to flood the TV market with hundreds of millions of dollars of advertising clearly designed to influence the outcome of elections.

Look for this powerful new type of “astroturf organizing” to grow in future elections as scores of opportunistic PR firms promote this new business avenue among their corporate clients. More and more wealthy interests will invent civic-sounding names for front groups. These names, pasted on the bottom of TV ads, create the illusion that some genuine citizen-based movement is behind the campaign, when in reality the “citizen coalition” is just a small number of wealthy clients and corporations.

Ironically, the court rulings have been based on defending the constitutional rights of citizens to speak out on important issues during electoral campaigns. In the real world, however, the effect has been to further disenfranchise citizens by providing yet another way for vested interests to corrupt the electoral process.

## FROM GRASSROOTS TO GRAY SUITS

In the 1960s, grassroots organizing was part and parcel of what came to be known as the “New Left,” as civil rights and peace activists, feminists and environmentalists pioneered new techniques for mobilizing everyday citizens to confront corporate and government powers-that-be.

Saul Alinsky, a Chicago community organizer, emerged as one of the leading grassroots strategists of the period. Inspired more by Thomas Paine than Karl Marx,

***The Clinton Group (no relation to the President) is one of the Washington firms that specializes in “grassroots organizing” for corporate clients. These pages from their promotional literature typify the high-tech nature of the business.***

Alinsky saw politics as a struggle between “Haves” and “Have-Nots.” The “Haves” are people with money who therefore are able to buy political power. The “Have-Nots,” however, have another potential source of power: strength in numbers at the grassroots, based on the fact that the “Haves” are usually a tiny minority. By mobilizing “Have-Nots” to act collectively and in unison, Alinsky was able to win victories for poor people.

Today the public relations industry, not concerned citizens, organizes the biggest and most effective “grassroots citizen campaigns” that lobby Washington, and state and local governments. Unlike Alinsky’s campaigns, today’s industry-generated movements are controlled by the “Haves.”

“The heirs of Saul Alinsky can be on both sides of the equation,” say PR consultants Edward Grefe and Martin Linsky, who have chronicled the rise of what they call a “new breed of guerrilla warriors” in their 1995 book, *The New Corporate Activism*. “The essence of this new way,” they argue, “is to marry 1990s communication and information technology with 1960s grassroots organizing techniques.”

## ROBOTS TALKING TO OTHER ROBOTS

The high-tech strategies of corporate grassroots, touted in promotional brochures and company how-to guides, sound more like computer geek-talk than the “power to the people” rhetoric of the 1960s. RTCdirect, a grassroots PR firm located in Washington’s notorious K Street lobbyist corridor, boasts of capabilities including “public opinion surveys, cluster analysis, . . . laser-

personalized direct mail, inbound/outbound telemarketing, broadcast fax and email, Web site creation, focus groups . . . message creation, printing, mailhousing, shipping and mailing, operating telephone banks, capturing the response data. . . . We can use interactive and voice-recognition technologies that reduce or eliminate the need for live operators to minimize costs while providing maximum access.”

“The database, the cornerstone of today’s marketing communications, is also the heart of grassroots communications,” explains corporate grassroots consultant Richard Stone. “It enables users to *know* their customers. Direct marketers know what, where, how often, how much and why people buy, as well as their income level, number of children, home ownership status, car preferences and a host of other individualized demographic and psychographic characteristics. . . . Equally detailed information on attitudes towards issues and political figures can be pulled up by grassroots practitioners.”

“Psychographics” refers to a technique for using statistical data to make educated guesses about people’s opinions, based on other facts that are already known. It is used in tandem with “merge-purge,” a technique for combining information about a single individual from multiple databases.

“If phone numbers are not included, they can easily be added,” Stone says. “You can also run your list against FEC contributions data and state voter files to determine, for example, which business owners are making sizeable political contributions. . . . You might even

run the list against cluster-based geodemographic targeting data.”

Using these techniques, a grassroots PR firm can generate a list of likely supporters overnight for its client’s cause. The trick then is to transform these hypothetical supporters into “activists” who will actually phone or write to exert constituent pressure on a targeted government official. This transformation is accomplished through standard telemarketing, combined with a technique known as “patch-through.”

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***“The essence of this new way is to marry 1990s communication and information technology with 1960s grassroots organizing techniques.”***

**Edward Grefe and Martin Linsky**

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Using phone banks, calls are made to each name on the list. After a brief conversation to determine whether the constituent agrees with the pitch, the telemarketer offers to connect him or her immediately with the targeted official. A push of the button later, the citizen is electronically “patched through” to his or her elected official, and the telemarketer is on to the next call. This ensures that the newly motivated activist actually makes good on the commitment to call—and does so while the lobbyist’s arguments are fresh in mind. Lobbyists can even silently monitor the conversation, if they stay on the three-way call.

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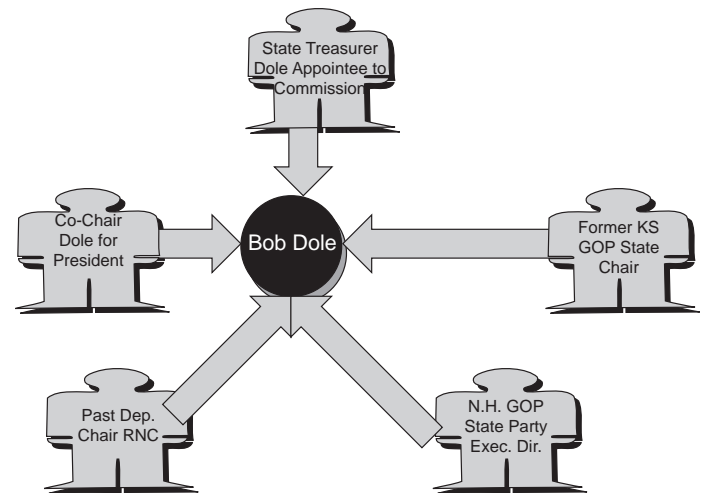
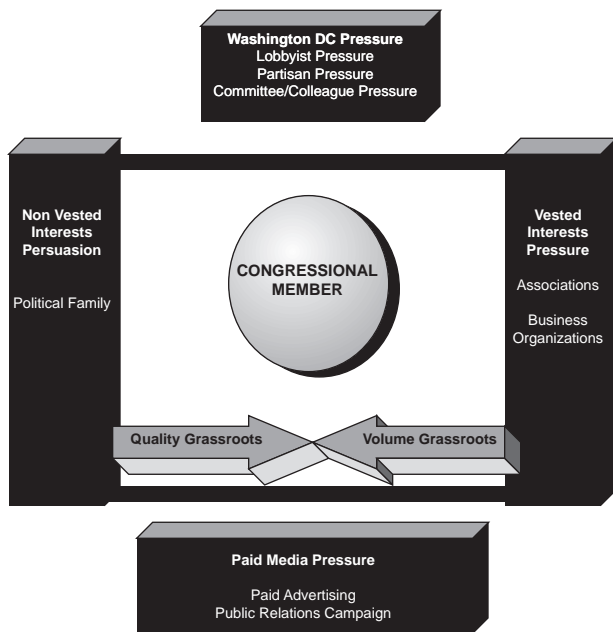
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## Surrounding the Targeted Member



Target: Bob Dole January 1996

*These diagrams by Decision Management, Inc. depict the company's strategy for "grasstops" lobbying of elected officials. When politicians like Bob Dole cease to be "targets," they often go to work as lobbyists themselves and become part of the system used to "surround" others. Dole is currently a "special counsel" for the powerful Washington, DC lobby firm of Verner, Liipfert, representing Taiwan business and government interests. In a recent "David Letterman" appearance, he attacked President Clinton's China policies while neglecting to reveal his personal stake in the issue as a lobbyist.*

In addition to phone calls, telemarketers may also offer to send letters, telegrams or faxes using the activist's name. The sheer quantity of mail generated through grassroots campaigns is staggering. A single member of Congress receives 92,000 pieces of mail per year.

In some cases, astroturf campaigns can backfire. "Patch-through phone calls are no longer cutting-edge technology. . . . Their overuse may annoy some lawmakers," says Brenda O'Connor, director of public affairs for the American Insurance Association. Increasingly, PR firms are turning to more personalized, intensive methods of orchestrating political activism for their corporate clients.

### CAPTIVE MASSES

"Key contacts" are employees who have been trained and cultivated to lead the company's political campaign. They are in charge both of mobilizing other employees and of developing a close relationship with their elected officials. Typically, a employee's duties as a political activist are literally written into his or her job description, and successful key contacts are rewarded with perks including flexible working hours, bonus pay, and opportunities for promotion.

"These people have independent and direct access to policymakers and can usually reach them on short

notice," explains Sally Patterson of the Winner/Wagner & Francis PR firm, whose clients include the Edison Electric Institute, Exxon and the National Association of Counties. "With key contacts, a company can identify, recruit, and activate a small number of influential citizens and opinion leaders to contact public officials through personal letters, phone calls, or visits. They are most effective at critical moments in a public policy campaign."

For corporate grassroots pros, the term "mobilizing the family" means bringing out a company's people in mass—its employees, shareholders and retirees. "These constituencies add numbers to the messages delivered by the key contacts, bringing the force of the company's voting constituency to a legislator," Patterson says.

Employees are the easiest to mobilize, Patterson says, because they are "instantly available at the worksite . . . they are the first resource when volume response is part of a grassroots need."

Retirees are also targeted. "As senior citizens," Patterson explains, they "have instant credibility with legislators. They have time to follow the issues, they take time to write to their legislators, and they vote in greater numbers than most other age groups. But companies may need to sort through their retiree lists—retirees who have

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been affected by downsizing or restructuring may not automatically support the company.”

## THE BUDDY SYSTEM

*Grasstops* organizing is an updated version of the “good old boys network” that used to rule back in the days when “Congress was dominated by a handful of powerful men who wrote and passed virtually all the legislation,” as PR executive Edward Gabriel recalled in a 1992 article for the *Public Relations Quarterly*. In those days, Gabriel said, “If you wanted a change in the tax code, for example, you really needed only to persuade one person—Wilbur Mills, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. You did not have to worry about the other two dozen committee members.”

“You could make a deal in the government,” recalls Thomas J. Donohue, president of the powerful U.S. Chamber of Commerce. “We had a drink in the middle of the day, . . . and then they’d all cuss and swear and tell stories and then, the deal gets fixed.”

Today, every member of Congress gets targeted for similar buddy-to-buddy attention. Although “grassroots” mobilizations make a good show, Donahue believes that a single phone call from an individual close to the targeted politician “is better than 500 people knocking on the door.”

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***“We’ve had letters back from people unaware of the fact that something has been sent in their name, and saying ‘In fact, I don’t feel that way.’”***  
**North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan**

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A “grasstops” contact may be a fellow politico—a mayor, a local union president, the head of a civic association, or a trusted election volunteer. It may also simply be someone the politician knows personally—a former classmate, family member or close friend.

“Grasstops contacts are independent voices with a standing in the community and their own points of access to policymakers,” Patterson said. “The key concern here is to ensure that their interests on a particular issue are consistent with the company’s.”

The value of these contacts, according to Brian Lunde of Decision Management, Inc., a Virginia-based PR firm, is that they create “the impression that more than just the vested interests are in favor of your position. Even close advisors and friends are supportive.”

Grasstops contacts can be cultivated through a variety of techniques. In some cases, PR firms simply *hire* them for a fee. In other cases, careful recruitment and per-

suasion is necessary. For this reason, companies like Bonner & Associates charge more money for generating grasstops contacts than they charge for mere grassroots—up to \$500 for each letter or call generated, and up to \$10,000 for face-to-face, personal visits.

## IS IT REAL, OR IS IT ASTROTURF?

Jack Bonner, the president of Bonner & Associates, argues that his big-business version of grassroots organizing is every bit as legitimate as the traditional variety. “Have we come to a point in our democracy where it’s legitimate for environmentalists to take their message to the people but not for industry to do the same?” he asks.

Others disagree, arguing that the sheer economic power of corporations gives them an unfair advantage which subverts rather than enhances democracy. “If you combine the institutions with unlimited resources with those that have new technologies, it could give new meaning to the phrase ‘reach out and touch someone,’” says Fred Wertheimer, president of the government reform group, Common Cause.

Grassroots PR has also been criticized for deceptive practices in a number of cases where companies have used people’s names without their authorization. In 1994, for example, an aide to Alabama Democratic Senator Howell Heflin was surprised when a letter signed with his own name arrived in Heflin’s office strongly objecting to President Clinton’s health care plan.

The aide, Steve Raby, had called the Healthcare Leadership Council, a Bonner-affiliated front group a week earlier, but had not given permission to send any such letter. “I said, ‘I disagree with your message,’” he recalled telling the operator.

Bonner shrugged off the incident, saying, “Mistakes happen.”

But other legislators have also experienced instances of unauthorized letters purporting to come from their constituents. According to Byron Dorgan, a Democratic Senator from North Dakota, his office has noticed discrepancies when his office writes back to constituents acknowledging their letters. “We’ve had letters back from people unaware of the fact that something has been sent in their name, and saying ‘In fact, I don’t feel that way,’” Dorgan said.

In July 1995, an astroturf campaign by the Beckel Cowan PR firm became the subject of a more serious scandal when it was discovered that as many as half of its messages to Congress were unauthorized. Beckel Cowan hired a subcontractor, NTS Marketing, to generate mailgrams against legislation which was opposed by long-distance phone companies.

Suspicious members of Congress began to check the authenticity of signatures on the telegrams they received. They got some intriguing answers: Some signers were dead; some no longer lived at the addresses listed; some were traveling abroad; and a great many said they had never been called or asked to sign.

Beckel Cowan hastily apologized, claiming that NTS Marketing had “severely violated” its trust. Aside from the embarrassment, however, it suffered no further consequences. The U.S. Attorney’s office looked into the matter briefly but dropped it because there are no laws that prohibit sending fraudulent communications to Congress.

Mistakes happen, of course, but the *type* of mistakes that occur with “astroturf PR” are unheard-of in genuine grassroots campaigns. In *genuine* grassroots campaigns, “activists” act on their own behalf. They are not simply camouflage for other interests.

Ronald Shaiko, a professor of government at American University who has written about the lobbying process, believes businesses should be expected, at a minimum, to publicly disclose their role in grassroots lobbying efforts. “If a corporation or any organized interest goes beyond its organizational infrastructure and membership to mobilize grass-roots support or opposition in the policymaking process, I want to know about it,” he states. “I would like to know what firm or firms were hired, how much they were paid, the duration of their contracts and the method of mobilization (e.g., direct mail, media campaign, telephone patch-throughs, Internet campaigns). I do not believe that the privacy of a single individual would be violated by such a disclosure.”

Jack Bonner, predictably, disagrees: “The problem with disclosure is, will it have a chilling effect on people getting involved? Grassroots lobbying is good. The more people who participate the better.” ■

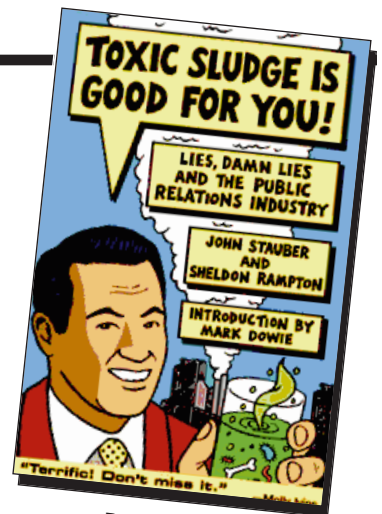
## Cures for that Spinning Sensation

BOOKS BY JOHN STAUBER AND SHELDON RAMPTON

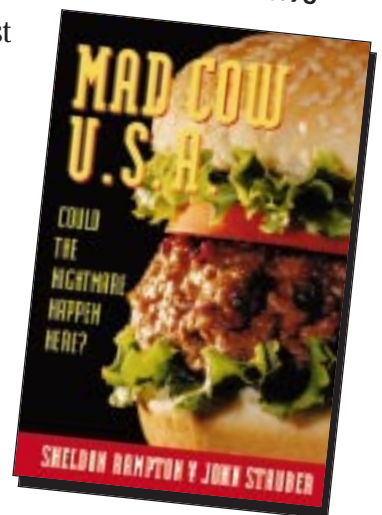
PR Watch editors John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton are the authors of two critically-acclaimed books:

- ***Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*** blows the lid off today’s multi-billion-dollar propaganda-for-hire industry, revealing how public relations wizards concoct and spin the news, organize phony “grassroots” front groups, spy on citizens, and conspire with lobbyists and politicians to thwart democracy. *Publishers Weekly* calls it a “chilling analysis of the PR business.” *Public Relations Quarterly* says, “*Toxic Sludge* should appear on the short list of anyone serious about the study of public relations in the United States.”
- ***Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?*** offers a case study of the interaction between PR and public health concerns in dealing with the crisis of “mad cow disease”—a baffling, bizarre fatal dementia that has emerged as a result of modern, intensive farming practices and whose true risks have been kept hidden by government and industry denials. The *Library Journal* calls it “gripping . . . important . . . highly recommended.” *Chemical & Engineering News* calls it “the kind of book you can’t put down.” The *Journal of the American Medical Association* says *Mad Cow USA* “will be received with interest by a large number of readers of different backgrounds and perspectives.”

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# Global Spin: the Corporate Assault on Environmentalism

book review by Sheldon Rampton

The twentieth century, argued Australian scholar Alex Carey, has been shaped largely by three trends: “the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.”

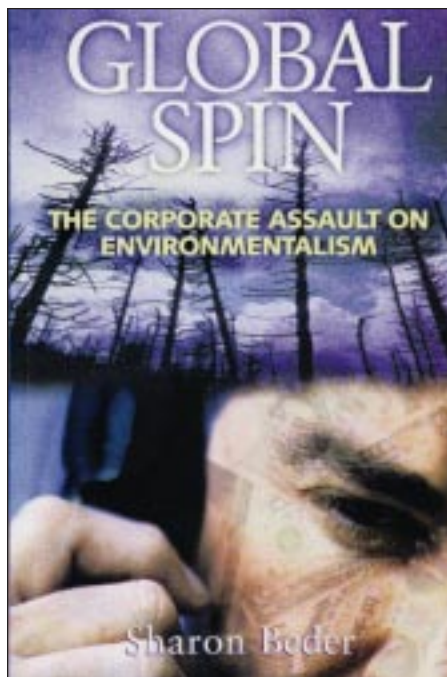
Now Sharon Beder, another Australian, has published *Global Spin: the Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*. In it, she examines the third of the trends that Carey talked about: corporate propaganda and its corrosive effect on democratic institutions. What she describes will be surprising, shocking and yet simultaneously familiar to many readers.

Most people realize, for example, that public relations concerns are what motivate companies to engage in charitable activities, and yet they will be shocked at the *level* of manipulation that Beder finds at the heart of a corporate practice that is almost universally greeted with praise: charitable contributions to education.

*Global Spin* examines the *quid pro quo* that accompanies these gifts, showing in exquisite detail how corporate giveaway programs have converted classrooms into unabashed vehicles for corporate marketing and indoctrination. The true purpose of industry-sponsored educational materials, according to one of the companies that specializes in designing them, is to help companies “enter the classroom through custom-made learning materials with your specific marketing objectives in mind. Communicate with young spenders directly and, through them, their teachers and families as well.”

The propaganda can be subtle, but sometimes it is blatant beyond belief. One company, called Teacher Support Systems, actually puts out a free, widely-used educational kit with test questions such as “Taco Bell has [blank] and burritos.”

Another company, Channel One, loans schools VCRs, TV sets and satellite dishes “in exchange for students’ minds twelve minutes each day.” The deal requires schools to guarantee that at least 90 percent of their students will watch the in-class commercials that are part of Channel One’s TV “news” program for the classroom, in a structured environment with an authority figure demanding their attention. As Beder observes, “The deal



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is quite coercive for schools that sign up for a three-year contract. If they break the contract, for example by not requiring ninety percent of students to watch, . . . then they are ‘financially liable for the cost of cabling school buildings and for the removal of video equipment.’ Teachers are not supposed to interrupt or turn off the broadcast whilst it is being aired. . . . A study of 3,000 Channel One viewing students in North Carolina found that most of them thought the products advertised would be good for them because they were being shown the advertisements in school.”

This type of trickery is not limited to the public schools. Commercial interests have also become incredibly adept at disguising themselves as public-spirited citizen groups. In a chapter titled “Fronting for Industry,” *Global Spin* examines the strategy that Merrill Rose of the Porter/Novelli PR firm describes as “Put your words in someone else’s mouth.” Examples include:

- the Council for Solid Waste Solutions, sponsored by the plastic industry in defense of throwaway plastic;
- the Alliance for Responsible CFC Policy, financed by companies such as Dow Chemical to oppose regulation of ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbons;
- the Global Climate Coalition, which lobbies on behalf of the oil, auto and coal industries to prevent any regulatory interference with global warming;
- Citizens for Sensible Control of Acid Rain, which operated between 1983 and 1991 to oppose tightening the Clean Air Act;
- and the Coalition for Vehicle Choice, created by the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers of America to fight against higher fuel efficiency standards.

PR firms create these front groups, Beder writes, to help “their corporate clients convince key politicians that there is broad support for their environmentally damaging activities or their demands for looser environmental regulations. Using specially tailored mailing lists, field officers, telephone banks and the latest in information technology, these firms are able to generate hundreds of

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telephone calls and/or thousands of pieces of mail to key politicians, creating the impression of wide public support for their client's position. This sort of operation was almost unheard-of ten years ago, yet in the US today, where 'technology makes building volunteer organizations as simple as writing a check,' it has become 'one of the hottest trends in politics' and an \$800 million industry."

The ultimate front group, in Beder's book, is the "Wise Use Movement," to which she devotes a full chapter, beginning with its origins as the brainchild of timber industry consultant Ron Arnold, who chose the term "Wise Use" because, in his words, "It was symbolic, it has no exact definition, . . . It can mean anything."

The Wise Use agenda, adopted in 1988, was really a wish list for industry, calling for "all public lands including wilderness and public parks" to be opened for mining and timber extraction by private businesses. Since then, generous doses of corporate funding have enabled Wise Use to develop into something that looks like a genuine social movement, bringing together a loose coalition of property-rights absolutists, opponents of gun-control, angry farmers and corporate fixers that downplay threats to the environment while billing Wise Use as the "true" environmental movement.

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***Most people realize that public relations concerns are what motivate companies to engage in charitable activities, but they will be shocked at the level of manipulation.***

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Some of these facts have been documented elsewhere, notably in David Helvarg's landmark 1994 book, *The War Against the Greens*. What distinguishes *Global Spin* is the diverse range of corporate tactics which it examines. Beder's book is also notable for its international scope, which offers numerous examples from England, Australia and Canada—virtually the entire English-speaking world.

A chapter titled "Lawsuits Against Public Participation," for example, criss-crosses the globe as it details the growing corporate strategy of suing real citizen-activists in order to intimidate them into silence and passivity. Examples include the infamous "McLibel" lawsuit against two British environmentalists who circulated a leaflet criticizing McDonald's; a lawsuit by timber interests against community groups that opposed the logging of an ancient rainforest in Canada, and an Australian city

council's successful use of legal threats to silence a local newspaper following criticism of the city for dumping sewage effluent into the ocean.

Beder also analyzes the origins and activities of corporate-funded think-tanks that "spread a patina of academe and expertise over the views of their sponsors." Examples include the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, England's Institute of Economic Affairs and Adam Smith Institute, and the Centre for Independent Studies in Australia.

*Global Spin* details the revolving door through which conservative think-tanks "nuture a new generation of conservative leaders . . . by sponsoring college students and promising junior bureaucrats," as well as providing a convenient place "for discarded government officials to go when there is a change of government, where they can be employed until 'their' government is re-elected, whilst still having some influence over public policy in the meantime."

Along the way, Beder deftly dismantles the scholarly pretensions of outfits like the Heritage Foundation, which spends only forty percent of its budget on actual research, while devoting the remainder to marketing, fundraising and public relations.

As Beder explains, "All this marketing enables the Foundation to successfully attract mass media coverage for its publications and policy proposals. The Foundation claims that it usually gets 200 or more stories nationwide from each of the position papers it publishes. . . . Its specialty is its 'backgrounders' or 'bulletins' which are short essays (between two and twenty pages) on current issues—'brief enough to read in a limousine ride from National Airport to Capitol Hill.' "

It would have been nice to see *Global Spin* devote more space to the many genuine citizen groups which offer alternatives to corporate propaganda. It also would have been nice if the book had been footnoted differently. Beder's sources are identified in the notes but not always in the text, and she uses a "two-tiered" reference system so that in order to understand a footnote, the reader has to turn to her bibliography. In some cases this detracts from the book's clarity. I had to flip back and forth on several occasions to see whether a particular quotation came from a corporate flack or a corporate critic.

These, however, are minor criticisms of a book whose virtues far outweigh its flaws. *Global Spin* is an ambitious, important analysis of corporate propaganda in all its gory splendor, which ought to be carefully read by anyone who wants to understand how public opinion and policy are molded and twisted in modern society. ■



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# PR on the Witness Stand: Vinyl, not the Whole Truth

by Carissa Kowalski

Science is a part of our everyday discourse. At work, we chat about the latest computer software; at home, we tinker with our cars and our appliances; in our leisure time, we read about space telescopes and wonder drugs. But how do we get our information? Chances are, we get it from the mass media, which in turn relies on ready-to-use soundbites or press releases from industry public relations people like J. Patrick McGinn.

McGinn is the manager of communications and media relations at PPG Industries in southwestern Louisiana, an area sometimes called the “cancer corridor” because of the many chemical manufacturers that operate there.

PPG Industries manufactures ethylene dichloride (EDC) and vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), carcinogenic chemical precursors to the vinyl plastic that appears in everything from children’s toys to electrical insulation and home siding.

Louisiana and Texas are responsible for almost all of the EDC and VCM production in the United States, and they have suffered the environmental consequences. In Louisiana alone, 14 million pounds of EDC and 1.7 million pounds of vinyl chloride were released into the air and water between the years of 1987 and 1996.

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***Few PR professionals are forced to undergo the type of scrutiny that McGinn received, but obviously more should.***

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According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s 1995 Toxic Release Inventory, the county where PPG Industries is located ranked in the top 20% of all counties in the U.S. in terms of air and water releases of known cancer-causing agents. PPG itself was responsible for releases of 174,044 pounds of known carcinogens, plus another 336,298 pounds of other pollutants including suspected carcinogens, suspected neurotoxicants, and known developmental toxicants.

The worst victims of these exposures have been plant workers who have died from rare cancers linked to toxic exposures—individuals like PPG employee Henry Toussaint, who died earlier this year at age 54, or Dan Ross, who worked at the neighboring Vista Chemical plant and died of brain cancer at age 46. Their attorney, William Baggett, has won large settlements for their families and is currently building a conspiracy case against 29 chemical companies, along with the Chemical Manufacturers Association and the Society of the Plastic Industry.

The lawsuit has unearthed hundreds of thousands of pages of internal company memos, letters and other documents. In June, *Houston Chronicle* reporter Jim Morris published a series of stories based on the documents, which Morris said “depict a framework of dubious science and painstaking public relations. . . . There are two dominant themes: avoid disclosure and deny liability.”

The lawsuits also placed PPG communications manager McGinn on the witness stand. On July 31, 1996,

## Counting Chemicals

The U.S. EPA’s Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), which is the source for estimates of chemical releases used in this article, is based on data supplied by companies themselves. The TRI is the best single publicly available source of information on toxic releases, but there is an obvious problem with relying on industry’s own estimates.

In March 1994, for example, workers at a Conoco refinery in the neighborhood of the PPG plant detected a leak from an old underground pipeline which carried ethylene dichloride to a nearby Vista chemical plant. By April, Conoco’s internal records showed that they had recovered more than 1.2 million pounds of EDC from the leak. In May, however, Conoco was still reporting publicly that only 1,602 pounds of EDC had been lost. In fact, the spill was one of the largest in U.S. history. It is estimated today to have dumped somewhere between 1.6 million to 47 million pounds of EDC into the environment, most of which has never been recovered.

In his deposition to attorney William Baggett, PPG communications manager J. Patrick McGinn commented that “the general public has a mindset against all chemicals. . . . Hardly ever do you see the term ‘chemical’ by itself. It is always ‘toxic chemical.’ ” In fact, the toxicity of different chemicals *does* vary widely. In order to help in assessing the dangers, the Environmental Defense Fund has created a helpful, user-friendly website called the Environmental Scorecard ([www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org)). By simply entering their zip code, visitors can access a list of polluting industries in their area, with detailed numerical breakdowns, based on TRI data, of the chemicals released. In addition, the website offers descriptions of specific chemicals, their uses, and their health effects.

Baggett put him through an extensive deposition about his work and his written statements about the safety of PPG's operations.

McGinn is the sole author of a semi-regular newsletter, *The Source*, which is billed as "a public resource for PPG environmental information." Under Baggett's grilling, however, McGinn was forced to admit that he received no input from the environmental employees of the company, nor did any of the "environmental people" look over his work before it was published.

"I do things at the very last minute, and I do it as quickly as I can," McGinn said in what was at best an admission of ignorance and at worst an effort to evade responsibility for the accuracy of his own statements.

### DEADLY COMBINATIONS

A great deal of McGinn's deposition revolved around the difference between "vinyl chloride monomer" and "polyvinyl chloride" (PVC).

PVC is the material that most of us think about when we hear the word "vinyl," but its production is a complicated process. Chlorine, derived from salt, is combined with ethylene, a petroleum product, to form ethylene dichloride (EDC). EDC is then converted into vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) and put through the polymerization process to form PVC resin.

Both EDC and VCM are toxic substances. EDC is a liquid sometimes used to make commercial solvents. It has been shown to cause cancer, birth defects, and damage to the lungs, liver and kidneys. Exposure to large amounts of EDC has resulted in death from lung and heart failure.

VCM is a colorless, flammable gas with a faintly sweet odor. Evidence of its negative health effects began to appear when workers who cleaned VCM reactors developed acroosteolysis, a deformity of the hands caused when the bones of the fingers erode. It can also cause scleroderma, which causes the skin to become smooth and tight, as well as Raynauds syndrome, which damages blood vessels.

These maladies, unfortunately, are only the tip of the toxic iceberg. Vinyl chloride can damage the developing fetus, and an excess of spontaneous abortions has been reported among workers and spouses of workers exposed



***In Mossville, a largely African-American community near the PPG and Vista plants, EDC-contaminated groundwater has forced many of the residents to abandon their homes.***

to vinyl chloride. Increased rates of birth defects have been reported in areas where vinyl chloride processing plants are located.

In 1972, Italian researcher Cesare Maltoni found that VCM exposure levels previously thought to be harmless caused an excess of angiosarcoma, a rare form of liver cancer. Studies have also linked VCM to cancers of the brain, lungs and other organs.

According to Morris at the *Houston Chronicle*, the vinyl industry sponsored biased research in the 1970s designed to downplay these risks, but even its own studies found disproportionately high cancer rates in vinyl workers.

By the mid-1970s, labor organizations and the federal government had become aware of the dangers associated with vinyl chloride, and stricter exposure limits were imposed. In the meantime, however, thousands of workers had already been exposed during the 1950s and 1960s. The consequences of these exposures are still unfolding, as workers continue to die from liver and brain cancers.

### VINYL VS. VINYL

Even finished PVC resin is not entirely safe. The resin must be combined with chemical additives to make it usable. Plasticizers and other additives such as DEHP (a known carcinogen) are added to make it flexible; heavy metals are added to change its color or make it more rigid; fungicides are added to kill bacteria. Research points to fires involving PVC products producing a deadly gas of hydrochloric acid.

Finished PVC, however, is vastly less dangerous than vinyl chloride monomer, a point that came out repeatedly during McGinn's deposition.

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Baggett focused in particular on McGinn's statements in the August 1995 issue of *The Source*, which was distributed to announce a partnership between PPG Industries and Vista Chemical to operate a new VCM facility in the area.

"The vinyl industry has more than a 50-year documented record of safe performance," McGinn had written, in a section titled "Now you know."

Under interrogation, however, he admitted that this statement would have been a lie if it referred to the vinyl

chloride monomer which is manufactured by Vista or PPG. "At the time, I wasn't referring to our industry," he said.

What *was* he referring to? *Finished* PVC, he said—the plastic that goes into home siding and molded chairs.

Baggett was incredulous. After all, neither PPG nor Vista manufacture PVCs in Louisiana.

"Now, the phrase 'vinyl industry'—when a person reads that, you don't think that they were entitled to think that you're talking about plants like PPG?" Baggett asked.

## How to Deal with "Environmental Activist Incidents"

Self-described as a "national trade association representing the leading manufacturers of vinyl," the Vinyl Institute is a client of the Jefferson Group, Inc. ([www.jeffersongroup.com](http://www.jeffersongroup.com)), a powerful DC-based PR and lobby firm whose many clients include Dow Chemical Company, W.R. Grace & Company, the public employees union AFSCME, and the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The Vinyl Institute is a powerful propaganda machine in its own right. In its quest to "promote and protect the vinyl industry and its markets," it has sponsored scientific studies, produced numerous informational materials, and sparred with Greenpeace and other environmental group which have raised questions about environmental and health hazards related to vinyl.

The book that McGinn relied upon in writing *The Source* is titled "Guidelines, Message Points and Resource Materials, Communications and Community Mobilization Plan." Published by the Vinyl Institute, it includes basic message points, information about how to deal with the "outrageous claims" of environmental activists, and tips on how to proactively communicate with community members—all produced on "plain paper to enable you to reproduce and distribute them." This is exactly what McGinn did.

The "Guidelines" publication includes a lengthy section on how to manage "environmental activist incidents." First comes "preparation": making sure security is tight, a spokesperson is chosen, and community contacts are made.

A proactive approach, which builds the company up to be a valuable part of the community, is also emphasized: "If you haven't already done so, engage in dialogue and build relationships with key influentials in your community. . . . A community that relies

significantly on local businesses for jobs, taxes and corporate contributions is more likely to give your plant the benefit of any doubt regarding health, safety, and environmental matters."

Other suggestions deal with the company's image: "For the purposes of projecting a positive image for television and print media cameras, be especially mindful of the appearance of your plant and of the plant grounds. . . . Park trailers and store drums or other containers out of sight, etc."

The Vinyl Institute also recommends that employee support be utilized in the event of an "incident": "Ask employees to serve as your eyes and ears in the community. . . . Be certain, too, to communicate first and foremost with employees during any such incident or crisis, encouraging them to communicate your plant's positions to family members, neighbors, and friends."

During the incident, the Institute advises plant managers to "keep their cool" and avoid confrontations. It recommends engaging in dialogue with the activists—unless they are people from outside of the community who can be painted as "paid, professional agitators." Outside activists, it says, "won't garner the same sympathy as residents if they need to be physically removed from your plant site."

The proactive approach touted in the "Activist Incidents" section is taken one step further with the Vinyl Institute's Grassroots Legislative Outreach program. This program encourages people associated with the vinyl industry to run for public office and secure a position in the government in order to protect the industry.

Baggett suggests that Vista PR person Nancy Tower, who ran for Senate, may be an example of someone taking advantage of this program.

“Do you think they are supposed to be thinking about people who are manufacturing chairs?”

Baggett also challenged a sentence in *The Source* which stated, “Study after study has confirmed there’s no evidence that vinyl affects human health.”

“You’re telling me . . . your average reader is going to think they’re talking about something different than what PPG and Vista are doing here?” Baggett inquired.

“Yeah,” McGinn said.

So why did he focus on vinyl end products rather than the chemicals his company actually manufactures? “I am trying to get people to think. . . ‘I shouldn’t be afraid of my vinyl siding. I shouldn’t be afraid of my vinyl seats in my car, my vinyl dashboard,’” he claimed.

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***“It is hyperbole that you find often in those kind of national public relations things,” McGinn admitted.***

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In the same section of the newsletter, however, McGinn had written, “The vinyl industry has drastically reduced emissions (99%)”—which seems to refer to the manufacture of VCM rather than PVCs. When asked if this statement could refer to chair manufacturers, McGinn pleaded ignorance: “I have no idea what they are talking about here,” he said. “I am taking it word-for-word out of a vinyl industry book.”

According to McGinn, his statements in *The Source* came directly from an information packet distributed by the Vinyl Institute, an industry trade association. He hadn’t given any thought to fact-checking, he admitted,

nor had he thought about whether people might miss the distinction between VCM as vinyl and PVC as vinyl.

“My intent is, it’s midnight. I’ve got to make this thing,” he explained. “I’ve got some white space. I remember I’ve got a Vinyl Institute binder. I thumb through it very rapidly and find some little bullet points that I can put in there. I have got no time for anybody to see this, so I type it word-for-word out of there.”

### **IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH**

McGinn claimed that he knew little or nothing about the health distinction between VCM and PVC at the time he produced the August 1995 *Source*. “What the distinctions are, I am not aware of,” he testified.

As a result, he had not made any attempt to explain the risks associated with his employer’s product. “I personally have not informed the public of any risks associated with vinyl chloride,” he said.

Few PR professionals are forced to undergo the type of scrutiny that McGinn received from Baggett, but obviously more should. They are often the primary source of health information for employees, the media, and the community at large. As McGinn himself admitted, their statements cannot be taken at face value.

At one point during the deposition, Baggett questioned McGinn about another item in *The Source*, which asserted that the manufacture of vinyl is one of the “most closely regulated production processes in existence.”

“Do you believe that?” Baggett demanded.

“It is hyperbole that you find often in those kind of national public relations things,” McGinn replied. ■

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