

...And Selling Truth

There are two kinds of people," says Frank Greer, director of San Francisco's Public Media Center, "those with money and those with something to say. We're trying to rectify that situation." PMC is one of the most active of over 500 groups in the United States now involved in some type of media reform work—all of them trying to increase the number of types of messages communicated by the mass media. They reflect a movement that has been growing since the mid-Sixties, a movement that has included challenges to the renewal of local TV stations' FCC licenses on the grounds of racist or sexist policies, open media committees negotiating for the right of citizens to speak on local broadcast media, and public interest advertising agencies which turn around the sophisticated techniques of modern mass communications to advance issues normally frozen out of the commercial media. And despite limited resources, and limited cooperation from much of the media, the scope and effectiveness of these efforts have steadily increased.

A landmark event for the public interest advertising movement took place back in 1966, the year Congress seemed ready to authorize a series of dams on the Colorado River that would have inundated much of the Grand Canyon. The Sierra Club paid a small San Francisco advertising agency, Freeman, Mander & Gossage, to direct a campaign against the bill. Jerry Mander, who was to become an important figure in future campaigns, designed an ad headlined "Shall We Flood the Sistine Chapel so the Tourists Can Get Closer to the Ceiling?" The ad included a coupon readers could use to inform public officials of how they felt: Interior Secretary Stewart Udall received 20,000 coupons demanding the project be dropped. The

dam project collapsed and Rep. Wayne Aspinall, chairman of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, gave the ads credit for defeat of the plan.

The Grand Canyon victory gave Freeman, Mander & Gossage considerable prominence, which they followed up over the next few years. Ads produced by the agency are credited with preserving a redwood forest in California, preventing miners and dam builders from encroaching on North Cascades National Park near Seattle, stopping Texas oil millionaire Lamar Hunt from converting Alcatraz Island into a space-age Disneyland, and helping to block development of the SST.

By 1972, a number of activists in the movement for public interest advertising had come together in San Francisco to form Public Interest Communications—later to become PMC. Jerry Mander, dress manufacturer, Alvin Duskin, who had financed some of Mander's most successful ads, and Dugald Stermer, former art director of RAMPARTS, were joined by Frank Greer and Roger Hickey, who had been involved in Project Unsell, a powerful nation-wide advertising campaign directed against the Vietnam War. Armed with a \$50,000 grant from the Stern Fund, the new group aimed toward a continuing, aggressive presence in developing and distributing alternative messages through the media.

PIC's first major achievement came later that year, in response to the U.S. Christmas terror bombing of North Vietnam, which included the destruction of Hanoi's Bach Mai Hospital. Medical Aid to Indochina approached PIC and offered to pay for ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*, which would assail the bombing and also solicit money for medical supplies for North Vietnam.

During the two years that followed, the ad brought in nearly \$600,000—largely because the ad was reprinted by local anti-war groups across the country.

But Public interest advertising groups are not simply ad agencies with a specialty market, delivering ad copy or 60-second TV spots for a few. They view themselves as responsive to—indeed, part of—broader movements for social and economic change. Across the country, small agencies, consumer and political organizations, and ad hoc groups are making possible grass roots responses to the economic and political premises of commercial advertising which have long dominated the field of mass communication. In Los Angeles, Public Communications, Inc. has produced messages for television on auto safety, deceptive advertising for pain remedies, water pollution, drug abuse, and voter registration. PCI has also produced ads for print media on food stamps, harassment by credit agencies, and airline overbooking. (PCI also functions as a public interest law firm.) In nearby Westwood, the Public Advertising Council—operating out of a small bungalow with a staff of two—has produced radio spots for the Discharge Upgrading Project criticizing punitive discharges of Vietnam veterans; radio spots for the Citizens Action Project on discriminatory credit and loan practices; radio and TV ads for the National Sharecropper Fund on the problems of rural farming; and a TV ad for the People's Bicentennial Commission on the atrophy of the Bill of Rights.

At San Francisco's Public Media Center—the successor to Public Inter-
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by Henry Weinstein

House politics. Curiously, the Ad Council by-laws say that it will "accept no subsidy from Government and (will) remain independent of it" and will "remain non-partisan and non-political."

Of the council's 25 major campaigns each year, more than a third are usually associated with boosting and popularizing government projects. The campaigns range from peddling low-interest U.S. Government Savings Bonds, to pushing recruitment for the National Guard and the Armed Forces Reserve, to promoting the Justice Department's incredible anti-crime campaigns in 1971-72.

An Ad Council release describes one of these: "*Help Prevent Crime. This campaign thus far has concentrated on auto theft prevention; the advertising urges motorists to fight juvenile delinquency and prevent crime by locking their cars and taking their keys.*"

And we thought the roots of crime were troubling and complex. Not at all. You can forget about bad schools, bad drugs, bad housing, unemployment, and despair. Just don't forget your keys.

When the Ad Council is not distracting the public from the problems that the government should be dealing with but isn't, it is promoting the counter-productive efforts the government does mount — the war on marijuana, the Vietnam War, the WIN program.

One Ad Council cheerleader campaign for the White House was challenged by citizens. President Nixon decided that the nation needed to hear more about the plight of the American prisoners-of-war in Southeast Asia. With secret financial support from the Republican National Committee, an organization called the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia asked the Ad Council to sponsor a "Write Hanoi" campaign. The campaign was announced, and then mysteriously dropped. The Ad Council then designed a new campaign that deleted the letter-writing pitch. On April 14, 1971, the White House sent the council a telegram of support.

Four months later, an anti-war group of POW families called Families for Immediate Release, which was angered because the campaign implied support for continuing the war, began asking television stations for equal time to rebut the council's ads. The Ad Council campaign began officially in March 1972, but few stations carried it because of the equal time demands of the Families for Immediate Release.

Currently, the Ad Council is launching another outrageously partisan effort on behalf of the Ford White House. On Sept. 27, President Ford met with Ad Council president Robert Keim to promote his Whip Inflation Now (WIN) campaign. In an election campaign season when many Republican candidates were running on Ford's WIN program, and many Democrats were running against it, the Ad Council began pushing the campaign. The council designed the WIN buttons, and distributed plans for reproducing them free to businesses around the country.

Keim gushes with enthusiasm when he speaks of the council's WIN project. "It will be a special drive. [It will] rally the country behind the President's measures." Says Lewis Shollenberger, vice president of the Ad Council, and the man working with the White House on the WIN project: "Normally it takes six months to get a campaign moving, but we're trying to get this one rolling in six weeks. We're

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going all out. This will be one of our greatest efforts ever."

Russell Freeburg, President Ford's special assistant coordinating the WIN campaign, defended the "cooperation" of the Ad Council. "The President is President of all the people," Freeburg said while his boss was campaigning for Republican candidates in the Midwest, "and he is trying to solve inflation. Sure, if he solves inflation, it will help him politically, but if the Democrats would rather have us go down the drain so that they can win the next election, well, that's pretty short-sighted."

On the other hand, Freeburg is being a little short-memoried. He says that the Ad Council WIN media blitz will be based on "inflation-fighting" points in Ford's Kansas City speech of October 15, 1974. But he does not mention that this speech was considered so one-sided that the Democrats were given a free half-hour during prime time television to respond to it.

Speaking on behalf of the Democratic majority in Congress, Senator Edmund Muskie (D-Maine) delivered a speech entitled, "The State of the Economy — A Democratic View" — on NBC. In it he said, "... to a great many of us in Congress — and to many, many Americans around the country — the President's economic policy and his Kansas City speech raise serious questions ... admonitions to 'balance your family budget' when the family paycheck will not cover bare necessities beg the question of what we must do, and to families which are really squeezed, it is cool advice."

And yet, the Ad Council and the White House are now basically producing this "advice" for mass consumption by the public service ad viewing audience. One wonders if, under the fairness doctrine, poor Ed Muskie will have to hang around the studio and rebut them one by one.

Give this card to someone
you love.



Safety belts, when you think about it, it's a nice way to say I love you.



[AMOTIVATIONAL SYNDROMES]

The Drug Abuse Program produced by the council was also directed almost entirely by the White House, in flagrant violation of the council's by-laws. After requesting the Ad Council to handle the program, and then advancing the council \$150,000 for the initial out-of-pocket expenses, the White House went on to design and direct the campaign, which was officially sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health under HEW.

In June, 1969, Charles B. (Bud) Wilkinson, special consultant to President Nixon, wrote "A Supplement to the White House Proposal to the Ad Council for a Major Campaign on Drug Abuse." In it, he said "The White House will continue to assume a strong leadership role in the campaign, and the National Institute of Mental Health has been designated as the contracting agency. It was agreed that the coordinated Federal campaign would be conducted in cooperation with the National Coordinating Council for Drug Abuse Education and Information and that the new campaign will build from the base established in the National Institute of Mental Health public service program. The development of the campaign and its execution will be subject to review at all stages by a committee composed of one of the designated representatives of each of the three government departments, and the National Coordinating Council under the chairmanship of a White House representative." Notice that there is no mention of the Advertising Council, which is supposedly running the campaign, and which is "independent of the Government."

By the way, it was this campaign that warned of the "social maladjustment" and the "amotivational syndromes"

of marijuana, while adding that "not everyone who uses a mind-altering chemical becomes dependent upon it. Alcohol is one common example of this point . . . The majority of persons who drink do not harm themselves or those around them." Before you ask, the president of Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, Inc. is on the council's board of directors.

[TIN CAN ECOLOGY]

But the Ad Council is best known for its campaigns on behalf of non-profit organizations, many of which happen to be funded and directed by big business. The classic example of this is the council's \$40 million a year campaign for Keep America Beautiful, Inc., an anti-litter organization directed and funded by the American Can Company, and other manufacturers of cans and bottles, beer and soft drinks, and steel, glass, and aluminum, all of whom are distressed by the litterbugs who pollute America's environment.

The KAB ads are the best produced and most controversial ones run by the Ad Council. The KAB ad portraying the Indian who sheds a tear when someone throws a bag of litter at his feet won two Clio awards for the best television commercial.

At the same time, however, the Sierra Club and four other environmentalist groups have resigned from KAB's citizen advisory council because KAB has been actively opposing the only proven curb of litter — legislation what requires the use of returnable beer and soft drink containers. Oregon passed a so-called bottle bill in 1971, and has since reported a 80 percent decline in the number of cans and bottles littered in the state. Similar legislation is also supported by the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Energy Office, and the League of Women Voters because it would save energy and valuable resources, control litter, and reduce prices for consumers. Such savings for the consumer, however, would cost the canners, bottlers, and steel, glass, and aluminum manufacturers who run KAB millions of dollars in profits. And so KAB, the avowed leader in the war on litter, opposes the only legislation likely to do the job.

Although this controversy has been brewing for years, the fight shifted to high gear in January 1974, when KAB president (and former executive for the brewing industry) Roger Powers testified in the California State Legislature against a bottle bill there. Soon thereafter, the Sierra Club, the Izaak Walton League, the National Parks and Conservation Association, the Outdoor Writers Association of America, and the Wilderness Society resigned from the KAB advisory council.

In its letter of resignation, dated July 8, the National Parks and Conservation Association wrote: "In fact, it seems that the KAB, Inc. is using its achievements in litter prevention education to cover its support for the container industries' efforts to oppose beverage container refund-deposit systems to restrict litter."

In its April 25 letter of resignation, the Sierra Club asked if KAB was not "merely a front for container manufacturers." In August the KAB advisory council unanimously passed a resolution calling for KAB itself to an-

nounce publicly that it is not opposed to returnable bottle legislation. If it does not change its position soon, several other members of the advisory council, including the EPA and the League of Women Voters, have indicated they will resign too.

[INFAMOUS "IRON EYES"]

KAB's commercials, even one starring the infamous "Chief Iron Eyes Cody," as Ad Council execs call him, subtly promote the industry's war against returnables. Says Pat Taylor, a lobbyist with an environmental group in Washington D.C. called Environmental Action, and a leader of the pro-bottle bill forces: "The commercials try to create the myth that people are to blame for litter, and not the industries that push the throw-away containers, and thus people should be made to change, and not industries. KAB argues against bottle legislation that's been proved to cut litter, and then it spouts its slogan 'People start pollution, and people can stop it.'"

More important, perhaps, is the KAB role in the "one-from-column A, one-from-column-B" effect that frustrates so many community groups trying to get public service time. That is, most station managers try to spread out their PSA time among as many issues as possible, partly so that when someone asks "What about problem X?" they can point to the anti-X ads they already ran. Environmentalists trying to get their own PSAs aired have complained that many stations have cited the KAB ads in rejecting the requests.

There is reason to believe the Ad Council knew it was pre-empting serious environmental concerns when it decided to produce the KAB campaign. In 1969 a subcommittee of the council's Industries Advisory Committee was formed to "advise how the council should proceed on the anti-pollution campaign." The subcommittee was composed of the chairmen of Allied Chemicals, Bethlehem Steel, Kraftco., American Can Co., and U.S. Steel — all of them intimately knowledgeable about pollution. The subcommittee carefully reviewed all the sources of pollution in the country, and through a stroke of group-think genius, decided to focus on the real colossus of environmental destruction — litter-bugs. The principle is rather elegant: if everyone is responsible, no one is responsible.

[THE ZEN OF AGRIBUSINESS]

The Ad Council has produced dozens of other campaigns that serve the interests of big business. In the Minority Business Enterprise, for example, business takes a modest bow for its determined struggle against racism. One ad featured a full-face shot of General Motors board chairman James M. Roche, with the headline "Here's why Mr. Roche of General Motors thinks investing in minority business is just plain good business." The ad copy praised GM for accepting Federal money to set up "one of the first Minority Enterprise Small Business Investment Companies (MESBICs) to be licensed by the Small Business Administration." As [More] magazine reported in March 1972, "The MESBIC program is little more than a

charade that finances big business subsidiaries that serve as decoys to industry's often discriminatory hiring and promotion practices." Nevertheless, underneath Mr. Roche's beneficent visage was the information that the ad was "donated for the public good." What's good for General Motors . . .

In the JOBS campaign, sponsored by the National Alliance of Businessmen, we learn of the accomplishments of business in hiring the poor, a success that seems all the more magical since it is achieved while unemployment rates still soar. The Technical Education and Training Campaign, run for the U.S. Office of Education and the Manpower Institute, encourages students to take up technical training because "technicians earn . . . as much or more than the average college graduate." Although this may be true for people just out of school, it is doubtful that it holds in the long run.

Even our furry fire fighter, Smokey the Bear, is not a total innocent. Environmentalists view forest fires as far less severe a threat to America's timber resources than clear-cutting and indiscriminate logging by paper and wood products companies, but the ads instead say careless people destroy forests, not careless industries.

The Smokey campaign, by the way, is coordinated by James M. Montgomery of the Gulf States Paper Corporation. Meanwhile, when the Sierra Club approaches a broadcaster with environment ads, they are told "Oh, forests, we got them covered with Smokey the Bear."

Perhaps the most blatant pro-business ad campaign by the Ad Council is the productivity program ("How would



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How would you like to sign the work you do?

It's a shame that most of us don't get to sign our work. Because we'd probably do it better. Just out of pride. And that could mean better products and services for everybody. So, even if you don't have to sign your work, do the kind of work you'd be proud to put your name on.

America. It only works as well as we do.

The National Commission on Productivity, Washington, D.C.
This ad is the work of Urrae Franklin and Gavino Sanna

you like to sign the work you do?”), which urges laborers to work harder for their employers. As yet, there is no council campaign urging employers to pay their employees more. Such “Work! Work!” campaigns cost thousands when attempted by individual factories and industries, and are usually prevented by watchful unions who know from experience what a “speed up” drive can mean. But, thanks to the Ad Council, the campaign is carried multi-media, nation-wide, and free, “as a public service.”

But the masterwork of all Ad Council manipulations has to be its Food, Nutrition, and Health campaign, which is sponsored by HEW, the Department of Agriculture, and the Grocery Manufacturers of America, Inc. It is coordinated by an executive of General Foods Corp. The ads urge viewers to send in for a free booklet entitled “Food Is More Than Just Something to Eat.”

The booklet neglects to mention that Americans eat too much cereal, sugar, potato chips, processed foods, etc. Rather, the helpful manual chirps “Fresh or frozen? Canned or dried? Instant or from scratch? Which foods have the nutrients? Which do not? They all do.” The message is don’t worry, it’s all good: The Zen of Agribusiness.

Robert Choate, director of a group called Children, Media and Merchandising in Washington, D.C., tried to distribute ads to show the other side of the nutrition debate, but without much success. “We produced the ads that said Americans ate too many snack foods, but the networks wouldn’t let them on. They said they were too controversial. The local stations wouldn’t touch them

either, or else ran them at 2 a.m.

And finally, the Ad Council produced a campaign for the National Safety Council (funded and directed by Ford, GM, et al.) which pushes the use of seat belts. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety conducted a study in 1972 that showed commercials asking people to use seat belts were totally ineffective. The report concluded, “The television messages had no effect whatsoever on use.”

Why did the Ad Council continue to squander free advertising on the seat belt campaign after it received the institute’s study? The answer lies in the June 18, 1974 *Status Report* of the Safety Institute, entitled “Auto Makers Renew Passive Restraint Attack.” The report describes how the auto industry, which has near control of the Safety Council, as well as a hefty representation on the Ad Council’s board, has been actively lobbying against the replacement of seat belts by “passive restraints,” such as automatically inflatable air bags.

The Ad Council abuses public service time: 1) by giving the impression that business and government are doing their job to help America (Minority Business Enterprise, JOBS, Jobs for Veterans, etc.); 2) by diverting attention towards window dressing solutions to serious problems (seat belts rather than unsafe cars, litter rather than institutionalized pollution, locked cars rather than sources of crime); 3) by using its prestige and economic clout to corner scarce public access; 4) by filling public service time with ads that are so bland as to have no impact on the status quo; and 5) by foisting the responsibility for government- and business-caused problems onto the individual, thus reducing social



and political problems to the level of personal failings.

Such policy is actually the modus operandi of advertisers, networks, and stations -- to maximize their profits, they have decided to use television as almost a purely entertainment medium. Disturbing documentaries, scathing exposes, and truly intelligent programing are kept to a minimum -- the top priority is the continued blissful narcosis of the viewer. Television makes money by getting viewers to purchase advertisers' merchandise, and marketing science shows that anything above mild arousal is not conducive to a buying mentality. So with the slick, bland Ad Council advertisement, the broadcasters get the best of both worlds -- the viewer is not aroused or offended by a serious, productive use of the PSA time by public interest groups, and the PSA commitment to the FCC and the community is numerically filled.

[“CORRUPTING THE INTENT”]

The networks and broadcasters put up with and support this waste of their PSA time because they do not want to offend their viewers or their advertisers. For this reason, controversial PSAs are never aired by networks and most local stations. “If we accept yours,” they say, “we’d have to let the other side respond.” (For years Planned Parenthood was denied public service space for this reason.)

But according to the FCC, controversiality is not grounds for rejection. Said an FCC spokesman, “There’s no reason why a PSA ad can’t be controversial. If a controversial ad runs, and someone demands a chance to respond, then let him respond.” Unfortunately, while controversiality is not good grounds for rejection, the networks and stations do not legally need any grounds at all. They can reject any ad for any reason they want.

This is the first aspect of the system that critics would like to change. “Let’s open the public ads to the public,” says Asher. “Let’s air all the opinions, and especially those of the people who don’t have access to the media already. If things get controversial, then the system’s working. Just try to keep a balance.”

“The problem now,” he says, “is that we have one-sided controversial ads that are being passed off as non-controversial. Viewers are getting the establishment view, bland maybe, but establishment. The voices of change are vir-

Currently, all three networks and most local stations publicly refuse to air “controversial” PSAs. This policy came into question last winter when the so-called “gas crisis” (known to others as the excess profits campaign) crippled the nation. The oil producers blitzed the country with a brand of advertising -- the paid public opinion influencer. With their huge resources -- substantially enhanced by the crisis they claimed to be trying to solve -- the oil manufacturers flooded the airways with paid ads spouting their party line.

In response, Congressman Benjamin Rosenthal (D-N.Y.) and certain citizen groups, including the Public Media Center in California, urged stations to give equal time to the other side of the issue. No networks, and few stations, complied -- most said the ads were too controversial, and that a response to the industries was not required.

Although the incident dramatized the inadequacy of the present PSA and equal time provisions, it was encouraging in some respects. For the first time, citizen groups were finding the necessary resources to produce professionally done ads on a national-scale to compete with the Ad Council. At the same time, the oil industry was out in the open buying media access to influence public opinion on its side of a political controversy. The industry in this case had no choice, of course, but the point was that it was not hiding behind the cloak of non-profit fronts and PSAs.

[TIME FOR THE PEOPLE]

Although the counter-ads disappeared with the “crisis,” the pressures of change have not subsided. A growing number of genuine public interest groups have accumulated the polish, expertise, and determination to force the issue by demanding effective access to media time. Congressman Rosenthal has told RAMPARTS that he is going to petition the FCC to open an investigation into the entire public service system, with special attention to the monopoly position of the Advertising Council.

“By grabbing the major chunk of public service time,” the Congressman said, “the Ad Council is preventing the carrying out of the true purpose of public service time, which is to permit those elements in the community without the economic and political clout to communicate properly to tell their story. The Ad Council and the networks have corrupted the original intent of public service time by turning it into a free bonus for the special interests.”

“The Ad Council,” he continued, “is a propagandist for business and government, and with staggering control of the media, it not only makes sure its own side of the story is told, but that the other side isn’t. The public has no meaningful access to the media. We’re not disputing industry’s right to tell its side, but just its monopoly of the time meant for the people.”

Others, including David McCall, president of the prestigious Madison Avenue advertising firm of McCaffrey and McCall, have called for the end of the Ad Council. “Now is the time for the Advertising Council to disband,” he said in an address to the American Association of Advertising Agencies in its annual meeting in 1972. “It is too old, and it is too heavily encrusted with establishment points of view.”

We should not have to wait for another crisis like the gas shortage to get the public voice into public service advertising. Even when the public is not clutching desperately at the brink of disaster, advertisers and broadcasters should be obliged to produce and air their messages for free. In the last 200 years, power in the United States has shifted slowly but inexorably to big business and big government. Now, by insisting on a media more open to the people, we could help to celebrate our birthday by starting to turn back that trend.

Bruce Howard is a reporter for the Washington (D.C.) Star-News and has been published in New York Magazine, the New York Daily News, and Change Magazine.

(A Special Supplement)



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