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Spinning the Moral Compass

by Sheldon Rampton, PR Watch Associate Editor

I should have known that once the topic of “ethics” came up in a PR context, there would be fireworks.

The Compuserve computer network had asked me, along with my co-author John Stauber, to participate in an online discussion about our book, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*. One of the first questions came from a Compuserve user who asked if the public relations field had an “ethical code.”

“The devil is in the details,” I replied.

The Public Relations Society of America is the PR industry’s leading professional organization, and it *does* have a code of ethics, but the code is voluntary, and violators rarely receive even a symbolic sanction. I noted the example of the Hill & Knowlton PR firm, which in 1990 fabricated false testimony in front of a fake “congressional hearing” as part of its work to help the government of Kuwait promote the Persian Gulf War. (For the devilish details, see the pages 167–75 of *Toxic Sludge*.)

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Flack Attack

Watching the public relations industry discuss ethics is a little like watching tourists from a foreign country attempting to speak a language they barely understand. They seem enthusiastic and sincere, and many of the right words come out of their mouths, but they just don’t quite manage to make sense.

The problem, fundamentally, is that PR is preoccupied with symbolism, imagery and perception rather than substance. From a flack’s perspective, *appearing* ethical is equivalent to, even better than, *being* ethical.

One way to appear ethical is to *talk* about ethics, which undoubtedly explains the current moral preoccupations of former Hill & Knowlton chief executive Robert Dilenschneider. His lecture about the unethical nature of “spin” is described in this issue’s cover story.

Of course, if Dilenschneider *really* thought spin was unethical, we would expect him to offer a full public accounting of the role that Hill & Knowlton played in promoting the Persian Gulf War. Neither he nor the company has answered repeated requests from reporters for complete answers to the questions that still persist, eight years after the war itself has ended.

Talk is cheap, but real ethical behavior is sometimes expensive, and that’s where the PR industry’s ethical dilemma originates.

There is no ethical way to help the tobacco industry increase market share for a product that kills its customers. There is no ethical way to protect polluters, sweatshops and makers of defective products while they continue to practice business as usual. There is no ethical way to create corporate “grassroots” front groups (see our interview with Dan Barry on page 7 of this issue). And there is no ethical way to harass and censor journalists whose reporting threatens a client’s controversial product (see our story on page 9).

All of the major public relations firms—not just Hill & Knowlton, but Burson-Marsteller, Ketchum, Edelman, Porter Novelli and the others—routinely engage in these types of offensive practices. They don’t do it because they are evil people. They do it because their wealthy clients have problems, and cleaning up their image is often easier (and cheaper) than cleaning up their mess.

Meanwhile, their ethical talk will always ring hollow.

“Hill & Knowlton has never suffered any consequences as a result of its unethical behavior,” I wrote. “To the contrary, it remains a member in good standing of the PR industry and is still considered one of the industry’s leaders. In fact, Robert Dilenschneider, who was president of Hill & Knowlton at the time of the fabricated hearings, is going around these days giving moralistic lectures about ethics to university classes and PR trade seminars.”

That upset some flacks. “I am 36, a PR agency owner, and a member of the Counselor’s Academy of the PRSA,” replied Greg Jones. “As for your example of H&K, I know that they are now rebounding strongly from the Kuwait situation under dynamic new leadership. But to say that they suffered no consequences as a result is to demonstrate your ignorance of the profession.”

“What consequences did they suffer?” I asked. “As a member of the Counselor’s Academy of the PRSA, I’m sure you can readily lay your hands on any proclamations which the PRSA has issued condemning Hill & Knowlton’s actions.”

Of course, PRSA has never criticized the “Kuwait situation.” It is true that H&K lost business *after* the war ended—largely because its biggest client no longer needed its services—but these losses can hardly be called “consequences” of its unethical behavior.

In April, in fact, I attended a pricey PR conference in New York called “Media Relations ’98,” which featured Bob Dilenschneider as a keynote speaker. According to Jones, anyone who lies to the media—even in wartime or a hostage situation—“can kiss your PR career goodbye.” But there was Bob, large as life, being introduced to hundreds of top PR professionals as someone who had helped H&K by “tripling revenues and delivering more than \$30 million in profit.”

Like a lot of PR practitioners, Dilenschneider likes to *talk* an ethical game. His message at “Media Relations ’98” was a diatribe against “spin,” which he defined as “a deliberate and reckless disregard for the truth. I find spin offensive and destructive to our profession. It is to public relations what pornography is to art, quackery is to medicine.”

Of course, he admitted a minute later, “to a degree we’re all spinning all the time. . . . We’re all advocates, I’ll give you that.” But, he added, “Credibility is built on trust. It’s not built on tricks. If people think you’re trying to trick them, they’re not going to trust you. . . . What has happened to morality and ethics in this country?”

As an example of a “trick” that Dilenschneider considered unethical, he pointed to the recent example of Microsoft’s recent attempt to fight a U.S. Justice Depart-

ment antitrust lawsuit through a corporate “grassroots campaign” developed by the Edelman PR firm. The plan involved paying freelance writers and Edelman staff members to write pro-Microsoft letters to the editor and opinion-page editorials.

“They tried to conduct a synthetic campaign,” Dilenschneider said. “The media got wind of it, and they made the story the sleaze alley of the computer industry.”

Given Dilenschneider’s history as a “synthetic campaigner,” it is hard to take these pontifications seriously. The PR industry certainly doesn’t.

Given Dilenschneider’s own history as a “synthetic campaigner,” it is hard to take these pontifications seriously. The PR industry certainly doesn’t. After Microsoft’s plans were leaked to the press, *Inside PR*, a leading industry trade publication, interviewed PR professionals around the country and reported that “they saw nothing remarkable or particularly disturbing about the campaign proposed by Edelman. The attitude of Edelman’s competitors, for the most part, is one of ‘there but for the grace of god go I.’ ”

“Based on what I’ve seen it’s a fairly typical PR plan. It’s what we do,” said the general manager of the Washington office of one of the top ten PR firms.

WHO YA GONNA CALL?

PR consultant Jim Lukaszewski, who led two workshops at “Media Management ’98,” had other perspectives on the relationship between ethics and public relations. A member of the PRSA Board of Ethics, he comes across as something of a moralizer within the industry, arguing that ethical behavior is the only way to avoid bad publicity in today’s world.

At “Media Management ’98,” Lukaszewski led off his workshops with slide presentations of cartoons that provided a PR version of gallows humor. “I admire your honesty and integrity, Mr. Wilson, but there’s no room for them in this firm,” went one punchline. In another, a CEO informed his flack that “We’re laying off half our staff and raising executives’ salaries. Announce it to the media and put a good spin on it.”

After the chuckling subsided, Lukaszewski introduced himself as “a specialist in managing other peoples’ bad news. If there’s a million gallons of toluene under your parking lot, I’m the guy you want to call.” A consultant to Fortune 500 companies, he has worked with senior executives on issues such as product recalls, plant closings, chemical spills and hazardous-substance

exposures. He helps clients prepare themselves to be interviewed on *Sixty Minutes* or *Nightline*, or to give testimony in front of congressional hearings. He also teaches communications at New York University and has written numerous articles for publications such as *Public Relations Quarterly*, *PR Reporter* and *PR Tactics*.

On his website (www.e911.com), Lukaszewski gives examples of some of his recent work. As the following excerpts show, his clients are typically major corporations that have been targeted for criticism by environmental, human rights, labor and other citizen groups:

- “Provided . . . counsel to a large state-owned petrochemical company in South America related to its efforts to relocate neighboring villages now too close to its growing manufacturing facilities. The strategies developed addressed issues related to litigation, activist intervention by nongovernmental organizations and advocacy groups from other areas of the world, anti-government action, the damage caused by cultural intervention, and long-term community-company relationship building.”
- “For senior environmental officer of Canadian natural resource company, provided strategic response recommendations for managing aggressive campaign by U.S. environmental groups against the company and its largest U.S. customer.”
- “Helped prepare executives of major U.S. defense contractor for annual meeting disruptions by anti-nuclear activists.”

- “Prepared directors, senior managers, and locally based executives of national financial cooperative for public demonstrations against farm foreclosures.”
- “Guided Fortune 500 toy manufacturer through attack by largest U.S. animal rights organization over the issue of animal testing.”
- “Developed specific, targeted, pro-active face-to-face communications response to noise, odor, and quality-of-life complaints by neighbors of a mid-size manufacturing facility.”
- “Counseled senior executives of major U.S. retailer/merchandise facing very public action by a national and international labor organizations protesting manufacturing practices in Central and South America.”

THE ETHICS OF STONEWALLING

Where does the “ethical” part come in? At “Media Relations ‘98,” Lukaszewski explained that he advises clients “to resolve the situation with the activist. It’s unavoidable. We’re eventually going to have to sit down with them. Let’s do it today. We’re probably not going to make them happy, but we can probably resolve it down to where they don’t have a case. . . . Honorable action, on the ground, is the crucial ingredient, not media coverage. . . . If you’re a crook, if you’re a slimeball, then the media strategies I recommend will not work.”

These comments came during a provocatively-titled panel discussion on the subject of “When the Press Attacks: Should You Stonewall or Cooperate?” Debating

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Larry Kamer of Kamer/Singer Associates, Lukaszewski took the side in favor of stonewalling. “Respond to the media only when your message goals are served,” he said. “There is nothing in the US Constitution that says you have to call the press back.” In order to communicate effectively in crisis situations, he advised that people should stick to scripted messages or shut up altogether. In order to keep friends and relatives quiet as well, he joked, “Duct tape is very handy.”

The following day, Lukaszewski’s message seemed at first to be diametrically opposed. Speaking at a workshop titled “Face the Press,” he argued that PR strategy should be based on four principles: (1) “openness and accessibility”; (2) “truthfulness . . . unconditional honesty is the only policy”; (3) “responsiveness . . . recognition that any constituent concern is by definition legitimate”; and (4) “no secrets. Our behavior, our attitudes, our plans, even our strategic discussions must be unchallengeable, unassailable, and positive.”

How do you achieve openness and accessibility while stonewalling? Lukaszewski’s recipe consists of first making a list of the ten or so questions that a client most dreads answering, plus another list of questions that the client *wishes* someone would ask. Then, he writes out and rehearses scripted answers to each question.

During actual interviews, he advises clients to use “bridging language” so that their answers actually respond to their preferred rather than the feared list of questions. He has developed a number of specific phrases that can accomplish this bridging function:

- “I have heard that too, but the real focus should be . . .”
- “Opinions can differ, but I believe. . .”
- “Here’s an even tougher question. . .”

(The question you *wish* they’d ask is “tougher”? This must be some strange new definition of “unconditional honesty” that isn’t in the dictionary.)

Lukaszewski also puts a tight time limit on interviews, allowing reporters at most half an hour to interview his clients. Otherwise, he fears, reporters will start to ask “off the wall questions” that don’t fit the script. He advises clients to repeat all of their messages three times during the course of an interview, so that in reality reporters only get about 10 minutes worth of quotable material. To limit things still further, he has a standing rule that interviews should end as soon as a reporter hesitates for more than (literally) seven seconds between questions.

Lukaszewski even gives reporters printed versions of his scripted answers, which he calls “communications objectives.” “It’s amazing how accurate the

reporters become when you give it to them,” he said. “The communications objectives become the core of the story, generally.”

THE PREDATORY PRESS

Lukaszewski’s campaign to eradicate candor is the natural consequence of the PR worldview, which has a love-hate relationship with journalists. They are natural allies when a company wants publicity and a reporter wants access, but in times of crisis, PR pros and journalists turn into natural enemies.

The paradoxical nature of this relationship was evident in the remarks that PR people made during my appearance on Compuserve. “Many—if not most—media rely heavily on information and assistance from public relations professionals,” said Gwendolyn Moran. “My staff and I get calls from some of our media contacts to help them source articles . . . even when they’re unrelated to the clients we serve. Because we are very involved in the communities and industries we serve, they know we are a good source of information.”

In response to my critique of PR industry abuses, however, Moran’s defense consisted of a “tit for tat” recitation of *journalistic* abuses: “From the point of view of the news media, there is nothing unethical about using information supplied by an unnamed source, and from the perspective of the unnamed source, there is nothing unethical about supplying information—and yet the effect is to create ‘news’ whose true source is hidden from its audience. Journalists think nothing of taking a leak and running with it—often ruining lives in the process.”

Similar sentiments came from several of the speakers at “Media Relations ’98.” Lukaszewski, for example, justified his tactics as a way to help businesses cope with “an emotionally committed news media” made up of “alarmists, allegationists, interpreters, interventionists and speculators. . . . In the last several years we’ve seen an explosion of this emotionalization. . . . Their job is to spread the alarm, to get the word out. It doesn’t matter if it’s accurate or not. Their attitude is that it’s better to save lives by getting the word out than to lose lives by not reporting something. They figure, ‘It doesn’t matter if we’re wrong today because we’ll simply correct it tomorrow.’”

These comments prompted an angry response from one workshop participant, “I am a former reporter, and now I am on the other side in public affairs,” she said. “I don’t think you can generalize. I think you have set up reporters as the enemy.”

“No, no,” Lukaszewski said. “I respect what reporters do. I really respect it.” In fact, he added, “When the journalist gets up in the morning and looks in the mirror,

what the journalist says is, 'I want to save the world from something today.' I admire this."

Fortunately for flacks, journalism's ability to save the world is increasingly limited. PR guru Patrick Jackson, the keynote speaker on the first morning of the conference, highlighted the idea that the "news media are no longer the first line of activity" for PR professionals. "The credibility of news media has never been lower," Jackson said. "Peoples' opinion of it is absolutely in the sewer. Journalists rank in the public's opinion with used car people. This is a change, but also it's a danger. Maybe for some it's an opportunity."

Why is it a danger? Because PR pros use the news media as a vehicle for delivering their clients' messages to the public, and the credibility of those messages depends in large part on public perception that the stories which appear in the news are written by independent, truth-seeking journalists. These days, however, Jackson said, "The reach and credibility of any publication is so minimized compared to the old days that you really have to have a campaign for each message that you want to get across."

On the other hand, the decline in credibility of the media, combined with its fragmentation into numerous market segments, creates opportunities for PR firms to bypass reporters entirely. "Why should we allow anyone to interpret us?" Jackson asked. "The classic trade-off was, the media deliver so much third-party credibility and such huge audiences, that we're willing to risk that they'll screw up the message order to have them deliver it for us. . . . Now we're so fragmented across issue lines and position lines that it can't deliver those huge audiences. . . . And I ask you, where is that credibility? In one recent study, over 50% of the respondents said that you cannot believe what you read in the news."

Of course, he admitted, "It's no shock to you that people don't trust PR types, nor do they trust politicians or senior organizational officials."

BYLINE ENVY

A final look at the dicey relationship between journalists and PR people came during a "Media Relations '98" seminar titled "The Influence of Gossip Columnists on Mainstream Media." It featured Richard Johnson, editor of the *New York Post's* "Page Six" gossip column, and Deborah Mitchell, a writer for *New York Magazine's* "Intelligencer" column. Peter Himler, managing director for Burson-Marsteller (currently the world's largest PR firm) rounded out the panel.

In her opening remarks, Mitchell offered a jaw-dropping example of the news media's ability to live in denial of its dependence on PR-fed information. "I like to think

that in fact there is no relationship," she said, and then immediately added, "I guess you're selling me on the fact that PR people run these gossip columns, and they really do. We all know that."

"I like to think that in fact there is no relationship," Mitchell said, and then immediately added, "PR people run these gossip columns. . . . We all know that."

Himler concurred, recalling his early days working for a colorful entertainment publicist known in the trade as "Superflack." Shortly after he was hired, Himler said, "Superflack instructed me to head over to NBC studios as the new publicist for Art Linkletter. That day the show featured a reunion of the Mouseketeers. I took notes. My boss told me to write up what I saw and send it to [a gossip columnist]. I got back a note from the columnist that said, 'many thanks,' along with a tear sheet of my story, virtually verbatim as I had written it. I was astonished. 'So *this* is what we do in PR,' I thought. 'So where's my byline? Isn't this plagiarism? Until then, I really thought that all journalists went out and sourced their own stories.' "

Most members of the general public *still* think that journalists actually write their own stories, but both the media and PR industries know that enlightening people to the contrary would put the lie to the myth of independent journalism and destroy the profitable symbiosis of reporters and flacks.

Gossip columns may be more egregious than other sections of the newspaper when it comes to printing planted stories, but there are plenty of examples elsewhere, notably in the auto, lifestyles, entertainment, home and food sections. And in today's gossip-driven political environment, savvy flacks know that planting a story in a gossip column can "precipitate broader, more mainstream news coverage," in the words of the handout that accompanied Himler's workshop.

"Page Six" editor Richard Johnson gave a recent example of a story that originated in the gossip columns before going mainstream. "We had the story that Paula Jones was going to attend the White House correspondents' dinner, and then a couple of days later it was in the general news."

Is there an ethical standard that drives these collusions? Ethics *did* come up briefly during the gossip column workshop, when everyone agreed that the one

thing a flack must *never* do is lie to reporters. It is okay if flacks and reporters mislead the public about the source of their news, but a PR person “crosses the line” if he or she gets caught giving false information to the press itself.

“One thing we haven’t discussed yet is honesty. The McCartney thing,” Mitchell said. The “McCartney thing” referred to the fact that Paul McCartney’s family spokesperson had initially misled reporters about the location where Linda McCartney died. The following day, the McCartneys admitted that this had been a ruse to give the grieving family a little privacy.

“They don’t realize the damage that they do,” Himler intoned sadly.

From the narrow point of view of a gossip columnist or a flack, they might have had a point. It’s a small point, to be sure—much smaller than the points that ought to be considered about the ethics of PR tactics for handling

oil spills, wars, farm foreclosures, environmental disasters and nuclear weapons.

The more I thought about it, though, the more I began to feel that even this notion of ethics was based on a collaboration between PR people and journalists that many of the rest of us would find profoundly *unethical*. After all, who was harmed by the white lie that McCartney’s representative told to protect him from the harassing hordes of reporters who would otherwise have descended upon him in the moment of his deepest and most private grief?

I said as much on Compuserve, and drew immediate ridicule from the circling flacks who by then were in an angry feeding frenzy.

“So, lying to the press is okay now, huh?” wrote Greg Jones. “I think it was outrageous, stupid, and reprehensible. I can’t think of a justifiable reason to lie to the media.” ■

Cures for that Spinning Sensation

BOOKS BY JOHN STAUBER AND SHELDON RAMPTON

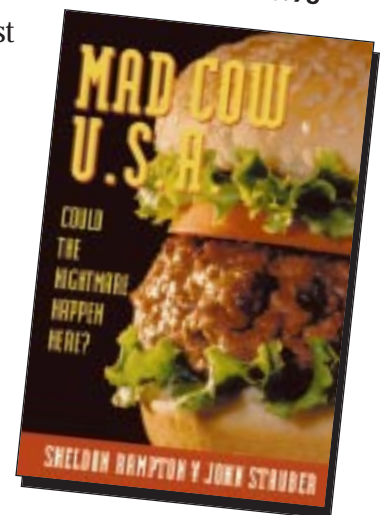
PR Watch editors John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton are the authors of two critically-acclaimed books:

- ***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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On a CLEAR Day You Can See Through Front Groups

an interview with Dan Barry

The Clearinghouse on Environmental Advocacy and Research (CLEAR) is a project of the Environmental Working Group. CLEAR tracks the funders and organizers of the industry-supported backlash against the environmental movement, which seeks to roll back or weaken laws that protect wildlife, habitat and public lands, as well as health and safety standards for our water, food and air.

PR Watch associate editor Sheldon Rampton interviewed CLEAR's director, Dan Barry, shortly before Barry's departure from CLEAR to head up Americans for the Environment.

Can you tell me a little bit about CLEAR's history and background?

CLEAR started five years ago and was founded to serve as the national clearinghouse for information on the "wise use" movement. At that time, we were aware of just over 250 groups that were active "wise use" organizations.

Our beginnings really trace back to the research that went into a publication of the Wilderness Society called *The Wise Use Movement: Strategic Analysis and 50 State Review*. A great deal of research went into this book. At the conclusion of the research and publication of the report, it was decided that the files created in the process should be maintained and built upon and be turned into a service organization to help inform environmentalists, members of the media and the general public of the structure, tactics and roots of the environmental backlash. CLEAR was the result of that decision.

Today, that report is well out of date, but CLEAR continues our work by publishing *A CLEAR View* 24 times a year, and by maintaining the vast databases we have put into our web site. The focus of our work has changed, as well. We now have some information on more than 2,500 organizations that are in some way affiliated with the anti-environmental lobby, ten times the number that we were aware of in the beginning. This is due to the realization that "wise use," as I mentioned earlier, is but one narrow element of the broad backlash against progressive environmentalism and progressive politics generally.

I visited your website and found it a great resource. It's certainly the best place I know of to get information about the Wise Use movement. How did you compile all that information, and how do you keep it up to date?

The CLEAR on-line databases represent over two years of effort, and are certainly the most complete resource of its kind available. The information was gath-

ered from a variety of sources, including press clippings, conference materials, the web, and original materials produced by groups associated with the environmental backlash.

CLEAR has two full-time researchers on staff, as well as a half time writer/editor who, in addition to producing the newsletter, *A CLEAR View*, conducts a great deal of original research. In this type of work, it pays to become an informational packrat. One never knows when small bits of seemingly innocuous information may turn out to be a missing piece to a puzzle.

Our in-house databases, from which the material on the web is derived, are designed as relational databases, meaning they all contain related information that is filed in different databases that are linked together with relational codes. We have databases that contain over 2,600 backlash groups, 6,000 staff and board members of those groups, 5,000 funders of those groups, and 2,500 press stories on the backlash.

How much does it cost to compile this information and make it available in searchable form on the internet? What is your advice to other groups who want to do something similar?

It's not cheap. Our budget is modest, less than \$150,000 per year, considering the amount of data and other material we have made publicly available. Besides the costs associated with maintaining a complicated set of computers, the main cost for keeping this information available and current is personnel related. It takes hours and hours to ferret the information out of sources that are quite scattered.

The short answer regarding any advice I would have for others is "Don't try this at home." Seriously, though, I would recommend that anyone working in the public interest either construct and manage their own opposition research files, or take advantage of other resources that do.

Knowing thine enemy is indispensable, and one really doesn't need a complicated computer system to begin to monitor and track one's main adversaries. It's amazing the information that is contained in a year's worth of newspaper clippings. Just read sources closely, and become an informational packrat.

How do you see the Wise Use movement fitting into the overall corporate agenda?

Ron Arnold, the "founder" of the movement, said it best in an article in 1980 that he published in a logging industry magazine. This was eight years before he held the original founding conference of the "wise use" movement. In his article, he described the need for a citizen-

based movement to battle environmentalism, stating that it takes an activist movement to fight an activist movement. He described his vision of the “wise use” element of the environmental backlash as the “human face” of the movement that would add to the “expensive legal talent” represented by the conservative legal foundations, trade associations and other corporate-based elements of the anti-environmental movement.

The corporate-funded free-market think tanks, trade associations and legal foundations are where the real work is being done now.

It's important to remember that “wise use,” such as it is, is only one element of a broad anti-regulatory, pro-business backlash against environmental protections and regulations. At the heart of the motivation of this backlash is a hatred of regulations that restrict business.

“Wise use,” in its heyday, played an important role as a media hit against the big bad environmental movement. Playing the “jobs versus owls” angle to the hilt, it generated a lot of media attention over a short period of time. Since then the bloom has come off the rose, and “wise use” has all but disappeared from the headlines. It remains to be seen what usefulness it will have to the corporate agenda.

It is certainly true that “wise use” has a very narrow political base that is not growing. It appears from our observations that the corporate-funded free-market think tanks, trade associations and legal foundations are where the *real* work is being done now, developing message and policy content that trickles down to the “wise use” groups that still have some relevance.

Do you know of other websites that carry similar information in a searchable form that we might recommend to our readers?

Other than CLEAR's web site, there are a couple of other places where raw data and polished information for opposition research are available. The Data Center (<http://www.igc.apc.org/datacenter/>) has great files on the broader right wing political movement, which are available to researchers. The Council on Economic Priorities in New York (<http://www.cepnyc.org>) keeps track of corporations.

Perhaps the best sources of information on groups like the Hudson Institute and others are their own web sites. These sites are showing up in increasing numbers on the web, and are starting to include more and more infor-

mation. Of course, anyone with on-line Nexis access has the most impressive research tool in the world available at their fingertips, but that is a luxury for most people.

What else would you advise people who want to research the hidden backers of PR front groups?

Other than keeping up with the work you are doing at *PR Watch*, the best thing to do is read the PR trade journals like *O'Dwyers PR Services Report*, and any media stories on the subject. It's tough, as you know. PR professionals are trained to obfuscate. They do not like to be in the media, especially when the stories are expository in nature. Good PR pros are paid to create a positive media spin. It seems that exposing their campaigns takes about equal measures of dogged research and blind good luck.

What drew you personally to this kind of work? What keeps you in it?

The work that we do here at CLEAR is unique. I was drawn to this because I recognized the unique nature of the work, and that the need for a solid base of information on the anti-environmental movement was vitally necessary. I started here in 1993, in the height of the media reporting on the backlash. At that time, the environmental movement was in disarray, and in some cases denial, over how to come to grips with and respond to the “wise use” movement. I saw directing CLEAR as a great opportunity to provide needed strategic information to help environmentalists at all levels understand the nature of the backlash.

Politically and intellectually, I find the backlash fascinating. I think that's what keeps me interested—discovering new organizations, coalitions and campaigns in the backlash, and exposing them for the benefit of progressive environmental advocacy. The most rewarding aspect of this work has been to see the broadening of the understanding of the backlash, and to see how environmentalists have used the information provided by CLEAR to do a better job as advocates.

Like the PR industry, the anti-environmental lobby, in all its forms—from “wise use” to corporate-backed trade associations and think tanks—is not going to go away soon. We need to remain vigilant, and do what it takes to keep our allies informed and prepared.

To access CLEAR's database of information about the environmental backlash, visit their website at <<http://www.ewg.org/pub/home/clear/clear.html>>. To receive a free automatic e-mail subscription to A CLEAR View, send e-mail with “subscribe” in the subject line to <clear-view@ewg3.ewg.org>. ■

Monsanto and Fox: Partners in Censorship

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

By all accounts, Jane Akre and Steve Wilson are tough, bulldog reporters—the sort of journalists you’d expect to make some enemies along the way.

That, according to Florida TV station WTVT, was why it hired the husband-and-wife team with much fanfare in November 1996 to head the station’s “news investigative unit.” Now, in the wake of their firing barely a year later, the Fox network affiliate is accusing them of theft for daring to independently publish the script of the story that they were never allowed to air.

“This is really not about a couple of disgruntled former reporters whining that their editors wouldn’t let them do a story they thought was important,” Wilson said in announcing that he and Akre are suing WTVT for breach of contract. “Jane and I have each spent more than 20 years in the news business. . . . It doesn’t take that long for every reporter to learn that every now and then—usually when the special interest of your news organization or one of its friends is more important than the public interest—stories get killed. That’s bad enough, but that’s *not* what happened here. . . . Fox 13 didn’t want to *kill* the story revealing synthetic hormones in Florida’s milk supply. Instead, as we explain in great detail in our legal complaint, we were repeatedly ordered to go forward and broadcast demonstrably inaccurate and dishonest versions of the story. We were given those instructions after some very high-level corporate lobbying by Monsanto (the powerful drug company that makes the hormone) and also, we believe, by members of Florida’s dairy and grocery industries.”

The hormone in question is genetically-engineered recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), the flagship product in Monsanto’s campaign to take command of the ultra-high-stakes biotechnology industry. Injections of rBGH (sold under the brand name Posilac®) induce higher milk production in dairy cows, but critics warn of potential health risks to both cows and humans.

The Florida dispute offers a rare look inside the newsroom at the way stories get spun and censored. It is also cracks the facade that Monsanto has erected through a highly effective, multi-million-dollar PR offensive aimed at preventing the news media from reporting the views of rBGH critics.

THE DAIRY COALITION

Coordinated by the DC-based PR/lobby firm of Capitoline/MS&L, the pro-rBGH campaign brings together drug and dairy industry groups in an ad hoc network called the Dairy Coalition, whose participants include university researchers funded by Monsanto, as well as carefully selected “third party” experts; the International Food Information Council, an industry funded

coalition that attacks health and safety concerns about food as unwarranted and unscientific; the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, representing the top executive of every department of agriculture in all fifty states; the American Farm Bureau Federation, the powerful right-wing lobby behind the movement to pass food disparagement laws like the one under which Oprah Winfrey was sued in Texas; the American Dietetic Association, the national association of registered dietitians which hauls in large sums of money advocating for the food industry; the Grocery Manufacturers of America; the Food Marketing Institute; and other dairy and food associations at the state and regional levels

Immediately after FDA approval of rBGH, attorneys for Monsanto sued or threatened to sue stores and dairy companies that sold milk and dairy products advertised as being free of rBGH, to make sure that any dissenters within the well-organized food industry would be frightened into towing the industry line.

Extensive media monitoring and aggressive intervention and punishment of offending journalists has been critical to the media management campaign. As early as 1989 the PR firm of Carma International was hired to conduct a computer analysis of every story filed on rBGH, ranking reporters as friends or enemies. This information was used to reward friendly reporters while complaining to editors about those who filed reports that were deemed unfriendly.

Leaked internal documents from the Dairy Coalition reveal how journalists who do not toe the line are handled. In January of 1996 dairy officials wrote Mary Jane Wilkinson, assistant managing editor of the *Boston Globe*, to complain about an upcoming food column by *Globe* writer Linda Weltner. “On February 23rd, [Dr.] Samuel Epstein . . . made unsupported allegations linking milk and cancer. We’re concerned that Ms. Weltner will give Epstein a forum in the *Boston Globe* to disseminate theories that have no basis in science.” The letter invoked carefully cultivated contacts to smear Epstein as a scaremonger with “no standing among his peers in the scientific community and no credibility with the leading health organizations in this country.” It noted that “others in the news media who attended Epstein’s press conference or reviewed his study—such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—chose not to run this ‘story.’ . . . *USA Today* was the only newspaper to print these allegations and we recently held a heated meeting with them.”

Another internal dairy industry document bragged about the handling of *USA Today* health reporter Anita Manning, whose balanced article on the subject offended

the rBGH lobbyists. “On Wednesday representatives of the Dairy Coalition met with reporter Anita Manning and her editor at *USA Today*. When Manning said that Epstein was a credible source, the Dairy Coalition’s Dr. Wayne Callaway pointed out that Epstein has no standing among the scientific community. . . . When Manning insisted it was her responsibility to tell both sides of the story, Callaway said that was just a cop-out for not doing her homework. She was told that if she had attended the press conference, instead of writing the story from a press release, she would have learned that her peers from the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the Associated Press chose not to do the story because of the source. At this point Manning left the meeting and her editor assured the Dairy Coalition that any future stories dealing with [rBGH] and health would be closely scrutinized.”

A February 1996 internal document of the Dairy Coalition notes that “The Coalition is convinced its work in educating reporters and editors at the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and the Associated Press led to those organizations’ dismissal of Samuel Epstein’s pronouncements that milk from [rBGH] supplemented cows causes breast and colon cancer. They did not run the story.”

The same document brags of knocking prominent *New York Times* food reporter Marian Burros off the beat entirely: “As you may recall, the Dairy Coalition worked hard with the *New York Times* last year to keep Marian Burros, a very anti-industry reporter, from ‘breaking’ Samuel Epstein’s claim that milk from . . . supplemented cows causes breast and colon cancer. She did not do the story and now the NYT health reporters are the ones on the [rBGH] beat. They do not believe Epstein. Marian Burros is not happy about the situation.”

Given this climate of systematic intimidation and capitulation by news media management, the remarkable fact about the case in Florida is not that the story was killed. What makes this case unique is the dogged persistence that Akre and Wilson have shown in standing by their story.

THE DEAL THAT SOURED

Steve Wilson is an Emmy award-winning former top investigative reporter for the TV news program “Inside Edition.” His past work has produced stories that forced two recalls of faulty door latches in Chrysler minivans and exposed ABC news anchor Sam Donaldson’s moves to accept farming subsidies while criticizing them on the air. *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz calls Wilson “a dogged and careful investigator” with a

“high-decibel level of journalism.” Jane Akre has been a reporter and news anchor for 20 years and has won a prestigious Associated Press award for investigative reporting.

The couple’s contract with the station stipulated that Akre would be paid \$149,500 over two years to to file short investigative pieces every few days and anchor the station’s weekend morning newscasts. Wilson’s contract offered \$85,500 for 10 hours of work per week on larger stories that would be timed for the all-important “sweeps” rating periods.

At the time of their hiring, it seemed like a good deal for all concerned. Akre had recently given birth to the couple’s first child, and Wilson hoped signing up with a local station would give him the chance to spend more time at home and less on the road. “Jane and Steve, quite frankly, were only interested in a package deal . . . which suited me. They’re both talented individuals who happen to be married,” explained news director Daniel Webster.

A few months after their hiring, however, Webster was shown the door as part of a management shakeup following a \$2.5 billion package deal in which WTVT and nine other stations were sold to the Fox network. By then, Webster had already given Wilson and Akre the editorial go-ahead for their first big investigative piece—an exposé about possible health risks of rBGH-treated milk, which also provided solid documentation of numerous disturbing facts about Monsanto and its product:

- Posilac® was never properly tested before FDA allowed it on the market. A standard cancer test of a new human drug requires two years of testing with several hundred rats. But rBGH was tested for only 90 days on 30 rats. Worse, the study has never been published, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has refused to allow open scientific peer review of the study’s raw data.
- Some Florida dairy herds grew sick shortly after starting rBGH treatment. One farmer, Charles Knight—who lost 75% of his herd—says that Monsanto and Monsanto-funded researchers at University of Florida withheld from him the information that other dairy herds were suffering similar problems.
- Interviewed on camera, Florida dairy officials and scientists refuted Monsanto’s claim that every truckload of milk from rBGH-treated cows is tested for excessive antibiotics.
- Also on camera, Canadian government officials described what they called an attempt at bribery by Monsanto, which offered \$1 to \$2 million to gain rBGH approval in Canada.

- A visit by Akre to seven randomly-selected Florida dairy farms found that all seven were injecting their cows with the hormone. Wilson and Akre also visited area supermarket chains, which two years previously had promised to ask their milk suppliers not to use rBGH in response to consumer concerns. In reality, store representatives admitted that they have taken no steps to assure compliance with this request.
- Finally, the story dwelt heavily on concerns raised by scientists such as Epstein and Consumers Union researcher Michael Hansen about potential cancer risks associated with "insulin-like growth factor-I" (IGF-1). Treatments of rBGH lead to significantly increased levels of IGF-1 in milk, and recent studies suggest IGF-1 is a powerful tumor growth promoter.

SUDDEN DEATH

The resulting story, a four-part series, was cleared by management and scheduled to begin airing on Monday, February 24, 1997. As part of the buildup to network ratings sweeps, the story was already being heavily promoted in radio ads when an ominous letter arrived at the office of Fox News chairman Roger Ailes, the former Republican political operative who now heads Rupert Murdoch's Fox network news. The letter came from John J. Walsh, a powerful New York attorney with the firm of Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, who accused the reporters of bias and urged the network to delay the story in order to ensure "a more level playing field" for Monsanto's side of the story. "There is a lot at stake in what is going on in Florida, not only for Monsanto but also for Fox News and its owner," Walsh wrote.

"Monsanto hired one of the most renowned lawyers in America to use his power and influence," Wilson says. "Even though our stories had been scheduled to run, even though Fox had bought expensive radio ads to alert viewers to the story, it was abruptly cancelled on the eve of the broadcasts within hours of receiving the letter from Monsanto's lawyer."

Initially, the story was postponed for a week, during which station editors and lawyers fine-combed the story but could find no inaccuracies. Akre and Wilson also offered to do a further interview with Monsanto and supplied a list of topics to be discussed. In response, Walsh

fired back an even more threatening letter: "It simply defies credulity that an experienced journalist would expect a representative of any company to go on camera and respond to the vague, undetailed—and for the most part accusatory—points listed by Ms. Akre. Indeed, some of the points clearly contain the elements of defamatory statements which, if repeated in a broadcast, could lead to serious damage to Monsanto and dire consequences for Fox News."

What followed next, according to Wilson and Akre, was a grueling nightmare of perpetual delays and station-mandated rewrites—73 in all, none of which proved satisfactory to station management. "No fewer than six airdates were set and cancelled," Wilson recalls. "In all my years as a print and radio and local and national television reporter, I've never seen anything like it."

At one point, their lawsuit claims, WTVT general manager David Boylan told them he "wasn't interested" in looking at the story himself and pressured them to follow the company lawyer's directions, adding, "Are you sure this is a hill you're willing to die on?" On another occasion, Boylan allegedly told them, "We paid \$3 billion for these television stations. We will decide what the news is. The news is what we tell you it is." Boylan then notified them they would be fired for insubordination within 48 hours and another reporter would make the requested changes.

"When we said we'd file a formal complaint with the FCC if that happened," notes Wilson, "we were not fired but were each offered very large cash settlements to go away and keep quiet about the story and how it was handled." The reporters refused the settlement, which amounted to nearly \$200,000, and ultimately were fired in December 1997.

THE PERFECT CASE

Notwithstanding the dramatic issues and allegations at stake for reporters everywhere, the lawsuit has generated almost no national media attention and only a few stories in the Florida press—most of which are couched in timid "he said, she said" language that is sure to please Monsanto. One editorialist could not resist putting quotation marks around the word "facts" in discussing the case: "The 'facts' at issue were as slippery as a just-milked cow. . . . And the lines between advocacy, truth integrity and insubordination thin to pencil width when an expensive lawsuit's in the offing."

"Is this an example of local TV's growing reluctance to air hard-hitting investigative news pieces?" asked Eric Deggans of the *St. Petersburg Times* before concluding that "The truth, as always, lies somewhere in the

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middle.” After examining “the personality conflicts and lack of definitive scientific evidence” about rBGH, Deggans concludes that “Wilson’s and Akre’s case may not be the perfect example to illustrate the trend of increasingly irrelevant reporting in TV news.”

Actually, the case *is* a perfect example to illustrate that trend. In fact, Deggans’s response to the case shows how corporate interests have succeeded in dramatically shifting the terms of acceptability in journalistic discourse.

Good journalism—in particular, good *investigative* journalism—is almost always controversial and accompanied by “personality conflicts.” In dealing with technologically novel products like genetically-engineered hormones, “lack of definitive scientific evidence” is part of what makes the story controversial.

“Is there smoking-gun, iron-clad evidence available today that drinking milk from hormone-treated cows will lead to cancer in you or your children?” asks Wilson. “No. Many scientists will tell you because this is a drug injected into animals and not directly into humans the testing of its effects on milk-drinkers has never been thorough enough to know for sure. But ask yourselves this: how long did it take us all to learn about the effects of tobacco while the special interests insisted there was no evidence of any harm? Was it wrong to raise those issues before the link was indisputable? Or how about Agent Orange, dioxin, PCBs—all Monsanto products, by the way, all approved by the government, sworn by Monsanto to be safe. Was it wrong to raise those issues before we knew for certain?”

In reality, journalistic reluctance to discuss hypothetical, as-yet unproven health risks is driven more by fear of corporate lawsuits than by a desire to be “responsible.” One such lawsuit by the Food Lion grocery store chain resulted in a \$5.5 million judgment against ABC-TV in January 1997—just one month prior to Monsanto’s threatening letter aimed at killing the Akre-Wilson story. It was a verdict that Monsanto’s attorney made sure to mention in his letter to Roger Ailes. “What has Monsanto concerned . . . is the assault on their integrity . . . blatantly carried on by Ms. Akre and Mr. Wilson,” Walsh wrote. “In the aftermath of the Food Lion verdict, such behavior would alone be cause for concern.”

“A lot of people now are more fearful of doing investigative journalism since Food Lion . . . which is why we have so many lawyers involved,” admits Phil Metlin, who took over as WTVT’s news director in July 1997. “We have to be careful . . . and prudent.”

The result, of course, has been that attorneys rather than reporters are empowered to make journalistic decisions.

For its part, WTVT insists that this system of institutional self-censorship must be defended in order to avoid “chilling the give-and-take essential in any newsroom in getting the news on the air in a timely and responsible manner.” In legal court filings, the station insists that its “editorial discretion and judgment should not and cannot be the subject of second-guessing by a judge or jury, consistent with the First Amendment.”

WTVT also objects to the fact that Akre and Wilson “conducted two press conferences the day they filed their suit” and “have also created a web site to publicize their issues, where they have posted the complaint and exhibits and where they are soliciting public comments.” Worse yet, the website includes two complete scripts of their controversial rBGH report—one version showing how they wanted to write the story, and the other showing how the network wanted it edited. Neither version has ever aired. In fact, its filings in court claim that by posting the scripts on their website, Akre and Wilson “have misappropriated . . . property. . . . This misconduct by Plaintiffs is in itself a material and serious breach of the employment agreements [and] amounts to theft.”

Theft it may be, in some strange legal sense, but Akre and Wilson don’t care at this point. “I am risking my career by doing this, and I will probably never work in television again,” Wilson said, “But we wanted to get this story out.”

“As a mother, I know this is important information about a basic food I’ve been giving my child every day,” Akre said. “As a journalist, I know it is a story that millions of Floridians have a right to know. The television station we worked for promised the story would be told. Instead, we spent nearly a year struggling to tell it honestly and accurately, and four months after we were fired for standing up for the truth, the station has done nothing but continue to keep this important news secret. It is not right for the station to withhold this important health information, and solely as a matter of conscience we will not aid and abet their effort to cover this up any longer. Every parent and every consumer has the right to know what they’re pouring on their children’s morning cereal.”

In May 1998, a month after Wilson and Akre filed suit, the station aired an rBGH story by the investigative reporter who was hired to replace them. His story, predictably, omitted many of their criticisms of Monsanto.

A version of this article appeared in the June 1998 issue of The Progressive magazine. Further information about the Akre-Wilson lawsuit is available on their website at <<http://www.foxBGHSuit.com>>. ■