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Targeting Children Industry's Campaign to Redefine Environmental Education

by John F. Borowski

Florida's Orange County Convention Center is big. Big enough to hold the Sears Tower if you laid it on its side. So big you could walk ten miles and never leave the cement behemoth. Its electric bill is \$325,000 per month.

This hulking structure in Orlando seemed appropriate for the carnival-like setting of the National Science Teachers Convention, held April 6-9, 2000. It was the largest gathering of educators in the nation: more than 14,000 science teachers and hundreds of exhibitors passing out armloads of pamphlets, packets, books, stickers, posters, and other educational goodies. But though there were a handful of conservation groups at the event, those of us sitting at the Native Forest Council booth were clearly in the minority.

When I started teaching 20 years ago, I could never have imagined such a perverse display: industries and their front groups trying to justify everything from deforestation to extinction of species. Worse yet,

continued on next page

Flack Attack

Many of you have called during the last couple of months wondering why you haven't received a recent issue of *PR Watch*. The reason this issue is so late is that we have been busy wrapping up a new book, soon to be published by Penguin/Putnam. Titled *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles with Your Future*, it provides an in-depth look at many of the themes explored in our earlier book, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*. We will provide you with ordering information as soon as it is available.

Some people, of course, think that we should also apologize to the PR industry for the harsh things we say about them. They will be disappointed with this issue, especially the section beginning on page 5, which carries an apology from PR industry defector Eric

Sparling, who writes that he worked in the industry "for a year before I was utterly disgusted."

As the other stories in this issue illustrate, PR is a propaganda industry, misleading citizens and manipulating minds in the service of special interests. Dustin Beilke's report on last year's conference of the Public Relations Society of America, which appears on page 11, shows how industry insiders are responding to the emerging "age of information" and the growth of online activism.

Industry's war against the environmental movement remains one of the biggest PR battlegrounds. Our cover story by teacher John Borowski reports on how polluters are targeting kids in the classroom with slick PR. And on page 9, our review of the anti-environmental book *Facts Not Fears* shows how industry's effort to infiltrate the classroom is accompanied by an assault on existing environmental education programs.

they were targeting America's teachers and, ultimately, our children. Corporate America has dug its claws into one of the last refuges of commercial-free space left in our society: public schools. One of the pillars of our democracy, public education, is now for sale:

- The coal industry's Greening Earth Society passed out videos and teachers' guides to the "fallacies" of global warming that mocked environmental concerns.
- Weyerhaeuser boasted of the recovery of Mt. St. Helens, as if this somehow justified clear-cutting.
- The "Temperate Forest Foundation" offered a video titled "The Dynamic Forest." In this shrill presentation, insects and fire hurt forests, but industry provides the needed remedies—with the help of chain saws.
- The American Farm Bureau, avowed enemies of environmental education, propositioned teachers to reconsider the dangers of chemical biocides.

They were selling lies, and the teachers were buying—quickly filling their bags with curricula as corrosive as the pesticides that the Farm Bureau promotes. Where were the largest environmental groups to counter this frontal assault on environmental education? Where was the outcry of the educational community? Their deafening silence was tantamount to complicit resignation.

SELLING OUT OUR SCHOOLS

Most people consider our public schools to be hallowed ground, where young Americans of various religions, races, and social strata collectively learn the tools of citizenship. Yet multinational corporations now view our children's schools as convenient locations for the dissemination of propaganda debunking environmental concerns, and as the tip of an unimaginably profitable marketing iceberg. The stakes are incredibly high.

Education about the environment is being assaulted on two fronts. First, multinational corporations are designing and distributing environmental curricula that is professionally produced, easy to use, often free and incredibly biased in favor of industry. Second, some of the most prominent conservative think tanks in America are mounting a well-funded attack on genuine environmental education. (See related book review, page 9.)



John Borowski inspects materials on display at the National Science Teachers Convention.

Their objective is simple: protect industries that despoil the planet and prevent any emergence of citizen awareness. The spectrum of curricula is breathtaking and its shamelessness is overt. The American Nuclear Society provides "Let's Color and Do Activities With the Atoms Family." Materials I received from Exxon portray the Prince William Sound cleanup as a victory of technology, brushing over the cause of the disaster: the Exxon Valdez. But the most brazen campaign of miseducation is carried out by the timber industry.

Big timber spends millions on its thinly-veiled national PR campaigns, touting them as educational programs (which, of course, they generously donate to public schools). They offer hikes, presentations, and paid workshops for teachers. They distribute books, posters, videos, lesson plans, and other materials. Through the looking glass of big timber, old growth forest become decadent biological deserts that require clear-cutting in order to survive. Industry is not destroying the forests, the propaganda explains, it is "managing" them, acting as their stewards—even saviors.

A timber company in my own community offers a hike in a small section of their forest. The first activity in their educational pamphlet resonates strongly with the kids, and can shrewdly confuse the most earnest educator. The activity begins when the largest child in the group plays the big tree. The other children stand closely to the big tree and crowd it. The guide asks them to choose three words that describe how they, the little trees, feel when they are crowded together under the big tree. Then all the little trees scatter out, providing more space. The purpose of the exercise is to help them visualize the benefits of thinning the forest. (For full realism, perhaps some of the children should be asked to

visualize the feeling of being chopped down and processed into end tables.)

PROJECT LEARNING TREE

Often, the very organizations that preach the gospel of environmental education are actually industry shills. They have earthy names but clandestine roots. The American Forest Foundation (AFF) has a list of co-sponsors, cooperators and partners that includes some of the most egregious despoilers of our forests: Sierra Pacific, friend of clear-cuts in California; Pacific Lumber, pillagers of the redwoods; MacMillian Bloedel; Willamette Industries; Boise Cascade. But the real story is found in one of AFF's core programs, called "Project Learning Tree" (PLT).

I first encountered PLT several summers ago when I was asked to lead a tour of teachers through Opal Creek, a wilderness area in the Willamette National Forest. Opal Creek is perhaps the most intact, pristine low-elevation watershed in the Pacific Northwest. Ironically, it has been preserved thanks to the efforts of the very activists that organizations like PLT oppose.

At the time that I agreed to lead the tour, however, I knew nothing about PLT. I arrived early at our meeting place by the clear waters of the Santiam River, with its giant trees providing the backdrop on that sun-drenched day. I felt honored by the opportunity to hike with teachers from across the globe and discuss the old-growth forest that I had defended in a presentation before a US Senate committee.

Kathy McGlauffin, vice president of PLT, accompanied us on our sojourn. We walked two miles along some of Opal Creek's most spectacular riparian zones. Much to my surprise, McGlauffin spoke more like a timber booster than an environmental education expert. For every point I made about the destruction of national forests, McGlauffin revealed her true colors. It seemed inconceivable that the representative of a supposedly pro-forest organization could be so misinformed.

I explained that the native forests have been overcut and replanted, creating one-species tree farms instead of forest ecosystems. McGlauffin responded that this was my own personal opinion, not reality. She mistakenly told the group that hemlock and cedars were replanted in large numbers after clear-cutting. Amazingly, she even claimed that apple orchards could be considered forest ecosystems.

I later found out that PLT is an industry front group, backed by timber dollars. The organization's website and printed materials look like something produced by an environmental group. PLT boasts a network of 3,000 grassroots volunteers and more than 100 state coordinators. This grassroots veneer is shrewd greenwash, and unfortunately, it is working.

Formed in 1970, PLT works to promote paper products, logging and industrial management of our nation's forests. They offer this version of "environmental education" to students from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade and claim to have reached more than 500,000 educators and 25 million students.

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Managing Editor: John Stauber

Editor: Sheldon Rampton

Research Coordinator: Laura Miller

CMD Board of Directors: Linda Jameson, Joseph

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PLT's educational materials are damning enough. But, as the saying goes, if you want the truth, follow the money. The industries that bankroll PLT include some of the nation's most passionate clear-cutters.

TURNING THE TIDE

Surreptitious public relations campaigns and deceptive advertising are battling today for the hearts and minds of our children. This battle will affect their health and their collective futures. Will we turn over public learning centers to those who see our children as pawns in the game of quarterly profits? Will we allow them to create a generation of apathetic and jaded young adults, disinterested in social issues and steeped in indoctrination which tells them that corporate technology will save the day and that activism is for someone else?

The environmental community must call corporate America on its sham. I can't imagine, for example, why the North America Association of Environmental Education (the largest environmental education group in the world) has endorsed Project Learning Tree. We must refuse to ally ourselves with those who try to manipulate our children. Organizations that claim to speak for the environment must remove corporate polluters from their boards of directors.

At a recent conference, an environmental education activist told me we need to be more "centrist" in our approach to solving problems. But I cannot take the middle of the road on this one. My children are not saleable property. Would good parents compromise on the welfare of their child? Industry is not "centrist," and when environmentalists try to avoid conflict, we lose.

Parents must assume the role of front-line warriors in this winnable war. They must demand that any curricula provided by corporate sources be reviewed, just like the process by which textbooks are reviewed prior to adoption. They must challenge their local boards of education to keep their local schools free of commercial influences. They must ask their children to share the materials they receive at school. Corporate predators in education are no different than those who peddle tobacco to our children. They must bear the scorn of society and be stopped in their tracks.

Most importantly, we must highlight the wonders of true environmental education. Thousands of incredible teachers are working every day to enlighten their



The Project Learning Tree booth at the National Science Teachers Convention makes PLT appear to be a genuine environmental organization.

students. They need funding, and it is incumbent upon society to see that schools don't have to go begging to industry.

And teachers must begin to comprehend what I call the "teachable moment": that indelible instance when data and caring and insight all merge as one, representing all that is good about ecological sciences in public schools. This moment does not require a slick video, fancy equipment or corporate money with strings attached. All it takes is students and teachers, exploring the natural world together.

I have seen children connect to their natural world through discussing *A Sand County Almanac* in the classroom, hiking in the giant cedars of Opal Creek, and identifying invertebrates in our majestic tidal pools. This year alone, I have watched more than two dozen seniors choose environmental topics for their senior projects. Three young men are examining the possible breaching of the Snake River dams. Another young Hispanic man is painting a large mural on our school which depicts the trees of Opal Creek.

Children care about the world and its beauty which is our common heritage. They expect adults to lead, to represent their best interests, and to protect them from exploitative commercial influences. The battle to make America safe for childhood is a battle worth fighting. ■

John F. Borowski has been an environmental science teacher for 20 years. He sits on the advisory board of the Native Forest Council, and has testified in Congress on behalf of forest protection.

Catching Flack: A Canadian PR Man Spills the Beans

The public relations industry does not brook criticism lightly, as we discovered for the umpteenth time in June of this year when an interview with *PR Watch* founder John Stauber appeared on MediaChannel, a website that analyzes the global news and entertainment media.

When members of the PR industry learned that the interview was scheduled to run, their “crisis management” forces swung into action. Ray Gaulke, president and chief operating officer of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), who complains that “public relations doesn’t have a forum to tell its side of the story when the PR bashers take on our profession,” described industry’s response in the Summer 2000 issue of *Public Relations Strategist*, an in-house publication sent to the PRSA’s 30,000 members.

“We spoke to MediaChannel’s senior editor, Aliza Dichter,” Gaulke stated. “She said that, in this case, MediaChannel would be willing to provide that forum to PRSA. Typically, she was on deadline and the turnaround time was short (over the weekend). So I called Fraser [Seitel, the editor of *Public Relations Strategist*].” Seitel rose to the challenge and, in Gaulke’s words, “Stauber was rebutted with facts, with style, and with a sense of humor.”

To read John’s interview, Seitel’s response and other related commentary, visit the MediaChannel website (www.mediachannel.org/atissue/prunspun/index.html). The exchange was also reprinted in *Public Relations Strategist*, for which we are grateful. (Immediately after it appeared, we noticed a surge in sales of our book, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*.)

The “humor” in Fraser Seitel’s response consisted of an attempt to portray John as some kind of frothing malcontent. “John Stauber is an angry fellow,” he wrote. “He condemns reporters. ... He laments modern society. ... But most of all, Mr. Stauber loathes public relations—the practice that, he says, has become ‘a huge, powerful hidden medium available only to wealthy individuals, big corporations, governments and government agencies.’ ... Why don’t we cut Mr. Stauber and his misinformed opinions some slack. And next time you see him, give him a hug and tell him, ‘No hard feelings.’”

Perhaps Seitel should first send the hug brigade to soothe some of his angry colleagues in Canada, who went ballistic when former PR man Eric Sparling wrote a public apology, titled “Confessions of a Spin Doctor,” that appeared in the *Toronto Star* on June 21, 2000.

With the *Star*’s permission, we are reprinting Sparling’s apology on page six, followed by an article beginning on page seven that he wrote for *PR Watch* explaining

why he wrote the original essay and how the PR industry has responded to it. We think you will find it interesting reading.

You will notice that neither of Sparling’s essays mentions any of his former clients by name or the name of his former employer. That is because the terms of his employment contract expressly bar him from discussing publicly his work for specific clients. ■

Will CFA Save GM Foods?

Democratic party heavyweight Carol Tucker Foreman has left her lucrative job as a lobbyist and returned to the Consumer Federation of America (CFA) as director of its newly formed Food Policy Institute. Foreman was CFA’s executive director before joining the Carter administration and then becoming an insider lobbyist for clients including Philip Morris, Monsanto (the maker of genetically engineered bovine growth hormone), Procter & Gamble (maker of the fake fat Olestra), and other giants in the drug and insurance industry.

CFA takes money from unions and corporations, and Foreman’s return signals a new direction as it seeks to become a major player in biotechnology issues with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. In April its National Food Policy Conference 2000 was sponsored by the American Feed Industry Association and the Olsson, Frank & Weeda law firm, both of which have been driving forces behind the passage of “food disparagement” laws that gut free speech rights on food safety controversies. Other agribusiness funders of CFA’s conference included the International Food Information Council (IFIC), the National Food Processors Association, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, Archer Daniels Midland, General Mills, IBP, Safeway, International Dairy Foods Association and many more companies.

In May the White House appointed Foreman the sole “consumer advocate” on an international committee to reconcile the severe differences between the US and the rest of the world on the issue of genetically modified foods. This has outraged U.S. critics of GM foods including Greenpeace, the Center for Food Safety, Friends of the Earth, the Organic Consumers Association and Public Citizen. They have called on the White House to revoke her appointment, “given her close ties to industry.” ■

Confessions of a Spin Doctor

by Eric Sparling

I owe you an apology. I've lied, cheated and swindled. Yeah, I know. You've done that, too, but I did it professionally. I spent this past year working in a public relations agency.

Let me boil it down for you. The job had one goal: make you care about the things my clients cared about, even if they were inconsequential to your life. Unfortunately, I often succeeded. I didn't work for Hitler or anything, just huge corporations with one common purpose: make money for their shareholders.

You see, only giant corporations can afford to hire PR agencies. With only one year's experience to my credit, my boss was billing me out to clients at US \$120 per hour. With that kind of cash changing hands, you can bet that only one perspective was going to be represented by me—the one that had serious financial backing.

Business is booming. We outnumber journalists and the gap is increasing. The reason is simple: public relations works.

We write stories that our clients want us to write, send them to newspapers, magazines or TV stations and journalists write their stories using our information. Often they'll get another perspective on the topic by contacting another source and call that "balanced reporting."

Sometimes they won't—we really liked it when that happened. It meant that our message wasn't diluted by an opposing opinion. If we were lucky, the journalists we contacted would be lazy or overworked. That way they wouldn't have the time or energy to come up with their own story angles, quotes or research, and they'd just use ours—our quotes, our research, our priorities.

Every day began with scanning the papers to find stories about our clients. Then a fax would come through from a company that monitors the airwaves, letting us know whether anything about our clients was broadcast during the previous week.

Once we got hold of the news stories, we'd scan them to see if our "story" made it into the journalist's piece. Sometimes the headline we wrote in our news release would be the headline of the article in the newspaper. Sometimes the article was our news release, the only change being the addition of a reporter's name at the top. When that happened, it was called a "good hit," and we'd send it through to the client as justification of our exorbitant fees.

Why should you care? Simple. I promise you that you have read a spin doctor's words as you've scanned through your daily newspaper. The quote that is attributed to the CEO of the company in that front page article? He never said it—a PR guy created that quote and faxed it to the journalist in a news release. The editorial



Former flack Eric Sparling: "Every day you are being lied to by guys like me."

letter from the irate president of the union? A PR guy wrote it, it passed through the hands of six bureaucrats, and the president finally gave his seal of approval. Whole sentences, sometimes entire paragraphs, will be pulled directly from a news release and reprinted in a newspaper, words that were written by guys like me with the specific intent of convincing you to be a customer of my client.

Look, if the most important news actually made it into the paper, every day the front-page headline would read, "The developing world still isn't using condoms, the industrial world is living beyond the planet's means, and none of us will care how our stocks are doing when we're on our death beds."

That's the stuff that matters, but no one has figured out how to make money out of it, so PR agencies don't represent it. Instead, we read about a cool new soft drink.

I did it for a year before I was utterly disgusted. I didn't tell too many lies and I don't think I was responsible for any environmental catastrophes.

Some of my former colleagues might not speak to me after they read this. I guess I'm letting the cat out of the bag. Well, it had to be done, because every day you are being lied to by guys like me.

Don't believe it when you read a story about heart disease and the statistics they use come from a pharmaceutical company—even if they quote a doctor (they're on the payroll too).

Well, I've burned that bridge. I've joined the ranks of the great unemployed masses. One thing I'll say for public relations—it paid well. I guess that's how they get people to do it. ■

Reprinted with permission from the Toronto Star, June 21, 2000.

Further Adventures of a Public Relations Turncoat

by Eric Sparling

I was cynical about public relations right from the start. During one of my college PR classes, I was in charge of printing T-shirts for a pub crawl. I came up with the slogan, “We’re friendly because we’re paid to be.” My classmates loved it. The head instructor thought it was a gross misrepresentation of the industry. She was wrong.

The public relations industry is growing rapidly in Canada. A few years ago, community colleges recognized that there was a huge crop of university students graduating with liberal-arts educations who had virtually no work experience or job training. Canadian colleges began offering one-year, professional training courses for university grads. The PR course I took was one such program.

I got into the industry for a number of reasons. I thought I would be good at it. I thought I would be well paid. I thought I would find the work interesting. I hoped to meet powerful, fascinating people who were doing important things.

Some of those hopes came to pass. My career quickly kicked into high gear. I was promoted from an entry-level position to assistant executive in three months, the fastest promotion in the history of my agency. I received my first raise three months ahead of schedule.

Then I hit a plateau. The reason was simple—I was bored. After the excitement of my first business card wore off, after wearing a tie and commuting to an office became tediously mundane, and after scowling at suppliers who were running late stopped making me feel superior, it finally dawned on me: I was a salesman, nothing more. I was out of shape, losing my temper with loved ones and working long hours, just so that “the client” could get its press release about breath mints sent out on a Tuesday instead of a Wednesday. It was a bad deal. The priorities were wrong.

When I finally quit the job, one of my supervisors asked why I was leaving. I replied that there are two good reasons to do a job: you like what you do, or you believe in what you do. A great job will have both. An okay job will have one of the two. A bad job has neither. Public relations was a bad job for me.

“Not only do I not care if the clients get coverage in the newspaper, I hope they don’t,” I told my supervisor, “and I think it’s sad that the media allow us to use them to spread our message.”

On June 21, I wrote an essay for the *Toronto Star*, Canada’s largest newspaper. Titled “Confessions of a Former Spin Doctor” (see previous page), it was a brief article in which I apologized to readers for my participation in the “manufacturing of consent.”

The response to my article was immediate. The same day it ran, I received a phone call from the assistant producer of a local television talk show, asking if I would make an appearance in the following week’s program. After consulting my family and some journalist friends, I decided to accept. It didn’t end up happening—the story got bumped, I guess—but it was encouraging.

“Not only do I not care if the clients get coverage in the newspaper, I hope they don’t,” I told my supervisor, “and I think it’s sad that the media allow us to use them to spread our message.”

The reactions of my former colleagues have been mixed. Most were angry. They felt that I painted the industry with too broad a brush, but none of them effectively challenged the truth of the statements I made regarding the day-to-day activities and goals of a PR agency.

A week after my article appeared, the *Toronto Star* ran a few letters from business communicators. Obviously, I had struck a nerve. The people who wrote in to attack my article included Sarah Jones, president of the Canadian Public Relations Society, and Colin Buchanan, a partner with National (one of the largest PR agencies in the country). Buchanan described me as a “disaffected intern,” even though I was a salaried professional for more than a year. It’s a standard PR tactic—when you can’t attack the message, try to discredit the messenger. I’m sure my firm’s clients would like to know why they paid more than \$3,000 a week for the counsel of an “intern.”

A greater distortion of truth could be found in Buchanan’s statement that PR is “a profession characterized by positive relationships between public relations consultants and journalists,” and that he was “proud of the frequently symbiotic nature of our dealings with journalists.”

In my experience, the majority of journalists are mistrustful and contemptuous of public relations people. I should know. I had to phone lifestyle editors to try and pitch them stories about personal hygiene products, a hell on earth that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

A couple of the criticisms that have been leveled at me deserve a response. I will grant that not every public relations professional is a lying swindler who contributes to the general decline of democracy in our society. You may be exempt from my statements if you’re doing a bit

of promotional work for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I also stated that only giant corporations can afford the services of a public relations agency. Strictly speaking, this isn't entirely true. Large charity organizations occasionally employ agencies. Public relations agencies are happy to charge their exorbitant fees to the tiny number of not-for-profit organizations that can afford them. Agencies will also sometimes do pro bono work for charities, a PR exercise if ever there was one.

The lies that PR people tell are usually lies of omission rather than outright falsehoods.

There are public relations professionals who do good work, but not many. Make no mistake, the vast majority of public relations professionals don't work for a cancer foundation or the homeless. Most are engaged in work that is, at best, amoral. Some are actively engaged in promoting causes they know are detrimental to consumers, the environment and democracy. They are mercenaries. Their clients have a lot of money and they want more. You are their target.

The lies that PR people tell are usually lies of omission rather than outright falsehoods. They'll pay a nutritionist to talk about vitamins on a talk show and plug their product at the same time. The viewer who watches the TV program never knows that the professionally-accredited nutritionist was paid to endorse that product. Imagine if you went to your doctor for a prescription, and the physician prescribed Drug X. How would you react if you discovered that the physician had received cash from a pharmaceutical company to promote Drug X. Would that affect your opinion of the doctor's credibility? Of course. Would you still want to take the drug? Maybe, but you'd be more cautious.

This is exactly what happens every single day in media outlets around the world. A press release is received by a journalist, complete with a quote from a person with a PhD. The journalist has an "expert" to quote, and the story hits the newsstands, with the public none the wiser that the information it is reading is nothing more than a dressed-up advertisement.

One of my friends in the business told me that I don't give consumers enough credit, the implication being that the public is well aware of what goes on and that consumers are skeptical of the media. I don't think she's right. How can consumers know the truth when there is a billion-dollar industry keeping it from them? ■

Survey Shows Most PR People Still Won't Admit Lying

"The cardinal rule in public relations, as enunciated by the Public Relations Society of America and followed by every self-respecting public relations practitioner is 'never lie,'" says Fraser P. Seitel, editor of the PRSA's monthly magazine, the *Public Relations Strategist*.

Outside the public relations industry itself, however, many people regard PR as a synonym for spin, insincerity and deception. Now a survey by the trade publication *PR Week* shows that a substantial number of PR people themselves agree with that assessment.

Published in *PR Week's* May 1 edition, the survey asked 1,700 PR executives about the ethics in their industry. The result: 25 percent admitted they lied on the job, 39 percent said they had exaggerated the truth, 44 percent said they felt uncertain of the ethics of a task they were asked to perform, and 62 percent said they had felt compromised in their work, either by being told a lie by their client or by not having access to the full story.

PR Week Editor Adam Leyland tried to put the best spin possible on these numbers. "I would really like to

survey the world of businesspeople, or the world of journalists, and find out how many of *them* have lied," he told the *New York Times*. He noted that the survey has prompted hundreds of reactions from people who work in PR. "Some of them have said they just want to resign from the industry and lie on a beach, examining their navel," Leyland said. "I say, look at the bright side. If 25 percent told a lie, that means 75 percent did not."

PRSA's Fraser Seitel also tried to brush off the result of the survey. "In a society where the President of the United States acknowledges he lied to the United States acknowledges he lied to the American public, the failings of a minority of public relations people is more understandable," Seitel said.

We're tempted to ask how many PR people earn their living *helping* the President to lie, but let's not quibble. What we'd like to know is why we should believe the 75 percent who say they *don't* lie. When it comes to truth and lies, our experience is that many PR people don't know the difference. ■

Facts Not Fear Wants to Make the World Safe for Styrofoam

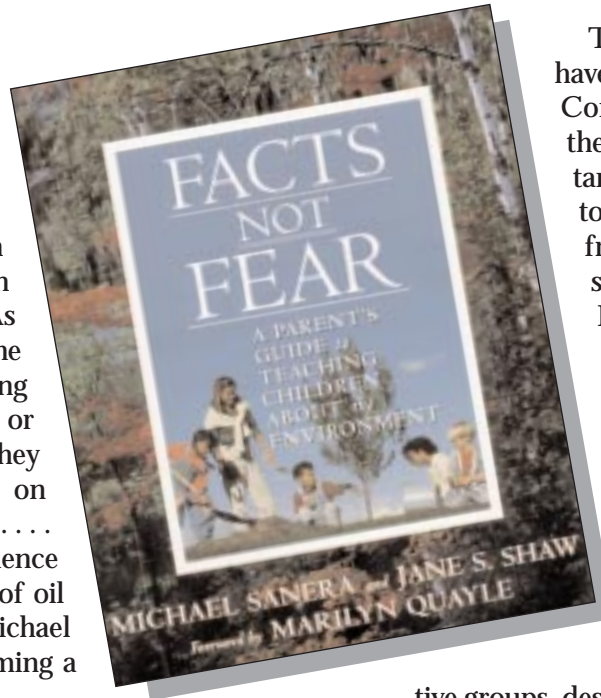
Book Review by John Stauber

Michael Sanera and Jane S. Shaw's book, *Facts Not Fear*, purports to be a guide for parents of school-age children confronted by "junk science" and "fearmongering environmentalism." They say they were inspired to write the book when Sanera "was driving his teenage son Andy and a friend to a movie. As Michael listened to the boys talking, he noticed that they weren't discussing last Sunday's Denver Broncos game or the latest Sylvester Stallone film. They were figuring out the exact date on which the world would run out of oil. . . . The boys explained that their science textbook said that proven reserves of oil could last only seventy years. . . . Michael began to realize why Andy was forming a gloomy view of the future."

Imagine the parental horror. Could it have been any worse if he'd caught the boys stashing marijuana in their school lockers? And Andy wasn't the only kid who had them worried. Shaw recalls sitting with her own seven-year-old son at a pizza place near their home. "David looked at the plastic cup that held his Dad's soft drink. 'Do you know what you could do that would really help, Mom? . . . You could stop using Styrofoam.' . . . Jane's heart sank. She knows that using plastic does not harm the Earth any more than using paper or glass. But how to explain that to a seven-year-old? And what else had David learned that was mistaken? And how could she undermine his trust in his teachers. . . . She didn't know what to say. 'Maybe plastic isn't all that bad,' she ventured."

"Who do they learn is responsible for this careening toward ecological disaster?" Sanera and Shaw ask. "We are. Parents, the current generation, have brought the Earth to the edge of doom," but "the good news is that these claims are not true."

Facts Not Fear is conversational and anecdotal in style, often written in the voice of fellow parents who "like you" are "worried about what our children are learning." But Sanera and Shaw are not merely parents who happen to love styrofoam and Sylvester Stallone. They are committed, paid activists in the conservative anti-environmental movement. Sanera directs the Claremont Institute's Center for Environmental Education Research, while Shaw is a Senior Associate at the Political Economy Research Center in Bozeman, Montana.



These non-profit enterprises may have less familiar names than the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the CATO Institute or other think tanks headquartered in Washington, DC, but their money comes from the same pro-industry sources: the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, and the William H. Donner Foundation—names that will be familiar to anyone who has studied the funding patterns of the anti-environmental conservative movement.

The *Right Guide*, a national directory of conservative groups, describes Sanera's Claremont Institute as "one of the most influential conservative think tanks on the West Coast." Its projects include "Doctors for Responsible Gun Ownership," which opposes efforts by the U.S. Center for Disease Control to treat gun safety as a public health issue. In 1996, says the *Right Guide*, the Claremont Institute spent \$136,480 on "academic programs to help high school teachers and journalists understand 'the principles of American Democracy.'"

Jane Shaw's employer, the Political Economy Research Center, is part of the so-called "wise use" movement which has been waging war against green groups and activists especially in the western United States. Fighting under the banner of "property rights," the wise use movement is heavily subsidized by the logging, mining, drilling and off-road-vehicle industries.

Facts Not Fear and other anti-environmental books have found a home at Regney Publishing Inc. in Washington, DC. Regney has also published Dixy Lee Ray's books, *Trashing the Planet* and *Environmental Overkill*, two of the earliest titles in what has become an ideological genre. It also published *Animal Scam* by Kathleen Marquardt, an anti-animal rights activist closely associated with a bizarre group called the American Policy Foundation, which accuses environmental writer Jeremy Rifkin of promoting "suicide, abortion, cannibalism and sodomy." Other Regney titles include *Inquisition*, a book that paints the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's tax evasion conviction in a favorable light, and a flattering biography of James Watt, Ronald Reagan's felonious Secretary of the Interior, written by "wise use" founder Ron Arnold.

BALANCING ACT

The dishonesty in *Facts Not Fear* begins with the photograph on its cover, which depicts an idyllic scene of children planting a tree under the supervision of a smiling adult—the sort of activity through which adults can help children develop an appreciation of their natural environment. The text of the book does provide lists of recommended learning activities for children, but the purpose of those activities is diametrically opposed to the tree-hugging cover photo. In the chapter on forests, for example, the activity it recommends is, “Visit a lumberyard with your children.”

The foreword to *Facts Not Fear*, written by Marilyn Quayle, says the book offers “what parents and teachers need to keep a sense of balance about our environment,” so that “our children” can “appreciate and enjoy nature, not see it as a source of anxiety and alarm.” But “balance,” as defined by the authors, means unrelenting war against what they see as a massive liberal conspiracy.

“During the past three decades,” write Sanera and Shaw, “a few emotionally powerful ideas—the idea that technology is bad, that we are running out of resources, that population is out of control—have taken hold. Although these ideas are not likely to stand the test of time, environmental groups continue to hawk them.”

Sanera and Shaw say they reviewed “more than 130 textbooks, 170 environmental books for children, and numerous examples of curriculum materials.” Amid these thousands of pages they managed to find a handful of errors, but mainly their complaint is about broad conclusions rather than specific facts. To their dismay, the books they reviewed tend to repeat the conclusions of scientists who warn that the past century of industrialism has brought about ecological crises.

Facts Not Fear champions “good” scientists and castigates “bad” ones. The latter, it says, are in cahoots with the liberal media, teachers, opportunistic politicians and green activists bent on scaring us all out of our wits.

“Some scientists . . . reinforce the message conveyed by the media,” the authors state. “Stephen Schneider, a scientist at . . . the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, told *Good Housekeeping* readers that world global warming would mean that food and water supplies would be threatened (temporarily at least), that certain diseases might go haywire, that numerous species of animals or plants—even whole ecosystems—would be endangered, and that both the temperature and the level of the oceans would rise, leading to more likelihood of severe storms and flooding of the coastlines.”

Why would a highly regarded scientist like Schneider stick his neck out by making these sorts of statements? The answer, according to Sanera and Shaw, is money. “Since so much scientific research is funded by government grants, some scientists often improve their access to funds if they can show politicians that their work may ‘save the planet.’” They claim that Schneider’s views are disputed by “equally reputable scientists.”

In the chapter on forests, the recommended activity is, “Visit a lumberyard with your children.”

So why aren’t we hearing more from the global warming skeptics? Fear of reprisals, the authors explain: “Other scientists who downplay crises may find themselves in hot water because they are threatening the budgets of their colleagues.”

According to Sanera and Shaw, this alleged conspiracy to suppress dissident views extends all the way to the White House and to Vice President Al Gore in particular. “His message: Agree with him or be quiet. Because of his prominence, scientists had to listen. . . . Environmental crises can boost political careers. . . . In Gore’s view, global warming is ‘the most serious threat that we have ever faced; and ‘we must act . . . even before we know every last detail about the crisis.’”

Before we get too carried away with this depiction of Gore as an eco-extremist, perhaps someone should check in with the people of East Liverpool, Ohio. Back in 1992 when Gore first campaigned for vice president, they heard him promise to block a planned toxic waste incinerator that was being built just 400 yards away from an elementary school, in a flood plain in a valley that experiences frequent pollution-trapping air inversions. “The very idea,” said candidate Gore at the time, was “just unbelievable to me.”

Once in office, however, he quickly reversed himself—not surprisingly, since Little Rock investment banker Jackson Stephens, the Clinton-Gore campaign’s biggest financial backer, was involved in financing the incinerator. Today the incinerator is chugging away, pumping tons of toxins into the air each year including dioxins, acid gases like hydrogen chloride, and heavy metals including mercury, lead and chromium.

If you want an example of environmental rhetoric that harms school children, think of the East Liverpool incinerator. Politicians like Al Gore may talk a good game, but when push comes to shove it is polluters like Jackson Stephens who “boost political careers,” and the

politicians know it. The eco-bashing rhetoric of writers like Sanera and Shaw serves mostly as an ideological diversion, making the politicians who sell out the environment—Democrats and Republicans alike—seem reasonable by comparison.

Facts Not Fear attempts to debunk specific major environmental and health concerns—over-population, depletion of natural resources, forest destruction, species extinctions, air pollution, climate change, pesticide contamination. The 150 pages that it devotes to these topics can be summed up as, “Don’t worry, be happy.”

Sanera and Shaw offer specific suggestions on how parents “can readily answer questions that your children may ask.” The answer to each question is pretty much the same: “Are there too many people? No. . . . Does population growth cause starvation? No. . . . Is America running out of trees? No. . . . Will the rainforests disappear? No. . . . Are Americans exploiting the rainforests by eating too much meat? No.” A few sentences of familiar rationalizations provide the counterweight to each carefully posed question.

Marilyn Quayle’s preface promises that these claims have all been carefully reviewed by “respected scholars . . . so you can read this book with confidence.” The

“scholars” cited, however, are names that will be familiar to anyone who has monitored the far-right anti-environmental movement: Dennis Avery of the Hudson Institute, Ronald Bailey and Michael Fumento of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Robert Balling of Arizona State University, Joseph Bast of the Heartland Institute, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute, Frederick Seitz and Sallie Baliunas of the George C. Marshall Institute, Steven Safe of Texas A&M, and the late Julian Simon of the Cato Institute.

The purpose of *Facts Not Fear* is not to enlighten parents, teachers or students, nor is it to broaden scientific debate or inquiry. The real goal is political: to attack the very idea that environmental problems exist, and especially to disparage the view that government or citizen action might be necessary to address these problems.

Sanera and Shaw conclude their book with a “what we can do” chapter for parents, warning that “you may be in a state that has mandatory environmental education laws. The objective of most of this legislation is to indoctrinate students in the environmental views favored by activist groups. Unfortunately, these individuals and groups are not generally receptive to providing both sides of issues.” Then again, neither is *Facts Not Fear*. ■

Cool vs. Old School: Public Relations Faces the Information Age

by *Dustin Beilke*

Judging by the 1999 annual conference of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), non-profit public interest groups can look forward to some good news and some bad news in the bold new cyber future.

Titled “Surfing the Information Tidal Wave,” the conference was held October 24-26 at the Hilton Hotel in Anaheim, California. Seminars and workshops bore titles such as “Mergers and Acquisitions: Public Relations’ Critical Role,” and “Counteracting Anti-Corporate Online Activism.”

As the latter title indicates, the bad news is that corporate America is ramping up its PR efforts to undermine grassroots activists. The good news is that the best mouths in the public relations industry don’t seem to know what they’re talking about.

Take, for example, the two keynote speakers at the conference’s, Gary Hamel and Al Ries.

Hamel, a professor with ties to the London Business School and Harvard Business School, provided the opening night keynote. In an address littered with buzzwords and trendy internet references, he talked about the information age as “the end of bullshit,” “the end of progress,”

“an antidote to denial,” and “the enemy of orthodoxy.” Echoing a mantra that would be repeated throughout the three-day conference, Hamel said it is essential for public relations and marketing professionals to be ahead of the e-world curve.

In these rapidly changing times, Hamel said, “incumbency is a disadvantage. Never has incumbency been worth less.” In other words, if you invent something and make it profitable, all you are really doing is setting yourself up for a fall when the next Monster.com comes along and make an even bigger killing at your expense.

Throwing around words like “radical” and “revolutionary,” Hamel urged his audience to think creatively and stay ahead of the competition. Indeed, he told the several hundred white, middle-class and overwhelmingly corporate PR practitioners who assembled to hear him speak that “You have to be a novelty addict. Go cool hunting . . . search for underappreciated trends . . . find transcendent themes . . . follow the chain of consequences . . . look for history’s recurring patterns.”

Fair enough. But 24 hours later Al Ries and his daughter Laura Ries had a different message. They

specialize in “brand building,” and the secret words to remember about building a successful brand, according to Al Ries, are: “You don’t have to be good, you just have to be first.” You sell something by “getting inside the mind” with publicity, Ries said, not advertising. “Publicity provides the credentials that create the environment for advertising,” Ries said to great applause. “The way you get into the mind today is not by having a better product or service, it is by being first,” he said to knowing nods.

The way the Rieses see it, firms achieve success when their names become synonymous with products people decide they want or need. Mercedes built its brand by being a company known for having really good, really expensive, luxury cars. The company is doing itself a disservice these days, Ries says, by dabbling in the production of less luxurious cars that more people can afford. “They are diluting their brand,” he said.

But doesn’t being first make one the incumbent? And hadn’t Hamel previously said that being first is a disadvantage? This apparent contradiction did not seem to bother any of the well-dressed conference attendees.

RUTTING OUT THE GRASSROOTS

As for the provocatively titled workshops, they too delivered less malevolence than *PR Watch* readers might have expected. I was not the only conferee who seemed a little disappointed when the moderators urged us all to play nice.

The workshop with the most lurid title was “Corporate Imperialism: Public Relations’ Global Challenge,” led by John F. Budd of the Omega Group. The workshop started off with Budd asking, “Is the ugly American back, and what can we do about it?”

Despite the promise of its name and Budd’s tantalizing opening question, the workshop failed to deliver and the attendees could be counted on both hands by the time it ended. Budd’s message was that American corporations are now much more visible abroad than the United States government or military. With this presence comes a greater responsibility for companies to at least respect and consider other cultures and nation states. As examples of Ugly American activity, Budd mentioned Coca-Cola’s tendency to buy up and shut down local soft drink companies all over the world, and McDonald’s overly defensive reaction to French farmers, but he did not spend much time analyzing those two fascinating cases. Instead he talked about his successful personal experiences working productively with non-American flacks and businessmen, to the snores and blank stares of the clearly unenthralled.

The workshop on mergers and acquisitions contained benign lip service about putting employees’ feelings first, though workshop facilitator Ian Campbell admitted, “your shareholders are your primary audience.” Obviously employees aren’t, since mergers and acquisitions frequently involve worker layoffs.

Another speaker at the same workshop, Sherry Hemingway, described her experience managing PR for the 1998 Northwestern Mutual Life/Frank Russell Company merger. taught her a valuable lesson about the docility of prestigious news organizations like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. “What I found so amusing was that they would very willingly stand in queues and stick to very rigorous time schedules, and they were absolutely used to it,” Hemingway said. “I was pleased with the media treatment.”

The workshop on “Counteracting Anti-Corporate Online Activism” was led by moderators James Alexander of eWatch and James Lukaszewski of The Lukaszewski Group. They stressed the importance of “active listening,” of allowing opponents their right to speak, of the difficulty of pursuing intellectual property cases against online sites. They noted in passing that a lot of activist sites have a professional look to them and could teach some corporations a thing or two about maintaining an attractive web site.

The real revelation at that workshop came when Alexander and Lukaszewski asked if audience members had any questions. In rapid succession, the attendees asked:

- Is there any way of tracking activists online?
- Should you identify yourself honestly when interacting with activists, or should you pretend to be someone else?
- What about using third-voice services to go after enemy sites and objectionable messages?

Alexander and Lukaszewski claimed to answer these questions with their homilies to honesty and straight shooting, but I sensed in the audience a disappointment about the lack of red meat. PR pros are not accustomed to fighting out in the open or on a level playing field, and they don’t want to start now.

For the PR pros assembled at the conference, the growth of the internet seemed to evoke a greater sense of fear than opportunity, even though the corporations they represent already own most of the internet and are acquiring a greater proportion of it every day. ■