

## 3 I hear 'reason', but I see lies

*Sociologist David Miller*

STRATEGIC use of science, or the appearance of science, is a well-used part of the armoury of the public relations industry. It is effective – it delayed action on tobacco for decades – and it poisons the public perception of actual science. The public relations and lobbying industries were themselves founded on attempts to pervert rationality and science in the service of vested interests. The very earliest PR practitioners, such as Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, were adept at this. Bernays famously put psychology to use in promoting cigarettes to women in the 1920s – by styling them “torches of freedom” and associating them with equality.

Bernays was among the first to make a profession out of what he called the “conscious and intelligent manipulation” of the beliefs and behaviour of the public. Those who “manipulate this unseen mechanism” of society were, he wrote in his book *Propaganda*, an “invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country”.

### *Linguist and activist Noam Chomsky*

**On co-option:** Anything that is co-optable is going to be co-opted by power systems for doctrinal purposes – for exploitation, violence, oppression, whatever – and science is no exception. So scientists should be very scrupulous and clear about the limits of their understanding – particularly important in a culture that tends to be deferential to expertise. Claims are made by real scientists that go way beyond what they could possibly support. That leads to blind acceptance of, or scepticism about science, both wrong.

**On reason and power:** George Orwell said that in a free society, ideas can be suppressed but without the use of force. He refers to the indoctrination of educated people, which instils the notion that there are things you don't talk about. Reason is “dangerous” because it leads you to question faith, not just faith that the world was created 6000 years ago but faith in the

The PR industry today prefers to be invisible, particularly when its task is to fend off the consequences of actual science. When the desired message is likely to be treated with scepticism if given openly by a corporation or politician, it must be put in the mouth of someone seemingly disinterested. What appears more disinterested than a dissenting view from a scientist? When the interested party needs an even greater distance between them and their message, the PR industry sets up “third party” front groups.

Both tactics are clearly documented in the battle to protect the tobacco industry. We see the same strategy of publicising doubts – enough to prevent political action, or merely to delay it until a return has been made on investments – in today's strategic use of science in climate-change denial, and to muddy the waters around obesity and binge-drinking as they become crisis issues.

A local case that I have followed in detail started with a study of toxic industrial

secular religions that lead to state power. Take Iraq. In the US we cannot have a principled discussion about the invasion of Iraq as we can about the Russian invasion of Chechnya. It's taken for granted that our goals, if achievable, are the right goals. If we approached this with reason, meaning that we apply the same standards to ourselves that we do to others, we would have a radical critique of power structures, and that can't be tolerated.

I think the sharpest turn away from reason is among the educated intellectuals, who advocate reason and blame others for turning away from it. If we can't even reach the level of applying to ourselves rational standards of the kind that we apply to others, our commitment to reason is very thin.

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See [www.newscientist.com/reason](http://www.newscientist.com/reason) for the full interview

contaminants in farmed salmon, published in *Science* in 2004 (vol 303, p 227). It was greeted with a chorus of condemnation in the press. Many of the voices were described as academic scientists, yet almost all had financial links to the industry which were undisclosed in the reporting. The study was actually well grounded, but the campaign to remove the stain of “poisoned salmon” from the public mind was largely successful.

On a bigger scale, while the International Life Science Institute (ILSI) sounds scientific, it is actually a food-industry lobby group funded by hundreds of the biggest food, pharma and chemical companies. For years it was more or less directed by the Coca Cola company. It was able to infiltrate the World Health Organization process examining dietary sugars by covertly funding some of the scientists involved. In January 2006, the WHO decided that ILSI could no longer take part in WHO activities setting microbiological or chemical standards for food and water.

The PR industry remains busy creating and managing front groups. The Scientific Alliance turned out to be run from the offices of Foresight Communications, a PR firm in central London, and at launch was funded by Scottish quarry owner Robert Durward.

The Social Issues Research Centre “fosters the image of... a heavyweight research body,” as Annabel Ferriman wrote in the *British Medical Journal* in 1999 (vol 319, p 716). It is run by the PR/marketing company MCM Research, which used to announce on its website: “Do your PR initiatives sometimes look too much like PR initiatives? MCM conducts psychological research on the positive aspects of your business... The results do not read like PR.”

Ironically, the biggest asset such operations have is humans' deeply ingrained sense of fairness. They do not have to win a scientific argument. They merely have to convince citizens – among them politicians, judges and juries – that there are “two sides to the argument”. The stage for inaction, or rather for continuing their sponsors' harmful activities, is thus set. Worse, perhaps, in principle, is the creation of a perception that all rational inquiry is serving some hidden interest. If every dispute is presented as having two incomprehended sides, why, in fairness, not see them as equivalent?

The defence is simple: full public funding of research, with enhanced ethics standards including transparency about funding. Simple in principle, that is. ●

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