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HEADLINES:

THE ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

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THE ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

The enemies of democracy are flexing their muscles. A corporate front group calling itself Frontiers of Freedom has petitioned U.S. tax officials to revoke the tax-exempt status of Rainforest Action Network (RAN), a major environmental organization (www.ran.org). If successful, the petition would put Rainforest Action Network out of business, and would open the door for lethal attacks on other environmental advocates. Frontiers of Freedom acknowledged to the *Wall Street Journal* that, if successful against RAN, "it will challenge other environmental groups."^[1]

Frontiers of Freedom was founded in 1995 by Malcolm Wallop, a former U.S. Senator (R-Wyo.) and "friend of vice-president Dick Cheney," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* reports that Frontiers is funded by Philip Morris Companies, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Holdings, Inc., and the Exxon Mobil Corporation.

This latest corporate attack on freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of assembly, is not random. It is part of an accelerating campaign to replace representative democracy with control by corporate elites.

Now a new book, *Trust Us, We're Experts!* by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, provides a chilling, documented history of ongoing corporate efforts to use propaganda and "public relations" to distort science, manipulate public opinion, discredit democracy, and consolidate political power in the hands of a wealthy few.^[2]

The Big Idea behind the anti-democratic corporate-power movement is that people cannot be trusted to make political decisions because they are irrational, emotional, and illogical. This cynical view of humans is widely held by the public relations industry's experts but also by

the scientific experts they employ to 'guide' the public. For example, physics professor H.W. Lewis (University of California, Santa Barbara), a well-known risk assessor, says people worry about non-problems like nuclear waste and pesticides because they are irrational and poorly educated. "The common good is ill served by the democratic process," he says. (pg. 111)

If people are not rational they cannot be guided by reason, so they must be manipulated through emotion, PR experts say (thus justifying their own propaganda services). For example, a spokesperson for Burson-Marsteller, a PR firm that manipulates the public on behalf of Philip Morris, Monsanto, Exxon Mobil and others, told the Society of Chemical Industry in London in 1989, "All of this research is helpful in figuring out a strategy for the chemical industry and for its products. It suggests, for example, that a strategy based on logic and information is probably not going to succeed. We are in the realm of the illogical, the emotional, and we must respond with the tools that we have for managing the emotional aspects of the human psyche... The industry must be like the psychiatrist..." (pg. 3)

The PR psychiatric manipulation industry is now enormous. Corporations spend at least \$10 billion each year hiring PR propaganda experts (pg. 26) and our federal government spends another \$2.3 billion or so (pg. 27) -- and these are no doubt underestimates. But these huge sums are not wasted -- they provide major benefits to the clients. For example, about 40% of all stories that appear in newspapers are planted there by PR firms on behalf of a specific paying client. Because most radio and TV news is simply re-written from newspaper stories, a substantial proportion of the public's "news" originates as PR propaganda. Naturally the connection to the PR source is edited out.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* analyzed the *Wall Street Journal* and found that more than half its stories are "based solely on press releases" even though many carry the misleading statement, "By a *Wall Street Journal* Staff Reporter." Thus what passes for news these days is, as often as not, corporate propaganda. Tongue in cheek, Rampton and Stauber refer to the major news media as the disinfotainment industry.

Unfortunately, as Rampton and Stauber make crystal clear with example after example, all of this manipulation has devastating consequences for real people. The news media largely set the limits on public discussion, and thus on public policy debate. What is excluded from the news is often more significant than what gets inserted. For example, approximately 800,000 new cases of occupational illness arise each year, making occupational illness much larger than AIDS and roughly equivalent to cancer and all circulatory diseases, but most people have no idea that this is so. (See REHN #578.)

Combined with on-the-job injuries, work-related illnesses kill about 80,000 workers each year -- nearly twice the national death total from automobile accidents. In 1991 former *New York Times* labor correspondent William Serrin reported (but, notably, *not* in the *New York Times*) that about 200,000 workers had been killed on the job since the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) in 1970, and that an additional 2 million workers had died from diseases caused by conditions where they worked. [3] That's 273 work-related deaths *each day*, day after day after day. This corporate carnage is ignored by the news media, which prefer to keep us focused on yuppie SUV crashes, and crimes of passion.

During the same 20-year period, 1970-1990, an additional 1.4 million workers were permanently disabled in workplace accidents. Yet during those 20 years, only 14 people were prosecuted by the Justice Department for violation of workplace safety standards and only one person went to jail -- for 45 days for suffocating two workers to death in a trench cave-in.

PR experts "spin" stories for the media on the assumption that most reporters are too overworked (or too lazy) to search out the truth for themselves. But Rampton and Stauber exhaustively document that "spin" goes much farther than merely providing a "news hook," a viewpoint, or a few facts. Modern corporate propaganda involves purchasing scientific opinions and planting them in scientific journals (without, of course, mentioning the money connection to the corporate benefactor). Tobacco companies invented this technique, but now others are using it freely. For example, in the early 1990s, tobacco companies paid \$156,000 to a handful of scientists to sign their names to letters written by tobacco company lawyers. The letters were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the *Lancet*, the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and were then cited by the tobacco companies as if they had been written by independent scientists. "It's a systematic effort to pollute the scientific literature," says professor of medicine Stanton Glantz (University of California, San Francisco), a longtime critic of Big Tobacco. (pg. 199)

In 1999 drug maker Wyeth Laboratories commissioned ghost writers to manufacture ten medical articles promoting a combination of Wyeth drugs called fen-fen, as a treatment for obesity. Two of the articles actually got published in peer-reviewed journals. After fen-fen was pulled from the market for permanently damaging peoples' heart valves, lawyers for injured victims discovered that Wyeth had edited the articles to play down and occasionally delete descriptions of side effects caused by fen-fen. Prominent scientists put their names on these articles in return for fees as small as \$1000 to \$1500 -- and journal editors published the articles as if they represented independent scientific inquiry. Wyeth could then cite these "independent" studies to convince doctors to prescribe fen-fen.

In 1996, Sheldon Krinsky of Tufts University examined 789 articles published by 1105 researchers in 14 leading life science and biomedical journals. In 34% of the articles, at least one of the chief authors had an identifiable financial interest connected to the research. None of these financial interests was disclosed in the journals. Krinsky said the 34% figure was probably an underestimate because he couldn't check stock ownership or corporate consulting fees paid to researchers.

Science, like democracy, depends crucially upon the free flow of information. When secrecy is imposed, errors go undetected and fallacies proliferate -- only to be discovered years later, if at all. [4] For example, secrecy has allowed the U.S. military to create a "pattern of exaggeration and deception" in its reports to Congress, just as secrecy allowed the military to waste more than \$100 billion (!) in failed attempts to create a workable "star wars" missile defense system.[5] In 1993, a front-page story in the *New York Times* began, "Officials of the 'Star Wars' project rigged a crucial 1984 test and faked other data in a program of deception that misled Congress..."[6] Secrecy invites deception and destroys democratic accountability.

Rampton and Stauber point out that "Corporate funding creates a culture of secrecy that can

be as chilling to free academic inquiry as funding from the military. Instead of government censorship, we hear the language of commerce: nondisclosure agreements, patent rights, intellectual property rights, intellectual capital." (pg. 214)

A key feature of the corporate anti-democracy strategy of the past 20 years is reduced government funding for needed research, thus inviting corporate funders to step in. This is what "tax cut" really means. Tax cuts are not primarily aimed at giving families another \$300 to spend -- they are mainly intended to reduce the capacity of governments to fund needed public services, such as medical research. As a result, corporations are asked to provide the funds and thus they gain an opportunity to influence the national research agenda and the results.

In 1994 and 1995 researchers at the Massachusetts General Hospital surveyed more than 3000 academic scientists and found that 64% of them had financial ties to corporations. They reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, that 20% of the 3000 researchers admitted that they had delayed publication of research results for more than 6 months, to obtain patents and to "slow the dissemination of undesired results." "Sometimes if you accept a grant from a company, you have to include a proviso that you won't distribute anything except with its OK. It has a negative impact on science," says Nobel-prize-winning biochemist Paul Berg. (pg. 215) In 1999 Drummond Rennie, editor of *JAMA*, said private funding of medical research was causing "a race to the ethical bottom.... The behavior of universities and scientists is sad, shocking, and frightening," Rennie said. "They are seduced by industry funding, and frightened that if they don't go along with these gag orders, the money will go to less rigorous institutions," he said. (pg. 217)

In this rich, deep book, Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber have painstakingly documented the specific techniques that PR experts and their corporate masters employ to deceive the courts, the legislatures, the media, educators, and the public. The next time someone accuses you of "chemophobia" or of relying on "junk science" you'll know you're dealing with corporate manipulators who are being guided by PR skanks. Their overriding goal is to discredit decision-making by the public and replace it with control by corporate elites. They know better, they're experts, trust them.

The final chapter of this important book tells us how to fight back. If you care about democracy, science or simple truth and want to know exactly how corporate elites subvert all three, this is the book for you.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union,
UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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1. Anne Marie Chaker, "Conservatives Seek IRS Inquiry On Environmental Group's Status," *Wall Street Journal* (June 21, 2001) pg. unknown.
 2. Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles With Your Future* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001). ISBN 1-58542-059-X. And check out their web site: <http://www.prwatch.org/cgi/spin.cgi>.

3. William Serrin, "300 Dead Each Day: The Wages of Work," *The Nation* Vol. 252, No. 3 (January 28, 1991), pgs. 80-81.
4. Tim Weiner, "Military Accused of Lies Over Arms," *New York times* (June 28, 1993), pg. A10 quoting a 3-year investigation by the U.S. General Accounting Office.
5. William J. Broad, "After Many Misses, Pentagon Still Pursues Missile Defense," *New York Times* (May 24, 1999), pgs. A1, A23.
6. Tim Weiner, "Lies and Rigged 'Star Wars' Test Fooled the Kremlin, and Congress," *New York Times* (August 18, 1993), pgs. A1, A15.

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--Peter Montague, Editor
