

PR Nation

Anti-spin activist John Stauber penetrates America's lie machine

By Michael Manekin

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Corporations, governments, and special interest groups spend at least 30 billion dollars annually -- exclusively, to f___ with you.

Whether you hear the news on NPR or your local morning shock jock, read the *New York Times* or *USA Today*, watch C-Span or the nightly news, an enormous percentage of the news you take in will be the direct result of somebody's spin.

And it's all because of a subdivision of the advertising world called the public relations industry.

With 2200 public relations flacks in over 30 countries, Burson-Marsteller is the world's largest public relations firm. They represent big-name corporations (Philip Morris, AT & T, NBC), foreign nations (the governments of Indonesia, El Salvador, Kenya) and heavy-duty non-governmental organizations (the World Bank, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the American Petroleum Institute).

Burson-Marsteller's promotional materials boast that "the role of communications is to manage perceptions which motivate behaviors that create business results."

In other words, Burson-Marsteller "manages" information to earn money. Like all the best public relations firms, who "communicate" to "create business results," they practice spin control. With so many of the world's most powerful institutions as their clients, Burson-Marsteller just happens to do spin very effectively.

Their mission is to help clients "manage issues by influencing -- in the right combination -- public attitude, public perceptions, public behavior and public policy."

That mission goes for the entire PR industry. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are 118,280 PR workers in the U.S. alone. To account for the historical inaccuracy of U.S. census data, both critics and proponents of the PR industry have estimated that upwards of 200,000 people work in the field.

The PR industry is so huge because of corporations. Most every issue in the news today -- global warming, globalization, genetically modified foods, tobacco legislation -- affects corporations who stand to gain or lose heaps of money, depending on public reaction. Therefore, the "management" of public reaction is crucial.

If, for instance, the public does not display outrage over global warming, the auto industry can stave off costly renewable energy alternatives. If not enough people seem frightened by the existing and potential dangers of genetically modified "Frankenfoods," multinational corporations such as Monsanto will continue to rake in bundles by genetically modifying food. And if the public believes that anti-globalization protestors are simple-minded rebels without a cause, Phillip Morris, Proctor & Gamble, Starbucks and others can safely multiply their revenues overseas.

With so much cash riding on public opinion, industry has always viewed public relations as a valuable, even necessary investment.

Why else would corporations throw billions of dollars a year at the PR industry?

"In societies like ours," said investigative journalist Derrick Jensen, "corporate propaganda is delivered through advertising and public relations. Most people recognize that advertising is propaganda . . . [but] public relations is much more insidious. Because it's disguised as information, we don't often realize we are being influenced by public relations."

And, whatever the issue may be, the public relations industry is usually behind the scenes -- wagging the dog.

When popular opinion threatens the interests of power, the PR industry is frequently consulted to placate the public in the interest of their clients.

It's the kind of pattern John Stauber came to learn inside out. Throughout the '70s and '80s, Stauber was a typical grassroots activist. He organized for the environment, consumers, family farms, public health, neighborhood concerns, social justice, peace -- you name it.

Frequently, Stauber battled corporations.

Repeatedly, he got his ass kicked.

As an activist promoting social change, Stauber's job was to build a groundswell of grassroots support around a particular issue. Whatever the issue, Stauber inevitably found himself battling against corporate interest. And corporations, in order to protect their profit margins, fought to sabotage Stauber's grassroots support. By hiring public relations firms, corporations waged big-money campaigns to win over public opinion with deceptions and half-truths.

Eventually, Stauber got the idea. Activist campaigns were doomed as long as the public relations industry used their vast resources to serve corporate interests -- and deceive the public.

Stauber got his PR education first-hand. In the late '80s he worked to organize farmers and consumers who were opposed to genetically engineered bovine growth hormone (rBGH).

Several corporations, including Monsanto, were preparing to market rBGH to dairy farmers, and they funded a massive PR campaign to combat the mounting grassroots opposition.

Over time, Stauber grew suspicious that Monsanto and the other rBGH manufacturers were colluding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). When Stauber filed a successful Freedom of Information Act investigation with the USDA and the FDA, the government regulatory bodies were forced to release thousands of pages of internal documents.

"And what those documents revealed was just mind-blowing," Stauber said. "I mean, in my most paranoid fantasies, I wouldn't have guessed the extent to which the FDA and USDA were working with Monsanto . . . to help this company promote this drug."

When Stauber organized a meeting of family farm, consumer and animal welfare groups who were opposed to rBGH, he received a phone call from the Maryland Citizens' Consumer Council.

"They said they were a group of housewives -- very concerned about this issue -- and asked if they could send someone to the meeting," Stauber said.

"A while later, I got a call from a reporter in Vermont . . . who said, 'Monsanto is bragging that they had a spy at your meeting.' And it turned out to be this woman from the Maryland Citizens' Consumer Council, which in fact did not exist."

The spy was an employee of Burson-Monsteler, the world's largest PR firm, and she had been gathering information at the request of their client Eli Lilly. Along with Monsanto, Lilly was one of the major manufacturers of rBGH.

"It really angered me," said Stauber. "I'd been lied to, misled, spied upon -- I was becoming aware of the extent to which this whole [rBGH] campaign was funded and coordinated."

Corporations like Eli Lilly and Monsanto had essentially waged an information war against Stauber and a broader coalition of grassroots anti- rBGH activists. In doing so, the corporations had turned to the PR industry for spin control.

"Once I found out that this was typical of what the PR industry does," said Stauber, "I decided that my next project as an activist would be to expose the ways in which the PR industry, especially, misleads the public and the press and works to defeat public interest activists."

Ten years later, even though rBGH has still not been proven safe, the drug is injected into 30% of U.S. dairy cows. And John Stauber is a full-time public relations watchdog.

For eight years Stauber has been operating the Center for Media and Democracy, a nonprofit devoted to investigative reporting on the public relations industry. With partner Sheldon Rampton, Stauber publishes *PR Watch*, the center's quarterly newsletter.

In addition to *PR Watch*, Stauber and Rampton have published three acclaimed books: *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, *Mad Cow U.S.A.*, and *Trust Us, We're Experts*.

Internationally recognized for his pioneering work, Stauber recently traveled to Northampton to shoot a documentary video with Northampton's Media Education Foundation (MEF), which has also produced videos starring activist-intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Bell Hooks and Edward Said.

While Stauber was in town, the *Advocate* got the low-down on the industry that pulls the world's strings.

Advocate: John, you've written three books about the public relations industry, and you've been publishing *PR Watch* for eight years, so I'm sure you're chock-full of horrifying PR stories. Can you give a particularly egregious example of PR at its worst?

Stauber: When Sheldon [Rampton] and I wrote our first book, *Toxic Sludge is Good For You*, our publisher challenged us to come up with a title that didn't even use the word PR in it. He said, "Look, no one wants to read a book about PR. Everyone thinks they're too intelligent, too cynical, too sophisticated, too educated to be fooled about PR."

So we came up with this title, *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, which we didn't realize had actually been inspired by a Tom Tomorrow cartoon that we had in the first issue of *PR Watch*, where, you know, toxic sludge is getting into the water supply and PR experts are brought in, and by the fourth panel of the cartoon the citizenry is saying, "Well, how foolish we were to be concerned about toxic sludge, and yes, it's good for you."

Then I realized, after understanding the inspiration for the title, that people are going to think that this really is a book about toxic sludge, and we have to research whether there is such a thing as toxic sludge and whether there's a PR campaign trying to tell us it's that it's good for us. But that was put on the backburner.

And then one day while we were finishing up our book, I got a call from [a woman] at the Water Environment Foundation. And in my business, when you hear something like "Water Environment Foundation," you turn the needle 180 degrees [and ask suspiciously], "What's the Water Environment Foundation?"

Well, it turned out to be the sewage sludge industry, and she was calling because she said, "I heard that you have this book coming out, *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, and I'm really quite concerned because, frankly, it's not toxic anymore and we don't call it sludge. It's now bio-solids, and it's a natural organic fertilizer. And we're very concerned that your book title is going to interfere with our education campaign to get farmers across the country to use bio-solids as a fertilizer on their farm fields."

So, that became a chapter in our book called, "The Sludge Hits the Fan," and we actually broke nationally this whole story about how this toxic sludge -- mountains of it building up at sewage plants all across the country that the Environmental Protection Agency had

deemed too toxic to landfill or incinerate or dump in the ocean -- has basically been renamed "bio-solids -- a natural organic fertilizer." And now half of it is being spread all across the country on farmlands, despite the fact that it's still as toxic as ever.

So, I mean, what that showed to Sheldon [Rampton] and me is that, no matter how cynical you are, you can't be cynical enough to anticipate the extent to which public relations is being used to manage issues. And essentially every single controversy that exists or that might occur already has an invisible PR crisis management campaign.

Advocate: Can you go into more depth about this invisibility?

Stauber: Well, the 20th century has been marked by three great developments: the rise of democracy, the rise of corporate power and the rise of corporate propaganda to protect corporate power from democracy. Corporations wage war on democracy through advertising and public relations, but especially public relations.

And the main difference between advertising and public relations, in terms of persuasion, is that advertising is usually in your face. You know, if you see a logo on a T-shirt, or advertising on the side of a bus, or hear an ad on the radio, hopefully you think, "Well, somebody has spent an incredible amount of money to craft this message, to deliver it, to persuade me . . . I should be skeptical."

In any society, the best propaganda has to be invisible. What public relations is really about is creating reality, and you have to do that through invisible means. Any public relations that isn't hidden just isn't very good.

Advocate: In *Trust Us*, you apply a name to a very popular PR method that really epitomizes this invisibility. Tell us about the "third party technique."

Stauber: Well, the third party technique is as old as the hills. The idea is that you find some supposedly independent, trusted source that you can use to send your message out to the public. Let's say I'm the coal industry and I launch a campaign to tell the American public that coal emissions (which are exacerbating global warming) are really good because global warming means more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere; more carbon dioxide means plants are going to grow more, and isn't that the epitome of a good environment -- more green, growing plants?

It sounds ludicrous. It sounds absurd. It's ridiculous. I'm the coal industry, for God's sake, and who's going to believe that? You know, probably only someone holding a lot of stock in the coal industry! So what the coal industry does is fund a group called the Greening Earth Society with people who have environmental and scientific credentials. And somehow, with a straight face, [these people] are able to say, "Yes, indeed, global warming appears to be occurring, and that's good. We should embrace global warming."

And that makes people stop and think, "It's something called the Greening Earth Society; it's got to be an environmental group. This guy has a Ph.D., he's a scientist, and I'm listening to him on, you know, on my National Public Radio affiliate. And he's doing this great job assuring me that global warming really is good for me." That's the third party technique,

and, yes, it's effective, because it usually works through the media.

Advocate: Now, can you use a real-life example to explain how the third-party technique is used?

Stauber: Well, the Greening Earth Society is one example.

Advocate: [Laughing] You're kidding!

Stauber: [Laughing] No, that's true! I don't make this stuff up. The Greening Earth Society really exists, and their message is exactly as I presented it. They're the creation of the coal industry.

Advocate: That's terrifying.

Stauber: It is terrifying, but there it is: Global warming is good for you.

Advocate: Do you see a link between U.S. domestic and foreign policies and the sophisticated PR machinery in this country?

Stauber: Yeah. They're really one and the same, because the push for corporate globalization -- the push to lower and destroy regulatory standards in other countries that do care about protecting human health and safety -- is based here in the United States. And the biggest PR firms that work for these corporations are very much active in trying to impose the U.S. definition of globalization on the rest of the world, including definitions that say, "Well, yeah, there's no real need for countries to provide universal health care; there's no need to safety-test genetically engineered food."

All of these major issues that U.S. PR firms are working on -- because of the corruption of our political process and the way it favors corporate decision-making -- these issues have been won, for the most part, in the U.S.: We're having genetically engineered food imposed upon us; we believe that we don't have a fundamental right to universal health care. . . . The citizenry is cowed and losing on these issues.

Advocate: OK, so what's been the most damaging PR work you've ever seen? What's just the most atrocious campaign?

Stauber: I think the most insidious public relations campaign -- and the most dangerous -- has been the extent to which corporations have been able to convince public interest groups -- environmental organizations, media literacy organizations, community organizations of all sorts -- that in order to be effective, these public interest groups should be formally partnering with corporations, and sitting down and negotiating win-win solutions.

Advocate: In other words, the absorption of grassroots organizations.

Stauber: The co-optation of activism! [At *PR Watch*], we write about that a lot, and it's really something that motivated me to start *PR Watch*, because I was seeing how activists were being duped and played for suckers by corporate PR strategies of "greenwashing" and

co-optation and partnering. And my biggest personal frustration has been that despite the fact that we've been warning about this and exposing it in all of our books and in *PR Watch* and in our talks, it's actually worse than ever.

Corporations have learned how to thwart activism by putting on a smiley face and holding out the hand of friendship and pulling out their wallets and offering contributions, and sitting down and agreeing to what might be some concessions, but what in the long run, invariably, turn out to be methods of successfully co-opting and thwarting social change.

Advocate: Can you give an example of an activist campaign where that was the case?

Stauber: Well, I think you can look at a lot of activist campaigns where it is happening. I mean, I ask the question, where the hell is the environmental movement when it comes to generating political power at the grassroots? If you look at the environmental movement in the United States, it's now really over 30 years old. There are literally hundreds of millions of dollars raised and spent every year by nonprofit environmental organizations in the United States. What have we got to show for that?

We've got about 15 big green organizations -- like the Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Wilderness Society, Environmental Defense -- and they suck up almost all that money. But in terms of a powerful environmental movement that can actually force government, for instance, to make the big three auto-makers develop highly fuel-efficient automobiles within the next few years -- it isn't there. The environmental movement is getting its ass kicked repeatedly on every critical issue. Well, why is that?

Businesses have learned how to partner with environmental organizations. And for every dollar that goes to these big national environmental groups in Washington, that's a dollar that doesn't go to building up an environmental group that's responsive to the grassroots. And that's the big difference between the environmental movement in the U.S. and the environmental movement in Europe. In Europe, there's a lot less money spent on environmental organization, but, ironically, the environmental movement is a lot more powerful.

Advocate: Is it possible that some of the corporations who partner with public interest groups actually want to do good?

Stauber: Corporations exist for one purpose only, and that is to make money. So anything that doesn't expand their bottom-line profits is secondary. Corporations, on the other hand, want to be seen as responsible corporate citizens, and a very important part of doing business is having a good image and evoking a warm, fuzzy feeling for customers and stakeholders. So corporations spend a lot of money on public relations, advertising and charitable donations.

Advocate: When activists talk about corporations in such a general way, there's a tendency to demonize "corporations" as though they were all conspiring together. But corporations are run by executives -- scores of individual people -- and they're too busy meeting their profit margins to engage in global conspiracy! Is it fair or even accurate to refer to corporations as though they were indistinguishable?

Stauber: In fact, generally, it is [fair], because there's a difference between corporations and the people who work within corporations. People are people, and whether they work for Ben & Jerry's or whether they work for Monsanto, they can be committed personally to all sorts of important values that they would like to see their corporation embody and promote. But corporations are like the military. People inside corporations do what they're told to serve the interest of the corporation, and if they don't, they're removed from their position.

So some people would say, "Well, look, corporations aren't evil; they're made up of people just like you and me. Parents and grandparents run corporations." I would turn that one around, and say, "Corporations run parents and grandparents."

There are those happy moments when [corporations] dispensing money to community groups or making the right environmental decision and the corporate bottom line are in synch -- and I'm sure that's a great feeling, and there's this sense that the corporation is doing the right thing. But again, doing the right thing is not the purpose of a corporation. Corporations really are all about money, and anything else really is public relations and image building.

You know, I think that my analysis of what corporations do is not different from the analysis of the executives who run corporations when they're talking among themselves. When they're talking to the public, then they have to try to put forward an image that they care about people, care about the environment, care about their employees.

Advocate: Recently *USA Today* published an article about *Trust Us*, and for the most part, the writer seemed to take your arguments seriously. But the article concludes with a quote from a professor of business who says, "Fortunately we live in a society where we get opposing viewpoints." Any comment?

Stauber: [Laughing] Well, we live in a society where 40% or more of all the news we get on a given day is the result of spin. So the statement that we live in a society where we get both sides of the issues does a great job of trying to deflect and spin the reality, which is that the news media is doing a very lousy job of investigating and reporting on critical issues. And when they do investigate and report on critical issues, the PR industry controls the media and limits the damage.

You know, I speak to a lot of journalism classes, and what I find is that most students aren't there to become journalists. They're there to become public relations flacks or corporate communications specialists or go into some sort of commercial use of their journalism skills.

Advocate: So teaching public relations and teaching journalism is becoming the same thing?

Stauber: Yeah, unfortunately. But it's not the same thing: People who think that teaching journalism and teaching public relations is just the same thing might think that teaching accounting and teaching embezzling is the same thing. We need to reclaim journalism from corruption. There is a sacred and fundamental purpose to journalism in a democratic society, and that's to get out there and ferret out the information, let the chips fall where they may, and investigate and report on issues that are critical to the society so that people can be informed and make the decisions that run the society.

Advocate: In *Trust Us* you argue that the PR worldview sees the public as apathetic and uninformed. Why do you think we're apathetic?

Stauber: I think the American public is feeling extremely angry, disempowered, manipulated and lied to. The apathy isn't so much because people don't care -- I think people do care -- I think it's more a matter of, "What do you do?" The American public may be the most propagandized population in world history, but at a certain level they're aware of it, which makes me quite hopeful and enthusiastic about the future and the ability of the American people to incite political movements that really do seize power away from corporations.

Advocate: So, we're the most propagandized population in world history. Where do we find the truth?

Stauber: [A prominent PR man] once said, "The truth isn't a solid; the truth is a liquid." Basically, the truth is whatever you can create and convince people is the truth. So if someone says that black is white or that toxic sludge is actually a beneficial organic fertilizer -- well, that's the truth. It just happens to be a certain truth.

So in terms of finding "the truth," you have to believe that, even if the truth doesn't exist, something like the truth exists, and it's important to try to figure that out. And the best way to do that is through an investigative educational process: You understand that every public debate has all this hidden public relations propaganda.

Advocate: But most people looking for truth are hustling to do a million things in a day. How do busy people -- and we're all busy -- search for truth?

Stauber: Well, unfortunately, people want the instant truth, so they turn on the news or maybe they think the best way to get the truth is listen to a lot of sources. On the left, you listen to Pacifica [radio], your community station or your weekly alternative papers. On the right, you listen to Rush Limbaugh or the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. And somewhere in the middle, you read the *New York Times*. I think that's not the correct approach. We have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that we're going to find the truth from the usual channels.

Maybe you just go, "Well, s____, it doesn't really matter. This is somewhat of a democratic society. If anything really bad is happening, I'm probably going to hear about it eventually. I'm just going to concentrate on getting by, paying the bills and doing the best I can."

I think the truth really becomes important to people when they realize the extent to which they're suffering because of the lack of the truth. There's sort of a radicalization process that occurs in people who are concerned about public health, personal health, family safety, community democracy, clean government. They're the ones concerned with getting to the truth, and that involves cutting through this propaganda smog. And I'd say the way to begin that is (not to sound too self-serving) to read *Trust Us* and *Toxic Sludge*, to read other media critics and to turn to organizations recommended in these books.

Advocate: In a sense, your life is devoted to uncovering these scary truths about everyday reality. I'm thinking that a lot of people would be driven to intense neurosis doing what you do.

Stauber: What makes you think I'm not intensely neurotic?

Before we'd written the last chapter for *Toxic Sludge*, our publisher told us, "This book has a real problem. You know, people already think things are really bad, and then you come along and convince them that it's even worse than they imagined. So you've got to come up with a solution for this."

And the problem is that there really is no solution. Unfortunately, we're facing an incredible number of crises. And you can't run and hide -- you can try to, but you have to live your life at the personal and societal level. That's why I think that the most important issue is the revitalization of democracy, along with personal and community political empowerment, so that we take control back from the powerful interests -- the corporations that now dominate our news media, dominate our government.

The biggest political problem we have is that corporations have usurped political power from individual citizens. Corporations have taken over rights that should only be held by citizens. What we have in the U.S. is a corporate citizenry *über alles* made up of the Fortune 500, and they have relegated the rest of us living, breathing citizens to a second-class citizenry.

Advocate: A lot of people would consider what you have to say a paranoid vision.

Stauber: [Laughing.]

Advocate: They would say that, more or less, we live in a democratic society, and that your opinions are just another amorphous conspiracy theory. How would you defend against that charge?

Stauber: If somebody just heard me speaking, if they were unaware of the documentation, including three books (extensively footnoted and indexed), I would forgive them for thinking that I sound like a raving conspiracy theorist. But indeed there is a hidden, secret power dedicated to invisibly manipulating public opinion and public policy on behalf of the powerful. And in fact, we name it: It's the public relations industry, and we document precisely how it works and what it does.

So I wish that we were simply paranoid, but unfortunately we're not. In fact, one thing that always amuses Sheldon and me is when we talk to [members of the PR industry], they'll compliment us and tell us that we're hitting the nail on the head. And that, indeed, this is how the world runs, and it's even worse than we imagine.

You know, I've learned an awful lot from the public relations industry: They know the most important thing they have to do is manage our outrage. In fact, they have a formula for it. They say, "Risk equals hazard plus outrage," and what they mean is that the risk to the corporate bottom line exists to the degree to which people are outraged when they find out the truth on a variety of issues.

I remember one conversation with a PR lobbyist for Monsanto, and I basically asked him how he did it. And he said, "Well look, it's a great job, it pays me lots of money, I love my wife and my kids, and when I go home I just turn on the TV and pour a stiff drink and leave it all behind me."

At work here is the Nuremberg principle: "If I don't do this, then somebody else will." This view is the worst sort of cynicism because it allows one to rationalize any sort of behavior -- to the point of what was done in Nazi Germany.

Advocate: Do you ever get hopeless?

Stauber: I don't think hopelessness is something we can afford. Even in [these] extremely dire times, it's important for individuals to take power back from corporations, to reinvigorate our democracy, to empower people at the grassroots, to figure out how we're going to create an economic system that is just and democratic and ecologically sustainable.

There isn't an overnight solution to any of these problems, and often hopelessness is the response of people who have assumed that change comes easily. History shows that great changes sometimes take generations to bring about, and you never even know what it is that you're doing or writing or saying that might be key to effecting change in people not even born yet.

We're so propagandized from day one by commercial advertising and marketing and PR to think that there should be an instant solution to everything: We want stuff fast, we want it quick, we want it easy. We want to tune in an expert to find out the fastest way to accomplish health, wealth, whatever it is. And we think that way politically too.

We think we can have fundamental political change against the most powerful political interests in world history -- the Fortune 500 -- by sending 50 dollars off to some environmental group or giving 25 bucks to some canvasser at the door, so that they'll go away. All of this rather than personally becoming active at the community level in the issues of our lives.

So Sheldon and I recommend that people become democracy activists. If you want to find the truth, if you want to get involved, if you want to improve the world, you start with yourself and the community. And you disabuse yourself of the many false notions that are part of the propaganda reality.

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