

“A Virtual Social H-Bomb”: The Late 1950s Controversy Over Subliminal Advertising

Ronald A. Fullerton, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

The controversy over subliminal advertising began for the first time in late 1957, as news of a supposedly successful commercial test of subliminal advertising became widely disseminated. This paper investigates the test and the reactions to it. Many reactions were fearful and wildly overblown, which becomes understandable amidst the paranoid and fearful intellectual climate in the United States at the time.

Subliminal advertising has had a half century of history. Despite its effectiveness being disparaged by generations of experts (e.g., Moore 1982; Pratkanis 1992), it refuses to go away. A large part of the public at large continues to believe in it (Rodgers and Smith 1993), and introductory marketing textbooks routinely give it a place in their discussions (e.g., Kotler and Armstrong 2008, pp. 143-144; Solomon, Marshall, and Stewart 2008, p. 148). It is the aim of this paper to explore the advent of the subliminal advertising controversy fifty odd years ago.

The method used is to review many contemporary accounts of the events described. Use of such primary sources is standard historical methodology. At this distance in time it is possible to look and evaluate objectively.

Since the late nineteenth century experimental psychologists had been studying how much, if anything, people could remember when presented with stimuli that were below the threshold of consciousness. By the mid 1950s a substantial body of literature had been built up, most of it confirming that some memory was the result of such stimuli but that the reliability and extent of recall lessened as the intensity of the stimulus did (Britt 1957; McConnell, Cutler and McNeil 1958). The experiments ended to study such phenomena as the ability to differentiate letters from numbers, or to pinpoint the location of something on a page. It was unclear whether anything except the most simple modifications in behavior could be caused by stimulation below the level of conscious awareness (McConnell, Cutler and McNeil 1958). Perhaps they could, perhaps they couldn't.

There was also the realization that “threshold” of consciousness varied from person to person; it also varied

enormously within the same person, being influenced by interest, state of need, mood states, state of alertness, and the like. In other words what was subliminal for one person at one time might be supraliminal for the same person at another time, or for another person (McConnell, Cutler and McNeil 1958).

During the mid 1950s the phenomenon burst the bounds of the experimental lab as several commercially-oriented groups began experimenting with sending subliminal advertising stimuli (Kalis 1958). There was, for example, a Scot named Peter Randall who invented “Strobonic Psycho-Injection,” which he claimed to boost the receptivity of viewers so that at least 75% of them would absorb sub-threshold messages (Kalis 1958). During late 1957 television Station WTWO in Bangor Maine conducted on-air tests of subliminal projection (Kalis 1958). So too did the BBC in the UK during 1956. In late 1957 H. Brown Moore and H.C. Becker of New Orleans established the Precon Process and Equipment Co. to market a subliminal point-of-sale device (“Subliminal Ads Wash No Brains” 1957).

But the company which really attracted attention was the Subliminal Projection Company, a three-man partnership. Francis C. Thayer was president, Richard E. Forrest was executive vice president, and James Vicary, a veteran Motivation Researcher (Vicary 1948, 1951), was the main investigator and firm mouthpiece. The three men had invented a device for sending messages onto a movie screen at an extremely rapid rate—1/3000th of a second—and were conducting tests to justify a patent for the device. They were also working on a device which would broadcast onto TV screens at a slower rate, 1/20th of a second. Preliminary testing of the movie device was undertaken in the summer of 1957 at the Fort Lee movie theater in Fort Lee New Jersey during a six-week screening of the now-classic film *Picnic*. Supposedly a second projector—the subliminal projector—was broadcasting the messages “Eat popcorn” and “Drink Coca-Cola” as the viewers watched the movie. 1/3000th of a second was by far the shortest time anyone had tried; it was definitely below everyone's threshold of consciousness.

Now things become complex. Vicary at the time claimed that popcorn sales rose more than 50% and Coca-Cola sales 18% compared to a “previous period”. The

theater owner later said that he did not notice any increase in the sales of either product. But the head of the chain to which the Fort Lee theater belonged was sent information by Vicary and concluded that while additional testing was needed, the subliminal technique had the potential to increase sales (Kalis 1958). A few years later Vicary told *Advertising Age* that he had exaggerated grotesquely (Danzig 1962).

Probably reflecting how preliminary and uncertain the experiment had been, news of it was only published in *Senior Scholastic*, a publication intended for junior-high school students ("Invisible Advertising" 1957). It is not known whether even this was intentional on the part of Vicary. It is not known whether Vicary gave the story to them, or whether they found out about it some other way. But the story was definitely not published in any adult-oriented medium. Vicary had published in professional business publications like *Printer's Ink* in the past (Vicary 1948, 1951), and presumably would have published his results in such a place now had he felt confident about them.

The News is Spread

Some of the serious general interest press such as the *Times of London* picked up the story, and then author Vance Packard picked it up, and spread it in his bestselling *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), a powerful indictment of the whole of Motivation Research as an unscrupulous and sinister manipulator. Motivation Research had been developing for years, was multi-faceted (Fullerton 2005), and achieved its greatest notice during the entire 1950s. But MR had not included subliminal messaging until Packard introduced it in 1957. Right at the beginning of his book Packard announced that "certain United States advertisers were experimenting with 'subthreshold effects' in seeking to insinuate sales messages to people past their conscious guard" (Packard 1957, p. 41). Packard did confuse the product being sold with ice cream rather than popcorn and Coca-Cola, but otherwise had the story the same as *Senior Scholastic*.

Suddenly the Fort Lee experiment was front-page news everywhere. Vicary tried to play down the furor by saying that the experiment was only a test to collect information for a patent application, and that advertisers should test the technique carefully before using it commercially. He further stated that the stimulus sent by his firm's device was very weak and suited mainly to reminder advertising of simple messages (Kalis 1958). But he also claimed that subliminal projection was "a new band in human perception, like FM" (Kalis 1958, p. 6)

The Furor Grows

Over time, the furor grew, and grew. There were three fundamentally different reactions. Only one of them was justified by the evidence presented—that was by those who called the technique still unproven and asked for further tests, hopefully to be published in reputable scientific sources (McConnell, Cutler, McNeill 1958; Haber 1959; Britt 1958; Kalis 1958).

A second group assumed the technique basically proven and extolled it as an advance in advertising. In early December 1957, Richard Lessler, a vice president at the Grey Advertising Agency, said he would recommend the technique to a client if he thought it would sell the product; he further compared the technique to a knife, which could have good or bad uses but which is not unethical in itself ("Subliminal Ad Okay If It Sells: Lessler" 1957). Vicary himself praised subliminal advertising for offering the potential to add entertainment time as ads would be broadcast below the threshold of consciousness hence not clutter up people's viewing experience (Kalis 1958). During autumn 1957 some television broadcasting stations were gearing up to use subliminal messages (Haber 1959).

They did not carry through their plans, however, because of extremely vocal opposition. The opposition was overwhelming—to a basically-unproven technique for the simplest reminder advertising. Those strongly opposed believed that subliminal stimulation worked only too well. "If the device is successful for putting over popcorn, why not politicians or anything else," wrote the editor of *The Saturday Review*; who continued, "But they [Vicary et.al] propose to break into the deepest and most private parts of the human mind and leave all sorts of scratchmarks" (Cousins 1957). In other words, subliminal advertising could short-circuit the individual's normal conscious defenses, influencing and even controlling him without his being aware. It was potentially unscrupulous hypnosis. "Subliminal stimuli, if defined as messages or forces that can reach into one's unconscious mind to influence his behavior, understandably become even more fear provoking," wrote an author in the *Journal of Marketing* (Klass 1958). There were calls for political action, and politicians quickly began denouncing subliminal advertising. For example Senator Charles Potter, a Republican from Michigan, argued that: "This persuasiveness raises serious ethical questions. The possibilities are certainly unfair to a viewer who isn't even given a chance to exercise sales resistance" ("FCC is Peering Into Subliminal Picture on TV" 1957, p. 81).

"Subliminal cues, for whatever they may be worth, are but the latest weapon in the arsenal of the psychological manipulator," wrote a professor at Northwestern (Haiman 1958). Haiman (1958) went on:

They attempt to make him buy, vote, or believe in a certain way by short-circuiting his conscious thought processes and planting suggestions or exerting pressure on the periphery of his consciousness which are intended to produce automatic, non-reflective behavior. The methods are similar to those of Pavlov's famous conditioned-reflex experiments with dogs. ...No thought processes intervene here. Non-critical reflex action—this is the goal of the hidden persuader

Steuart (sic) Henderson Britt, a veteran Motivation Researcher who had just migrated to the Marketing Department at Northwestern University, gave a more reasoned argument based on years of psychological research which demonstrated that subliminal stimulation was a real phenomenon. Britt's conclusion was the same as the just-cited authors: "This could become a potent, and in the wrong hands, even a dangerous technique," wrote Britt in November 1957 (Britt 1957). Britt (1957) argued:

"If children and adults can be persuaded to ingest soft drinks and blown up grains of heated corn without even knowing that they are being persuaded, why not hard drinks and sleeping pills. ...Or, in the field of politics, why not be cajoled by subliminal messages into voting for candidate Bloop and for bond issue Blooper? Shades of George Orwell's novel 1984".

An official at Stanford University's Research Institute declared that subliminal advertising is "a virtual social H-bomb" (Kalis 1958, p. 6).

Early in December 1957 the big three television networks and the Canadian Broadcasting System declared that they would not subliminally expose their audiences. The National Association of Telecasters banned the use of subliminal advertising by its members. Radio stations offered similar assurances. The FCC was looking into the issue but was assured by the industry self-restraint (Kalis 1958).

Explaining the Furor

In the minds of many, in other words, subliminal messaging was far more potent than simple reminder advertising for mundane products. It threatened total manipulation, hypnotic-like control over everyone. It was this fear that drove the frenzy against subliminal advertising. It was an exaggerated fear—a wildly exaggerated fear—yet held by those even as psychologically and marketing-savvy as Steuart Henderson Britt, who held a PhD in psychology.

There are several causes of the disproportionate response to subliminal advertising. To begin with, the alarm had been rung by an extremely powerful and influential book, Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*. The book was an enormous bestseller that has exerted influence down to the present; it was recently re-issued for its fiftieth anniversary, for example (Greif 2007). In 1957

and 1958 *The Hidden Persuaders* stayed on the best-seller list for month after month after month; more than a million copies were sold. Packard lumped in subliminals with "mass psychoanalysis" (Packard 1957, p. 11) and other social science techniques employed by Motivation Researchers:

This book ...is about the way many of us are being influenced and manipulated—far more than we realize—in the patterns of our everyday lives. Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences. Typically these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness; so that the appeals which move us are often, in a sense, "hidden". (Packard 1957, p. 11).

According to Packard, people were being manipulated. Some of it was ostensibly harmless, but nonetheless it was undertaken without a person's knowledge. Other aspects of it, for example political manipulation, could be truly frightening. *The Hidden Persuaders* "awakened millions of Americans to the dangers of corporate power," writes Packard's biographer (Horowitz 1994, p. 103).

The Last Straw

Subliminal messaging, it was believed, was the newest technique of Motivation Research to emerge from legitimate laboratory social science. In a way it was the last straw for many people, who saw it as "merely the most recent in a succession of perturbing events to which the public has been exposed. It has become the focus of, and is likely to become the whipping boy for, a host of techniques which now occupy the twilight zone of infringement of personal psychological freedom" (McConnell, Cutler, McNeill 1958, p. 238). Packard's book whipped up many people. So did other things. A year before Vicary's experiment, the American best seller list was headed by *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, which detailed the seeming reincarnation of a nineteenth century Irish woman in a twentieth century American housewife. Doubtless nonsense—but it did evoke a sense of hidden forces at work beneath the psychological exterior. The popular movie *Three Faces of Eve* showed, convincingly, a woman with three contradictory personalities. Just a movie—but a very convincing one. One might be one of several personalities without knowing it. "In combination," wrote three scholars in 1958, "this growth of emotionally-charged attitudes towards the unconscious and the suspicions about commercial morality came to be a potentially explosive set of tensions which was triggered off by the first commercial use of subliminal techniques" (McConnell, Cutler, McNeill 1958, p. 238).

In retrospect the late 1950s seem to have been a tranquil time, yet there was a great deal of paranoia, of

unease. Senator Joseph McCarthy had been discredited by 1957, but Communism was still felt to be a great danger, fear being whipped up by no less than FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's 1958 bestseller *Masters of Deceit: the Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*. The Russians had beaten the USA into space with their Sputnik satellite. Chinese Communist brainwashing techniques seemed in advance of those in the USA. There was a huge bestselling novel, *On the Beach*, about the pathetic aftermath of nuclear war. So people had, it seemed to many, a great deal to worry about.

The Furor Lessens

In January 1958 Vicary demonstrated his firm's technique for a high-powered Washington DC audience. The audience saw nothing, as predicted, and carried away no learning; some were skeptical, for example FCC commissioner Robert E. Lee, who declared "I refuse to get excited about it—I don't think it will work" ("Subliminal has a test; can't see if it works" 1958). In early February the Canadian Broadcasting Company tested subliminal messaging, flashing the message "Telephone now" on the screen 352 times during a thirty minute show. When viewers were asked to write in what the message was, 500 replied—none of them correctly ("'Phone Now,' Said CBC Subliminally—But Nobody Did" 1958).

Between Vicary's and others' failure to conclusively demonstrate that the subliminal technique worked, and self-restraint by the broadcasting industry in not using subliminal advertising, the furor over subliminals began to dim after about a year. Stuart (sic) Henderson Britt, writing in May 1958, took a much less alarmist view than he had seven months previously, pointing out that: "Subliminal advertising has not yet, from a scientific viewpoint, been completely demonstrated. Nor have the results reported been experimentally verified" (Britt 1958, p. 14). Ethics aside, continued Britt, "From a strictly commercial viewpoint, can it be demonstrated that subliminal advertising is more effective than supraliminal advertising?" (Britt 1958, p. 16).

But Never Dies

Vicary admitted in 1962 that his 1957 experiment had been, in part, a fabrication designed to prop up a failing company (Danzig 1962), yet belief in the efficacy of subliminal messaging has never since completely died. Indeed, at times it flares up. Wilson Bryan Key's books during the 1970s and 1980s, for example *Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not-So-Innocent America* (1972), assured readers that advertisers were slipping "subliminal" messages into print ads. The books had a large popular following, although they were

dismissed by serious investigators. Subliminal-containing audiotapes and CDs, some of them self-help, some of them designed for example to dissuade people from shoplifting; have long had a market. (Pratkanis 1992).

Conclusion

Why was there such an extreme negative reaction to news about a commercial experiment with simple subliminal advertising? The tremendous influence of Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* is one reason. Packard's book in a way admires the people behind Motivation Research, which represented the commercialization of various social science techniques. But it also holds them up as amoral, sinister manipulators. Ultimately the book was deeply distrustful of US business. Packard presented subliminal advertising as the latest assault upon people's right to privacy and self-governance.

The book would not have been so successful in another time. According to Packard's biographer, it had been more than twenty years since non-fictional attacks on advertising had attracted wide audiences in the USA (Horowitz 1994). But in the late 1950s there was a generalized climate of unease, distrust, and paranoia. In this climate the news that theater patrons were buying more popcorn and Coca-Cola after being exposed to subliminal advertising, could seem very portentous.

REFERENCES

- Britt, Stuart (sic) Henderson (1957), "Subliminal Advertising—Fact or Fantasy," *Advertising Age* for 18 November, p. 1.
- _____ (1958), "Subliminal Advertising," *Advertising Agency Magazine*, 51, May 23 1958.
- Cousins, Norman (1957), "Smudging the Subconscious," *The Saturday Review*, 40, p. 1.
- Danzig, F. (1962), "Subliminal Advertising—Today it's just Historic Flashback for Researcher Vicary," *Advertising Age*, September 17.
- "FCC is Peering into Subliminal Picture on TV" (1957), *Advertising Age*, December 2.
- Haiman, Franklyn S. (1958), "Democratic Ethics and the Hidden Persuaders," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 44, 385-391.
- Greif, Mark (2007), "The Hard Sell," *New York Times* 30 December.
- Haber, Ralph Norman (1959), "Public Attitudes Regarding Subliminal Advertising," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 23, 291-293.
- Hoover, J. Edgar (1958), *Masters of Deceit*, Kiplinger Publishing.
- "Invisible Advertising" (1957), *Senior Scholastic*, October 4.

- Horowitz, Daniel (1994), *Vance Packard and American Social Criticism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kalis, William H. (1958), "The Phantom of the Soap Opera," *Public Relations Journal*, March, 6-8.
- Key, Wilson Bryan (1972), *Subliminal Seduction*, New York: Signet.
- Klass, Bertrand, "The Ghost of Subliminal Advertising," *The Journal of Marketing*, 23, 146-150.
- Kotler, Philip, and Gary Armstrong (2008), *Principles of Marketing* 12th ed., London: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- McConnell, James V., Richard L. Cutler, Elton B. McNeill (1958), "Subliminal Stimulation: An Overview," *The American Psychologist*, 13, 229-242.
- Moore, Timothy E. (1982), "Subliminal Advertising: What You See Is What You Get," *Journal of Marketing* 46, 38-47.
- Packard, Vance (1957), *The Hidden Persuaders*, New York: David McKay.
- "'Phone Now,' Said CBC Subliminally—But Nobody Did" 1958, *Advertising Age*, February 10.
- Pratkanis, Anthony R. (1992), "The Cargo Cult Science of Subliminal Persuasion," *Sceptical Inquirer*, 16, 260-272.
- Rodgers, Martha, and Kirk H. Smith (1993), "Public Perceptions of Subliminal Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research*, March-April, 10-18.
- Solomon, Michael R., Greg W. Marshall, and Elnora W. Stuart (2008), *Marketing: Real People, Real Choices* 5th ed., Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- "Subliminal Ad OK If It Sells" (1957), *Advertising Age*, December 2.
- "Subliminal Ads Wash No Brains, Declare Moore, Becker, Developers of Precon Device" (1957), *Advertising Age*, December 2.
- "Subliminal Has a Test; Can't See If It Works" (1958), *Printers Ink*, January 17.
- Vicary, James M. (1948), "Free Association Tests Can Help Advertisers," *Printers Ink*, September 3, 44-50.
- _____ (1951), "How Psychiatric Methods Can Be Applied to Market Research," *Printers' Ink*, May 11, 39-40