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TRANSCRIPT

TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY UNSPUN

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The Public Relations Industry Unspun

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN STAUBER: In societies like ours here in the United States where we believe we live in a democracy and we have a free press and there can be no propaganda – in fact we're the most propagandized people in history because the type of propaganda that's waged in western democracies is waged by commercial advertising, marketing, and especially public relations.

STUART EWEN: Right now one can't leave one's house – I should say one can't leave one's bed without encountering public relations, so this sort of notion of how it affects every-day life is that every-day life itself has become permeated with messages which are designed to influence thought and behavior.

NARRATOR: Public relations is one of the fastest growing industries in the United States, employing over 200,000 people and earning millions of dollars annually for the leading firms, such as Fleishman-Hillard, Weber Shandwick Worldwide, Hill & Knowlton, Burson-Marsteller, and Citigate/Incepta. The activities of these companies are vastly influential in shaping public policy and delivering information about products and services to consumers but despite the important societal role they play, public relations firms are largely invisible, conducting their activities behind the scenes with little public scrutiny or questioning. As PR specialists are proud to proclaim, "the best PR is invisible PR".

THE PR INDUSTRY

JOHN STAUBER: The public relations industry is a multi-billion dollar business owned by the advertising industry and its job is to manipulate public opinion, news information, and public policy on behalf of its clients. No wealthy individual, corporation or politician makes a move without PR consultants. The tobacco industry, the chemical industry, the petroleum industry, the logging industry, the mining industry, the drug industry – these are the industries that fund most of the propaganda campaigns.

ERIC SPARLING: Most of the money that's being spent in public relations is being spent by large corporations, large government organizations, government bodies. So what that means obviously, as in everything in culture, whatever has the largest influx in cash is going to have more power. So that means that some voices are going to be louder than others.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: Big business has the connections, the money, the time, and the skill to feed their propaganda messages through the great echo chamber of the media. And this is what gives them a tremendous advantage.

STUART EWEN: Part of the role of a corporation in a democracy, part of the job of a corporation in a democracy, is continually to massage reality in which ordinary people will see an identity between their own interests and the interests of a corporate enterprise system.

ERIC SPARLING: Its about using every kind of technology, using every media outlet, using every outlet period, available in the society to convince people that what you want them to believe is good for them.

JOHN STAUBER: And not all public relations is bad. Some of the public relations techniques that early practitioners like Ivy Lee developed, such as news releases and news conferences, are fairly benign. And libraries, bookstores, hospitals, non-profit organizations use various public relations techniques. But what we should really be concerned about are the nefarious, deceptive, powerful, hidden public relations strategies and tactics that are used by industry.

ROOTS IN CONFLICT

NARRATOR: The history of modern public relations can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, a period of unregulated corporate power and of growing social unrest in the United States. Industry began to use public relations to improve its image and protect itself from the threat posed by a labor movement that was well organized and increasingly militant. When President Wilson's administration faced strong public opposition to American entry into the First World War, it brought together the leading journalists, advertisers and writers to orchestrate a propaganda campaign to curb dissent and persuade a resistant population that war was both necessary and desirable. This successful demonstration of how popular resistance could be overcome was a lesson well learned by both government and business.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: Wars have been sold to us for almost a century, by this government through the very canny use of PR techniques. It starts of course with World War I, the first time that propaganda had been used so extensively on the state level, and it was to persuade a resistant population of the absolute need for that conflict with the Germans.

STUART EWEN: Woodrow Wilson had just won re-election on the slogan "He kept us out of war." So three months after the new year begins, the one who kept us out of war is leading us into war, so there was a feeling that it would be necessary at the very least to explain to Americans why this dramatic shift of policy – and I would add shift of policy that went against what was understood to be public opinion.

JOHN STAUBER: So the Wilson administration started what's called the Creel Committee, the committee on public information. And involved in that committee were people who we now know as the originators of public relations – people like Edward Bernays. And looking back on it today it all looks sort of silly – we see those posters of the Huns with the bloody bayonets, the implications of baby killing.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: It was a matter of civilization versus barbarism. It was a wildly successful campaign, and it really put the PR profession on the map.

STUART EWEN: Part of what happens in the cauldron of the First World War is that, increasingly people involved in publicity start learning about and talking about and thinking about the kind of irrational motivations within the public mind. Edward Bernays comes out of the First World War with the conviction that the job of the public relations specialist is to understand those triggers, which will impact on individuals and on the masses.

JOHN STAUBER: Eddie Bernays considered himself a liberal intellectual, and he really believed that democracy is fundamentally flawed and that unless

propagandists were there to guide and direct society, democracies would fall into total anarchism. That democracies need an invisible ruling elite of public relations practitioners to lead the public in the proper direction.

STUART EWEN: And I think what we're talking about here – and it's a pivotal moment – is that sort of moment where the basic idea of democracy, that the public is capable of thinking, and that if provided with adequate information, the public is capable of determining its own destiny. That idea begins to become seen – particularly by people involved in PR, and Bernays is a central figure – that idea begins to be seen as more and more dangerous. If you let people sort of examine the facts and think about things, it's going to get in the way of executive action, plain and simple.

JOHN STAUBER: It was Bernays who really demonstrated, unequivocally, what PR could do for industry, by his work in overcoming one of the biggest social taboos of the time, which was the taboo against women smoking cigarettes. What he did was he hired attractive, young debutantes to march in the 1929 Easter Day Parade. And these debutantes marched down Fifth Avenue in New York on the arms of well-dressed gentlemen. Well Bernays arranged to have this shocking event very well photographed and he distributed the photographs so that this event was literally in pictures, in papers across the country and across the world – from *The New York Times* on down.

DIANE SAMPLES: He solved the problem of the low cigarette sales by virtue of creating this news, which was of course fake. It wasn't a group of women on their own who decided "well, we're going to smoke cigarettes, darn-it, and we're going to smoke them out in the open whether anyone likes it or not."

JOHN STAUBER: And if you think this is really ridiculous, just think of the extent to which even today, in cigarettes like Virginia Slims, this exact same theme is used – "smoke a cigarette and strike a blow for women's liberation." So this is the sort of brilliance that Bernays brought to the industry. And this is the sort of event that really hammered home to corporate America that learning these invisible, manipulative tricks, hiring public relations experts like Bernays, could open in this case, billion-dollar markets.

NARRATOR: Edward Bernays' ability to get his manufactured event onto the front pages of major newspapers convinced the business community that the news – not advertising – was the best medium to carry their messages to an unsuspected public. Currently, according to some estimates, more than 50% of what we think is news is actually instigated by the public relations industry. PR professionals measure their success in terms of how well they can insert their clients' messages into the continuous flow of news and information while their own activities remain out of view.

NOT LOCAL, NOT NEWS

JOHN STAUBER: If you ask the public, “Who do you trust most for your news?” typically the information that comes back is “well, we trust our local TV anchor crew, we trust our local news people.” These folks go out, they go to the softball games and the community events, they participate with the charities, they’re branding their news team, as being the folks you can trust here in Mayberry USA.

[TV ad: News 40 Springfield] Coverage you can count on!

[TV ad] Coverage you can count on!

NARRATOR: In today’s business climate, local news divisions are under immense budgetary pressure to be profitable. The resulting corporate restructuring and downsizing has meant that there are fewer journalists and less resources to produce the same amount of news. In this context where news directors are under pressure to produce more for less, they’re vulnerable to offers of free, prepackaged news that allow them to produce programming cheaply and efficiently. The public relations industry has used this vulnerability to transform local news into a promotional opportunity for their clients.

[Promo From Pre-Packaged News Provider] That's why the world's leading companies and hundreds of other industry leaders have turned to TVI news. No matter what the topic, our Emmy-award winning team of television journalists will craft your story into a format news stations will use. One that gets results.

NARRATOR: Consequently, news we may *think* is local often isn’t. And in fact may not even be news.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: So this is like a dream come true for the PR people – because they can provide camera-ready content to the TV stations, whose staff are two broke and too inexperienced, and too lazy very often, to *do* real news. So they take material from PR firms and they stick it in front of the audience as if it were stuff that they’d done themselves as if it were real news. The best example that I can think of is the Video News Release.

ERIC SPARLING: A Video News Release is a pre-packaged news story that’s been developed, written, produced by a public relations agency. Ideally it should look exactly like the SIX o’clock news.

[Video News Release, client: Interhealth Nutritionals] Researchers have discovered a compound extracted from the seeds of red grapes called Activin that inhibits and even kills human cancer cells while increasing the growth and health of normal cells. And the extract is already available in dietary supplements sold in drug and health food stores.

ERIC SPARLING: The Video News Release about grape seed extract was picked up by a number of stations across the country, including KNBC News in Los Angeles.

[NBC News Channel 4] *And a major breakthrough in the fight against cancer – it involves something you might have in your kitchen right now. In News For Your Health this afternoon, a new study indicates that grapes may help save your life. But as our Dr. Bruce Hensel tells us, its not the part of the grape that you might suspect – tell us Dr. Bruce.*

[Interview: Dr. Hensel] *Grapes may look out of place in a lab, but a new study shows that grape seed extract may prevent the growth of cancer cells. The substance is already available in supplements and the research finds...*

JOHN STAUBER: It's a story wholly created and produced by the public relations industry, by former journalists now in PR, putting together news stories on behalf of the drug industry, the petrol-chemical industry, the chemical industry lever at a cost of \$25 to \$250,000, providing them free to TV news directors who air them – and they do air them – with absolutely no labeling or indication that this is not news, this is a phony news story, this is fake news that has been done by former journalists in the PR industry, paid for by the clients and we're passing it on to you as news.

[News Channel 22] *Back to you your body now, orange juice does a body good, so you need to get lots of it. In today's Health Watch, besides being an excellent source of Vitamin-C, orange juice does much more.*

Sure it's packed with Vitamin-C, but orange juice has plenty more to offer. It can help protect your heart by raising your "good" cholesterol. And when it's fortified, it's a great source of calcium for non-milk drinkers. And that's not all.

[News 22 Interview] *It's also rich in potassium, which reduces our risk for high blood pressure and for stroke.*

DIANE SAMPLES: There are some really obvious things to look for and it becomes pretty clear that VNR footage is being used or that you're seeing a VNR if you know what to look for. Start noticing, particularly on local news – because we all know the local news has a limited budget, they have limited resources. So when we see a story on our local news that has all kinds of extra footage, from a factory for example, or from an exotic location, or any location that looks out of the ordinary, that is most likely VNR footage.

JOHN STAUBER: And the news directors could easily label Video News Releases as "footage provided by the Hill & Knowlton Public Relations firm on behalf of their client, the XYZ drug company." But to do that would destroy the myth of news reporting, destroy the myth of journalism.

[News Channel 7] Relief for asthma now comes in the form of a pill...

[News Channel 11] The Food and Drug Administration has cleared the way for a new class of asthma medications...

[Unlabeled news station] ... that works through prevention rather than after an attack.

[Spanish news channel] La administracion de drogas y alimentos ha aprobado un nuevo medicamento para combatir el asma.

[KNWS News] Great news for the twelve million Americans who suffer from asthma...

[Unlabeled news station] The government has approved a new class of asthma drug...

[News Channel 11] ...It has given approval to Accolate, a tablet, which people take twice a day as part of their daily asthma management.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: A media system that's as debased as the one we have is all too likely to use that, without comment, without telling people, and certainly without having any of the people who work in the news division looking into it, to blow the whistle on this practice.

THIRD PARTY ADVOCACY

NARRATOR: One of the ways to begin to understand this hidden industry is to become familiar with its techniques. Third party advocacy, one of the most widely used PR strategies assumes that when we see experts and organizations on the news, we'll take what they say at face value.

ERIC SPARLING: Experts play an interesting role in putting together a campaign, particularly with a media campaign, particularly with a media campaign. Journalists want to have an expert quoted in an article that they run or a news clip that they run, it lends credibility to what they're saying, and its expected. So, if you can provide an expert for a journalist who is credible in the eyes of the public that saves a step for the journalist.

KAREN CHARMAN: If I'm a company and my goal is to maximize my profits by selling a product, you're not necessarily going to believe what I tell you about my product. Whereas if there's an "independent" expert who says the same thing about my product or whatever issue we happen to be talking about, its likely to carry a lot more weight with people.

DIANE SAMPLES: If I want to influence you I don't even think about talking directly to you, I don't even entertain that idea. My job is to find out who do you find credible? Who do you listen to, who do you believe, who is able to sway your opinions already? And then I go after those people.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: It's very, very easy to fall for the claims of some guy – like me! – On camera, with a title in front of him, he's a professor of this, or he's a scientist who studies that, he's associated with this hospital, or with that foundation or with this university, and people will nod as they watch and figure well he knows what he's talking about. The fact is that it's a very, very important weapon in the PR arsenal to trot out these august advocates and use them to try and sell whatever it is they're trying to sell.

JOHN STAUBER: Obvious examples of the third party technique is taking a trusted independent scientist such as Dr. C. Everett Koop – when Dr. Koop goes to bat for the pesticide industry as he did in 1990 to help defeat an environmental proposition in California, its very effective because Dr. Koop paraded all over the state saying over and over, "look, I'm Dr. Koop. You trust me. If there were any problems with these pesticides you'd hear it from me first, but there aren't." It's a very powerful message. Well what we found out in researching Dr. Koop is that in some instances he and his organizations have been directly funded by industry.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: Any time you see an expert blandly explaining the benefits of something that you may suspect isn't really good for you, I think it's a

good idea to just type that person's name into the search engine there and see who it is.

NARRATOR: Another way to distance the message from the source is to set up front groups that appear to be neutral but are funded and controlled by industry. For example, the Temperate Forest Foundation is funded by the logging industry. The Green Earth Society is funded by the coal industry, and the Water Environment Federation by the municipal sewage industry.

JOHN STAUBER: In the spring of 1995, while we were finishing up the book *Toxic Sludge is Good For You*, I got a call from a very pleasant woman by the name of Nancy Blatt who said she was with the Water Environment Federation. The Water Environment Federation is the sewage sludge industry; it's this massive Washington DC-based nationwide lobby that represents all the municipal sewage sludge plants. And Nancy Blatt was calling to say that she had heard we had a book coming out in the fall of '95 with this title *Toxic Sludge is Good For You*, and that she was quite concerned by the title because in fact they don't really consider it toxic anymore and they don't like to call it sludge. Its now called "biosolids, a natural organic fertilizer." And she was very worried that if we maintained the title of our book, it might interfere with their educational campaign, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency that was going to convince farmers across the United States to take sewage sludge and spread it on farmland. They actually sponsored a contest to come up with this Orwellian name "biosolids." They invented the name and then they went about moving the name into the dictionary and insuring that the dictionary definition of the name would not include the word sludge. No matter how cynical you think you are about public relations and what it's involved with and which issues its working on, you really can't keep up with the public relations industry. There really *is* a campaign telling us toxic sludge is good for us.

SELLING WARS

NARRATOR: In 1990, Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, invaded the neighboring oil-rich country of Kuwait. Immediately the United States government began preparing for war with Iraq to protect its strategic interest in the region. However, the enthusiasm for war was not shared by most Americans, who with the images of the Vietnam War still lingering in their minds, were not willing to risk the loss of life in what seemed to be another campaign in a distant land. As in the First World War, public relations stepped in to create the necessary imagery to convince reluctant Americans to abandon their hesitation.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: The Gulf War was a PR triumph of the first order. Breathtaking. As successful in its way as World War I had been. They used every means at their disposal, as one must in a propaganda drive. They used all the available media. They used all the tricks in the book, and even added a few new ones.

ARTHUR ROWSE: During the Gulf War build-up in 1990, Hill & Knowlton – which is the public relations firm handling the account for the royal family of Kuwait – Hill & Knowlton set up this separate organization called Citizens for a Free Kuwait. This was purely a public relations organization, and it was set up to look as if American citizens are joining together and of course they have one or two American citizens involved in it. I think one of the most effective parts of this campaign to get the country to go to war was a testimony given by a young girl, about fourteen years old named Nayirah. She testified before a Congressional Committee (unbeknownst to the public, this whole hearing was set up with the help of Hill & Knowlton). And she testified that she saw Iraqi soldiers come into a hospital and dump babies out of incubators.

[Video News Release created by Hill & Knowlton] They took the incubators and left the children to die on the cold floor. It was horrifying.

ARTHUR ROWSE: But what's so insidious about all of this is that in the Gulf War case, the reporters reported these things as straight news, they reported these demonstrations as straight news. They reported the hearing that Nayirah was at as straight news. They reported the UN Security Council meeting as straight news, even though there was very clear evidence that this was a public relations effort. The reporters know – they can see and they know people in the public relations industry very well – and they can see them around there, they can see all the fingerprints. And it wasn't until about five months later that ABC sent out a reporter named John Martin over there to the hospital where she was working as a volunteer, and discovered there was nothing to the story at all. There might have been an accidental fall of a baby out of an incubator, but that was the only part of the story that was true.

[ABC News Interview: Iraqi woman] No, they didn't take them away from the incubators. To tell the truth, but there was no service, no nurses to take care of these babies and that's why they died.

[ABC News John Martin] But this is very specific, "Iraqi soldiers took them out of the incubators and put them on the floor to die."

[ABC News Interview: Iraqi man] I think this is something just for propaganda.

ARTHUR ROWSE: And in fact it wasn't until a year later that another reporter, Rick MacArthur of *Harper's Magazine*, who called the Kuwaiti embassy and asked who Nayirah was. Any reporter could have done this, but nobody had, and he found out that she was the daughter of the Ambassador of Kuwait to this country. I don't think that this country would have gone to war really – certainly not at that point – if it hadn't been for this story because this was such a powerful story and kept being repeated over and over again.

[Unlabeled News] They stole the incubators and threw the babies out of the incubators.

[Unlabeled News] 22 newborn babies were in incubators at the hospital and the troops – the Iraqi troops – turned off the oxygen.

[Unlabeled News] 14 newborn babies that had been taken from their incubators.

[Unlabeled News] Whose troops have bayoneted pregnant women and have ripped babies from their incubators in Kuwait.

[Unlabeled News: President Bush] And they had kids in incubators and they were thrown out of the incubators so that Kuwait could be systematically dismantled!

DIANE SAMPLES: In many cases when PR-driven information gets out into the public realm, especially if it's very inflammatory, even if it's found out later that it's false, it's sort of like a newspaper retraction. Rarely is the story about the information being false, as largely and widely reported on as the original false event.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: Now this is not to say that Saddam Hussein did not commit atrocities, because he did. But he committed not a single one of the atrocities that were ascribed to him by the propagandists working on American public opinion in the fall of 1990. Not a single one. No pregnant women were impaled on bayonets. No babies were dumped out of incubators. None of those things happened, but they took off like wild fire, the atrocity-drive was simply one weapon in the PR arsenal of the pro-war forces. The American people didn't want to go to war in that case.

MANAGING CRISIS

NARRATOR: In today's corporate culture, major PR firms promote crisis management as a necessary business expense. Whenever something bad happens to a corporation, often its first move is not to deal with actual problem, but to manage the negative perception caused by that problem. The Tylenol scare in 1982 is a textbook example of how to control damage to a corporate image. News reports that people were dying from Tylenol laced with cyanide prompted Johnson & Johnson to get involved with minimizing the fallout.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: They handled this basically through candor, and kind of understated assurance that they would take care of the problem. Now it's a different matter when the company's definitely at fault, and the consequences are catastrophic.

[Unlabeled News] One year after the Exxon Valdez unleashed the biggest oil spill in the US, what have we learned?

JOHN STAUBER: The Exxon Valdez, that event which occurred in 1989, is something that the public relations industry has looked at and out of that event has come a little formula that the experts use. Which is risk equals hazard plus outrage. The risk they're talking about managing isn't the risk to public health or the environment, the risk is to the corporate bottom line, and the corporate image, in this case Exxon in the wake of that oil spill. Because Exxon's image was devastated – Exxon did all the wrong things. And the public became outraged at Exxon. And what the experts say is if you want to control the risk to your company's image and bottom line, what you have to manage isn't so much the problem at hand – the oil spill – that's sort of a technical problem – it's the public outrage. The problem Exxon made here wasn't so much that they spilled all this oil; it was that they responded improperly. They looked callous, they looked arrogant, they looked like they didn't care; they didn't give a damn. What they should have done, some experts have said, is the CEO of Exxon should have flown, as quickly as possible, to Valdez, Alaska, and should have been photographed holding an oil-soaked seabird as part of the effort to clean up these seabirds, crying into the camera, apologizing profusely and explaining how stunned, hurt, chastened and changed Exxon was.

NARRATOR: What corporate America learned from both of the success of the Tylenol case and the failure of the Exxon Valdez debacle is the necessity of short-term damage control to protect profits from negative publicity. But they also learned that it is not enough to simply respond to crisis, that the most effective PR would prevent the crisis from occurring in the first place. And that long-term preemptive planning was necessary. The response of the food industry to the Alar scare of the late 1980s is a classic example of this preemptive strategy.

JOHN STAUBER: Alar was a pesticide that the apple industry used that should have been banned by the Environmental Protection Agency but wasn't. CBS did a report, which exposed the fact that the EPA had failed to get Alar off the market, and this looked just like a tremendous victory – for the press, for this environmental group, and for public health and safety. I mean isn't this how its supposed to work in the textbooks – the government is failing to get a carcinogenic pesticide off the market, crusading environmental activists working with the leading investigative TV show of the day, "60 minutes," expose this to the American people who launch a spontaneous boycott of apples, forcing the Uniroyal company to pull this pesticide off the market and the apple industry to renounce the use of it.

[CBS News: James Wylie, VP Uniroyal] Let the fear stop here.

JOHN STAUBER: Well unfortunately, what looked like a victory for environmentalists and a victory for public health, has become just the opposite.

NARRATOR: The lesson that Alar taught the food industry is that free speech, when exercised by citizens and public health advocates, is dangerous. Consequently, they moved to enact legislation at the state level to make sure it would not happen again. Lobbying on behalf of the apple industry, the American Council on Science and Health sought to bypass the First Amendment by getting food disparagement laws on the books in most of the farm-belt states. This legislation stipulates that anyone can be taken to court for publicly criticizing food products.

JOHN STAUBER: Well, these laws sat on the books until April of 1996 when Oprah Winfrey decided to have a TV program on Mad Cow risks in the US.

[Oprah Winfrey Show Interview: Howard Lyman, Humane Society] One hundred thousand cows, per year, in the United States are fine at night, dead in the morning. The majority of those cows are rounded up, ground up, fed back to other cows. If only one of them has Mad Cow Disease, has the potential to infect thousands. Remember, today, the United States 14% of all cows, by volume, are ground up, turned into feed, and fed back to other animals.

JOHN STAUBER: A month later, Oprah Winfrey was sued by millionaire cattle feedlot owners in Texas, under the Texas Food Disparagement Act.

[ABC News] Oprah Winfrey is heading for a showdown in a Texas courtroom Tuesday. Winfrey is being sued because of something she said on her highly successful talk show.

JOHN STAUBER: This was like a shot across the bow of the US media. And the message was simple: Look, if you do like Oprah did and you publicize the risk of Mad Cow risks in the US and how the government is failing to protect us from

this disease, you may end up dragged into court, forced to spend millions of dollars on legal fees and years of your life, fending off a lawsuit brought under food disparagement laws. These lawsuits dragged on for five years. And while she won her court case, the Texas Food Disparagement law remained intact.

NARRATOR: While Oprah Winfrey ultimately won the suit against her, this highly visible attack served its true function – to intimidate journalists to shy away from reporting responsibly on important public health issues for fear of expensive and time-consuming lawsuits.

SILENCING DEBATE

NARRATOR: By the 1990s, the field of biotechnology had become big business. Scientists, funded by industry, began experimenting with the genetic make-up of plants for commercial use and genetically engineered foods hit the supermarket shelves in the 1990s. PR has continued to play a significant role in shaping public opinion about this technology ever since, particularly in the news.

[CNN News] *Just the words “genetically modified foods” are very scary to some people. Often they don’t realize there’s an excellent chance they’re already eating genetically modified foods and just don’t know it. Genetic modification means scientists have gone in and changed a plant’s genes to make it more useful in some way, such as more resistant to insects or more resistant to agricultural diseases. The government regulates these foods and over forty genetically modified plant varieties have completed all the federal requirements to go to market. Everything from tomatoes to cantaloupes to corn...*

KAREN CHARMAN: In Europe there’s been a full-scale revolt against biotech food products and supermarkets have taken them off their shelves, you know there’s been a huge public outcry against them. And the biotech industry here has been terrified that the same thing would happen here.

[ABC News] *The Biotechnology industry is launching a multi-million dollar advertising campaign. The goal? To convince Americans that altering the genes of plants and animals can be for the good of man, and not the end of mankind.*

JESSICA HAYES: In the United States, the Biotech industry and the Biotech Council has launched a huge proactive media campaign to basically squelch public debate, to try to get the public to accept these products without questioning them.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: Here is a perfect example of how PR works. The other side, the crucial other side of propaganda per se is censorship. You have to wipe out the contradictory claims; you have to shut out those other voices so they don’t interfere with the message. So we don’t really hear anything about genetically modified foods being dangerous and why. We don’t know what motivates the protestors. So that we’re all that much readier to buy the view that they’re just hysterics, they just hate America.

JESSICA HAYES: Time after time, polls have shown that citizens, the public, wants to know what’s in their food, they want these products to be labeled and Congress still has not enacted a bill that requires labeling.

KAREN CHARMAN (in supermarket):

It’s possible that this is genetically modified.

Chances are that these products here, they’re all genetically engineered.

All of these bakery items may well contain genetically modified ingredients. This is most likely genetically engineered.

It's possible that these strawberries, they're all genetically engineered. Chances are all of these different cheeses contain the genetically engineered Bovine Growth Hormone.

And this also may well contain genetically modified ingredients in it. Of course since nothing's labeled, there's no way of knowing that.

JOHN STAUBER: One of the PR assurances you hear repeatedly from the food industry and the US government is that genetically engineered food is probably the most tested new technology in history. And this is supposed to really reassure you. What they don't tell you is, yes, that's probably true, but its efficacy testing. The testing is to determine whether putting the genetically engineered gene into the soybean allows the soybean to kill insects. It isn't to answer the question of whether the soybean might also kill people. The testing required to answer the question "are genetically engineered foods safe for humans?" has not been done.

NARRATOR: Because the issue of genetically engineered food did not get publicly debated, industry was able to promote the new technology using its own terms. By some estimates, the Biotech industry is spending a million dollars a week to fund its front group, The Council for Biotechnology Information.

JOHN STAUBER: You see the full-page ad of the handsome, rugged, smiling soybean farmer from the Midwest in *The New York Times* over, and over, and over. And full-page ads in *The New York Times* are a bit pricey. Reassuring us that his genetically engineered soybeans are not only going to save the family farm and promote agriculture in the US, but they're safe and they're going to feed the starving billions. And this is the sort of really disingenuous – but effective – propaganda tactic that the Biotech industry has learned is effective, telling the American people that "hey, if we slow down the marketing of genetically engineered foods, if we require mandatory safety testing, if we require consumer labeling, what we're really doing is condemning the starving billions to continue starving because genetically engineered food is going to save them from starvation.

JESSICA HAYES: If we wanted to put all the money they're putting into PR, we could actually change the distribution system and probably feed the world. If they were really interested in feeding the world, then spending a million dollars a week on PR would not be the place that they'd be putting their money.

NARRATOR: The case of genetically modified food is a clear example of how corporations view the role of the media in a democratic society. Solely as delivery systems for their point of view. With the media and journalists hamstrung to provide the full range of information that citizens need, the real loser is democracy itself.

CONCLUSION

JOHN STAUBER: I think we really need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that we can just turn on the radio, or turn on the TV, get our news fix for the day from our favorite source, pick up our favorite daily newspaper, and that's enough – that's not enough.

DIANE SAMPLES: The important thing to do is to have a variety of sources of information. If you're counting on one news broadcast every single night to give you all your news, then you are being fed a lot of information that is *not* originating from journalists but is originating from PR efforts. That's certainly the case.

MARK CRISPIN MILLER: When the American people know what's going on, they tend to make the right decision. They tend to see things pretty clearly. And that's a big "if". Because we do live in a system that's inordinately dominated by corporate PR practitioners and so on, a system that's really made to keep the people in the dark.

STUART EWEN: If we're going to talk about changing, sort of, and challenging the propaganda apparatus, the only way to do it is for the communications system, and for the tools for public expression to become things that are more and more in the hands of ordinary people. I mean, unless we begin to have a more democratic creation of a media environment, the current system is not going to change. But I think the possibility is there and the tools are within reach.