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Despite strong evidence linking tobacco to cancer, cigarette companies successfully stalled government action with a disinformation campaign premised on scientific research.

Smokescreens

Junk science tactics are designed to confuse the public and the policy-makers

By Neil Arya

Allan Brandt, in his book *The Cigarette Century*, described how in the 1950s the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer was becoming well established.

In response, John Hill, of the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, designed a strategy that allowed the tobacco industry to become a major sponsor of “medical research.” The industry’s approach, Brandt wrote, “implied that existing studies were inadequate or flawed,” and made cigarette manufacturers “seem a committed participant in the scientific enterprise rather than a detractor.”

By demanding impossible levels of scientific evidence the industry impeded governments from adopting common-sense regulations. The scientific message was twisted, implying that the peer-reviewed studies which linked smoking to cancer and other diseases did not measure up to the “sound science” put forward in the tobacco-sponsored studies that suggested the link was inconclusive.

David Michaels, the U.S. assistant secretary of energy from 1998 to 2001, has explained that the manufacturers created the “tobacco industry research committee,” employing scientists who “dissected every study, highlighted every question, magnified every flaw, cast every possible doubt every possible time. They also conjured their own studies with questionable data and foregone conclusions. It was all a charade, of course, because the real science was incontrovertible. But the uncertainty campaign was effective; it delayed public health protections, and compensation for tobacco victims for decades.”

A 1969 memo from the tobacco company Brown and Williamson noted, “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public.”

Michaels pointed out that this confuse-the-public tactic was later used by producers of asbestos, benzene, beryllium, chromium, diesel exhaust, lead, plastics, and other hazardous products in order to oppose public health, environmental and occupational regulation.

“Big oil” would also borrow that approach from “big tobacco,” launching a disinformation campaign to sow doubts about the facts surrounding global warming, the Union of Concerned Scientists has reported.

Biochemist Arthur B. Robinson, the associate leader of the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine, distributed a

petition and a paper on the environmental effects of increased atmospheric carbon dioxide, which is now cited by many climate-change deniers to show controversy in the field. And physicist Frederick Seitz, chair of ExxonMobil-backed George C. Marshall Institute, who had worked as a scientific adviser to R.J. Reynolds after serving as president of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), signed an accompanying letter to the Robinson report.

The paper, whose authors included Robinson’s son and several of Seitz’s colleagues, was in the same font and format as the official proceedings of the NAS. The NAS angrily disassociated itself from this effort stating that, “the petition project was a deliberate attempt to mislead scientists and to rally them in an attempt to undermine support for the Kyoto Protocol.

“The petition was not based on a review of the science of global climate change, nor were its signers experts in the field of climate science.”

The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC) was created in 1993 by APCO public relations company as a front for Phillip Morris attempting to discredit any health effects from tobacco smoke in the environment. It later included the Lorillard tobacco company, and other corporations such as Amoco, Chevron, Exxon, Occidental Petroleum, General Motors, Dow Chemical and the National Pest Control Association. The coalition’s executive director, Steve J. Milloy, a paid advocate for Phillip Morris and Exxon Mobil, founded the website junkscience.com — which was dedicated to debunking the good scientific research that threatened the profit-making potential of his employers, or what Milloy claimed was environmental radicalism and false claims regarding such diverse issues as climate change and the pesticide DDT.

Industry-funded scientists — who generally are not malicious or dupes — may be consciously or unconsciously influenced by their backers.

When a report by the Ontario Coalition of Family Physicians concluded that a wide variety of synthetic pesticides were associated with adverse health effects — including both acute and chronic including cancers — it was criticized by some toxicologists in Canada and a pesticide advisory panel in the United Kingdom. But it did receive a lot of support and positive feedback when published in a peer-reviewed article in *Canadian Family Physician* two years later. There was also an extensive report from the Toronto

Board of Health that reached the same conclusion, leading the former provincial medical officer of health, Sheila Basrur, to support a ban on cosmetic pesticides.

My own commentary in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* concluded that because the benefits of use on lawns was minimal, that these studies, while not definitive, give cause for concern — enough concern to support a ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides, a conclusion supported by the Toronto, Ottawa and Ontario medical officers of health.

When Nobel Peace laureate Dr. Albert Schweitzer called for an end to above ground nuclear testing in 1957, Atomic Energy Commission scientist Willard F. Libby lambasted him for scaremongering. The radiation from tests, Libby claimed, was less than one per cent of permissible concentrations and much less than natural background radiation — the difference between moving a few hundred feet up a hill from sea level or from a wooden to brick or concrete dwelling.

Unfortunately, Schweitzer was right. A 2002 study by the National Cancer Institute and the Centres for Disease Control showed an excess 15,000 deaths and 22,000 cancers from such testing, ranging from melanoma and leukemia to thyroid and breast cancer in U.S. residents born after 1951.

When its claim of product safety was discredited, the tobacco industry moved on to the smokescreen of light cigarettes.

A similar approach to reduce exposure is now in vogue with integrated pest management (IPM) for turf care. Although touted as a systemic approach that minimizes pesticide use, the City of Calgary last month reported that its IPM policy had led city herbicide use to rise from 1,976 kilograms in 2003 to 3,564 kg in 2007.

The move to IPM also begs the question, if pesticides are so safe when used as directed, why is reduction necessary?

So how can the average person navigate the field between pseudo-science smokescreens, scaremongering and sound science to make informed decisions on tobacco smoke, climate change, nuclear power or pesticide use? Consider the history of junk science, its credibility, biases and the tactics of the messenger, and then apply some critical thinking and common sense.

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McCain missed his chance to steal the spotlight

By Dan Rather

There was talk that presumptive Republican party nominee John McCain might name his vice-presidential pick this week. The ostensible reason — and the reason his campaign remained coy on the subject even after the initial frenzy subsided — was to steal away some of the media thunder that presumptive Democratic nominee Barack Obama has generated with his tour of the Middle East, Afghanistan and Europe.

It probably would have been a good idea for McCain to have done so, and the reason why has less to do with grabbing headlines from Obama than with the electoral calendar.

Obama’s foray overseas is about establishing his foreign-policy and commander-in-chief bona fides. But more than that, it serves as a clear and unmistakable signal (thanks to an assist from the national media) that Obama has moved decisively from his

party’s primary battles to the general-election contest.

It’s been a month and a half since Hillary Clinton suspended her campaign, and that is apparently all the time that Obama needed to shift the conversation away from questions about whether he could unite his divided party and win the support of disaffected Hillary supporters. This isn’t to say these questions have disappeared — and targeted polling between now and election day, not to mention the choreography of the Democratic Convention, will either revive them or put them to rest.

But the Democrats’ intraparty squabbles are no longer topic A for close followers of politics, and seem to have fallen off the radar entirely for more casual observers.

McCain, meanwhile, effectively sewed up the Republican nomination on Feb. 7, when Mitt Romney ended his run for the GOP nomination. But while Obama executed a textbook pivot to the political centre in the

immediate wake of his victory in the primaries — emphasizing moderate views he had stated previously but left on the shelf during the populist-toned race against Hillary, and staking out new ground on issues such as faith-based initiatives and the contentious FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) bill — McCain still seemed to be trying to close the deal with conservatives in his own party.

While Obama has been making strategic tacks to the right, McCain has often looked adrift. It is to say that, despite being four months behind McCain on the calendar and McCain’s fundraising progress notwithstanding, Obama is now ahead in the perception that he’s running for the White House instead of his party’s nomination.

If McCain had named his vice-presidential pick this week, it would have been more than a media coup. It could have served as an unmistakable announcement that he, too, had his eyes on the ultimate prize. And, de-

pending on his pick, it could have represented a canny way to put party unity questions to rest at last.

The Republican Convention starts on Sept. 1. This means that the optimal period for both candidates to announce their veep picks may be between now and the Olympics that begin Aug. 8.

There are rumours afoot that Obama already has made his selection, and there is some scuttlebutt that McCain may announce his pick right after the Democratic Convention — a selection that could tamp down Obama’s post-convention “bounce” and allow him to react strategically to whomever Obama chooses.

Strategic, perhaps. But if McCain doesn’t find another way to show clearly that he’s fully shifted gears to the general-election campaign, will it be too late?

Dan Rather is the former anchor with CBS-TV News, and is a columnist for Hearst Newspapers.

Sadly for humourists, there’s nothing funny about Obama

Nearly every aspect of American society will likely improve if Sen. Barack Obama is elected president in November.

Notice I say, “nearly.” For comedians and satirists, an Obama victory may prove to be a disaster.

A July 15 headline in the *New York Times* said it all: “Want Obama in a Punch Line? First, Find a Joke.”

The article — about the failure of comedians to come up with good Obama jokes — coincided with a controversial *New Yorker* magazine cover that depicts Obama as an Islamic terrorist and his wife, Michelle, as a black revolutionary, circa 1969. The illustration shows the couple in the Oval Office, with a framed picture of Osama bin Laden on the wall and an American flag burning in the fireplace.

The reaction to the *New Yorker*’s Obama cover has been largely negative. Which begs the question: Why



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can’t humourists effectively poke fun at Obama? Stand-up comics frequently tease Obama’s Republican rival, John McCain, especially about his age. “John McCain is now criss-crossing the United States campaigning. Or, as they’re calling it, Antiques Roadshow,” quipped Jay Leno.

Has Obama’s lofty rhetoric about change stopped comedians dead in their tracks? I doubt it. Starry-eyed idealism has always been grist for the mills of the irreverent.

Is political correctness to blame? Not likely. The heyday of political correctness was 20 years ago. Now we live in the age of

Family Guy, *South Park* and the *Colbert Report*, where nothing shocks anyone anymore. Today’s jokesters love turning sacred cows into hamburger.

The exception, of course, is the heightened sensitivity to race. Look at what happened when Seinfeld alumnus Michael Richards melted down on a stand-up comedy stage back in November 2006, hurling “N-bombs” at shocked African Americans in the audience. Any prospects he had for a career revival flew south after that routine.

That’s because overtly racist humour has no place in contemporary American society. But even non-racial Obama jokes do not go over very well with audiences. “The thing is, he’s not buffoonish in any way,” said Mike Barry, a longtime joke writer for Johnny Carson and David Letterman.

Other presidents have provided

ample fodder for comedians. No other president in recent history has been lampooned as savagely as President George W. Bush, who has already been the subject of a TV sitcom (*That’s My Bush*) and a Comedy Central cartoon (*Lil’ Bush*) that portrays him as a pint-sized hayseed.

Before Bush, Bill Clinton was relentlessly satirized as a redneck womanizer. The senior George Bush was caricatured as a geek, Ronald Reagan a scatterbrained oaf, Jimmy Carter a hillbilly peanut farmer, and Gerald Ford a bumbling fool.

And then there were the countless unflattering portrayals of Richard Nixon — the satirists’ dream president — complete with a ski-jump nose, flapping jowls, five o’clock shadow, and the shifting eyes. Even the beloved John F. Kennedy had Vaughn Meader, the first ever presidential imperson-

ator, whose imitation of the 35th president was so spot-on that even Kennedy himself reportedly loved it.

In fact, the United States has a rich history of presidential satire, going back to John Adams in the late 18th century.

Only George Washington, the nation’s first president, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president during the twin crises of depression and war, escaped from the relentless assault — largely because they were so revered in their lifetimes.

Maybe Obama — if he becomes president — won’t inspire belly laughs either. But something tells me that minor drawback won’t hurt his chances come November.

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