



Messages in Masquerade, Communications in Camouflage.

By Max Sutherland

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To get under people's evaluative radar, messages are increasingly masqueraded as news and entertainment, or camouflaged as questions in push polls. We know a lot more these days about how to influence people without making direct claims or assertions. Here's how it works and why a stronger, regulatory brake is called for.

As we saw in [my last column](#), when America sneezes, the rest of the world catches cold. Uncontrolled [product placement](#) in the USA is now threatening to become a global pandemic as the 'look the other way' approach by the Federal Communications Commission [spreads to other parts of the world](#). The F.C.C. [takes the curious view](#) that if no actual claims are made then: "consumer injury from an undisclosed payment for product placement seems unlikely". Media 'presence' by products or people invites inferences as to their popularity and product placement is just one form of message in masquerade. Perceived popularity is a magnet and it attracts.



Other forms of communications masquerade their messages too, camouflaging them as news or entertainment - or as push polling questions.

Push Polling

Communication psychologists are aware (as the FCC must also be) that you can exert influence without making overt claims. With push polling, the information is positioned as 'given fact' rather than a direct claim, and the message masquerades as a question.

During the 2000 Republican primaries in the USA, the Bush campaign allegedly torpedoed the rival candidate Senator John McCain in the South by asking voters in a poll "Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?" (See [Wikipedia](#)). Thereafter, the McCain candidacy was history, and push polling had established its credentials.

How it Works.

As a child, did you ever play the schoolyard trick of asking kids "How many of each creature did Moses take on the ark?" Their answer was invariably 'two', and you derided their 'ignorance' since it was Noah, not Moses, who took creatures on an ark. When you position information as 'given', it pitches it *under* people's evaluative radar. That's how push polling works.

Even though push polling makes no claims, the mind assumes, without much analysis, the veracity of the messages that have been camouflaged as questions.

Research Origins.

The odious technique of push polling grew out of some well meaning psychological research on eyewitness testimony that showed people a video of a car accident and later asked them: "*How fast was the blue car going when it ran the stop sign?*"¹ There was no stop sign but the question led people to assume that there was. Later when asked if they had really seen it, more than half claimed they did.

Testing the limits of this, researchers found repeatedly that they could influence people to add buildings, see people who aren't there, make cars go faster or slower, and in general testify to actions not originally there. Without ever making a claim, it is possible to implant false 'facts' and imbue them with an illusion of truth.

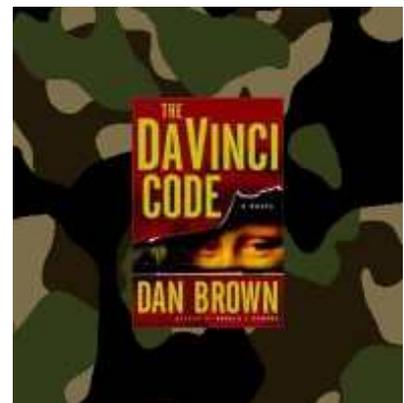
When 'claims' are camouflaged in this way and positioned so that they appear as 'given facts', we treat them more casually. We assume we already know them so we don't spend as much time evaluating their validity. Not only do people overlook erroneous information in a trivial question like the Noah example but the mental representation of important events may be 'altered' in people's minds simply by asking a question. That's a real worry for eyewitness testimony. Why is it not a real worry for communication regulators?

The push polling technique to malign political opponents is a practice that is widely condemned but not illegal. Only in a handful of states in the USA has any law been passed to restrict it. A Federal bill proposing some controls² is presently before the US Congress but barring some unexpected hardening of current sentiment, don't expect push polling to disappear anytime soon.

Entertainment as Camouflage

Entertainment is perhaps an even more powerful form of camouflage. You can not only embed products but also false information, to influence beliefs and behavior – all without making claims.

When we read, watch or listen to something presented for our entertainment, we process it differently to news or current affairs. Typically, entertainment romanticizes rather than proselytizes but we absorb information from it. For example, many a student has aided their study of Russian history and culture by reading Dostoyevsky. Novels like [Hawaii](#) and [The Source](#) by James Michener are replete with historical 'information'. When you blend fiction with reality, it can be hard to tell the difference, especially [when information is encountered vicariously](#) - for example by 'overhearing it' in the dialogue between characters such as in *The Da Vinci Code* (or even on a website³).



The Da Vinci Code

In April 2003, Christian leaders shrugged off Dan Brown's novel called "The Da Vinci Code". They were unworried by religious documents depicted in the story that were after all only a backdrop to a *fiction* story. Two years after, with sales of 18 million copies stirring up anti-church sentiment in various parts of the globe, the Vatican was forced to appoint [an official debunker](#). Newfound 'knowledge' about Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalen and the church had [embedded itself](#) in parishioners' minds to the point where some were even leaving the church. Communication camouflaged as entertainment can be very powerful.

Illusion of Truth

Marsh et al demonstrated how this works by deliberately placing distorted information in the dialogue of short, fiction stories.⁴ Students read stories with various themes – one of which was an Alaskan expedition. The misleading versions made no claims but contained subtle distortions of fact. (For example, if the dialogue in the correct version read *“This here, this is a sextant and it’s the main tool used at sea to navigate via the stars,”* the misleading version might read *“This here, this is a compass and it’s the main tool used at sea to navigate via the stars.”*) Later in a disguised test of their general knowledge, those who had been exposed to the short story misinformation gave more wrong answers and were more likely to proffer the misinformation as ‘facts’.

What is both worrying and intriguing is that they remained unconscious of having been influenced by the short stories. In fact, they maintained that they ‘knew-it-all-along’. That is, reading these distortions gave them the illusion, retrospectively, that they had known the (mis)information’ before they read it, so it was simply ‘confirmation’. It shows how positioning Information as ‘given’, even in a fictional story, can be used to deposit illusory ‘facts’ in the mind that are left behind in the form of residues.

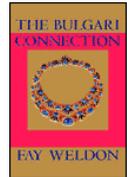
Focus of Processing

With entertainment, peoples’ ‘focus of processing’ is on enjoyment and not on vigilantly looking for masqueraded messages. But entertainment is not message neutral - especially in this new era of product placement. Novels, short stories, sitcoms, movies and even computer games, frequently occur in familiar political, geographical, and historical contexts and hence have the capacity to depict and thereby distort beliefs, as well as distort normative perceptions of people’s product consumption.

Back to the Future

Is it possible, or even likely, that advertisers can go still further in exploiting this newfound ability to masquerade fiction as fact without making claims? Especially with the regulatory door wide open and the competitive environment becoming more intense, why not? Indeed, if we look closely we can already see an extension in the trend.

From McDonalds offering to pay rappers to mention the Big Mac in their song lyrics, we have moved to Bulgari [paying Fay Weldon](#) to write a fiction novel called “The Bulgari Connection”. From paying game makers to ensure [McDonald’s food is available to virtual characters in a computer game](#), we have moved to the military developing [action computer games as recruiting tools](#). And so on we go, down the slippery slope.



Under the Radar

‘Under the radar’ is what characterizes this growing communication trend of the last few years. Much depends on the message penetrating the psychological defenses that would normally be engaged if people were more aware of what is happening. In this vein, we have seen undisclosed payments made to [celebrities to casually endorse brand-name drugs](#) in TV talk show interviews, and to [commentators](#) to tout government policies in their media columns. As well, we have seen Federal agencies disseminating information [disguised as news reports](#), and [respected newspapers](#) caught manipulating their ‘restaurant news’ to solicit and reward their food establishment advertisers.

Opportunism is ageless, so these things can happen at any point in time. But when regulators ‘look the other way’ and let precedent build on precedent, it becomes contagious and threatens to grow into a global pandemic. It is time that regulators acknowledged that there are powerful ways to exert influence without making overt claims and it is time they brought some regulatory containment strategies to bear on it.

“Every snowflake in an avalanche pleads not guilty.” Stanislaw J. Lec (Polish writer)

Notes

¹ Loftus G. & Loftus E., *Human Memory: The Processing of Information*, Lawrence Erlbaum N.J., 1976.

² To [require any person who conducts a Federal election poll](#) by telephone or electronic device to: (1) disclose to each respondent the identity of the person paying the poll expenses; and (2) report to the Federal Election Commission the poll's total cost and all its funding sources (if not otherwise to be made public), the total number of households contacted, and a copy of the poll question

³ Persuasion through overheard communication by life-like agents
<http://research.nii.ac.jp/~seiji/publication/Conference/2004/IAT-2004-ssv.pdf>

⁴ Marsh, E. J., M. L. Meade, et al. (2003). "Learning Facts from Fiction." *Journal of Memory and Language* 49: 519–536.