

the good ole days

Secret sell of subliminal projection

Cries of *Brave New World* and 1984 abounded. Nervous, frightened movie viewers waved their fingers in front of their faces incessantly, wondering if they were being exposed to it. The usually liberal *New Yorker* screamed that minds were being unknowingly and wantonly 'broken and entered'. An emotional editorial in the *Saturday Review* insisted that the only honorable course of action in this case would be to "take this invention and everything connected with it and attach it to the center of the next nuclear explosive scheduled for testing". A Los Angeles businessman informed *Business Week* that Himmler and Goebbels had at least had the decency to commit suicide and that James M. Vicary showed no such ethical sense and should be shot out of hand.

The year was 1957, the devilish invention was Subliminal Projection, and Mr. Vicary its developer. The process was simple: during the showing of a movie (or television program, it was hoped), a commercial message was flashed on the screen at a light intensity lower than that of the rest of the film for from 1/25 to 1/3000th of a second, depending upon the individual film's degree of brightness. This process was repeated at five-second intervals for one minute. The message was much too fleeting for the conscious mind to detect, but the subconscious mind was aware of its presence, and the intermittent repetition caused it to 'get into a person's mind', so to speak. The device had been tested successfully in a theater in Fort Lee, N.J. in August of the year. During the regular showing of the film *Picnic*, messages suggesting that the viewer 'Drink Coke' or 'Eat Popcorn' were sublimated at 1/50th of a second at ten second intervals, but on different nights so that thirst induced by additional popcorn consumption would not drive Coke sales up inadvertently. This experiment was conducted during the six weeks embracing July 16-August 31, the results being a 57.7% increase in Coke sales, an 18.1% increase in sales of popcorn. *Picnic* was not a film conducive to popcorn or Coke consumption (as would be a baseball or circus movie, for instance) and Vicary, an American Statistical Assn. member, could demonstrate that sound statistical controls had been used. Reports of this test were released in January 1958 and most observers got the immediate impression that hundreds of people had been convinced they should buy something without ever seeing or hearing a word.

Mr. Vicary apparently didn't realize how disturbing most people found this story. He went on to announce that the new technique was also adaptable for television and that he was soliciting clients in this area. His contention was that the new device would be a boon to the dedicated TV viewer, as it could eventually eradicate completely the annoyingly increasing number of commercial messages that were even then taking up more and more viewing time. But the conclusion drawn by a number of self-righteous journalists was that the day could come when consumers would unceasingly purchase items they didn't want or need simply because they had watched 'Gunsmoke' or 'Highway Patrol' the night before.

The stunning suddenness of these developments caused an immediate rhabarab. Congressmen up for re-election in 1958 began discussion of legislation against sublim, and Senator Charles Potter, a Michigan Republican with an unlimited capacity for indignant histrionics, asked the Federal Communications Commission whether it had sufficient authority to protect the voting public from this new menace or whether it needed more. The Women's Christian Temperance Union insisted that something be done to guard against the invasion of young minds should breweries and distilleries begin Subliminal Advertising campaigns. A few, however, kept their heads. Professor Richard H. Blackwell of the University of Michigan's Psychology and Ophthalmology Dept. had conducted experiments in this area earlier and said matter-of-factly that an advertisement unseen by the viewer would have the same effect as one obnoxiously visible, insisting that there was nothing really compelling about such stimuli.

This had been one of Vicary's main contentions all along. He wasn't overly concerned about the publicity that Subliminal Projection Company had gotten from the controversy, figuring that a widespread belief that motivation researchers had eerie supernatural powers over the public couldn't hurt when it came time to deal with a client. Originally, most observers thought that the entire idea was so devious that no legitimate advertising firms would have anything to do with it, but when it became known that a number of top ad executives had said that they would recommend Sublim to their clients if it were found to be as effective as its reputation, attacks on everything from the science of hypnotic research to Mr. Vicary's parentage were levied from all fronts. In a January 1958 interview with *Consumer Reports*, Mr. Vicary stated that he was not alarmed at the objections raised, stating that they were based on misconception. People would have ample reason to object, he said, if sublim was as powerful as they had been led to believe. He maintained that it was an innocent technique, a relatively weak form of reminder advertising. Its principal function, he insisted, was to relieve the pressure of advertisers demanding television time. Since a viewer could not know that he was watching a sponsor's message, he would not be tempted to leave his set during a commercial. Eventually, Mr. Vicary hoped, all commercials could be invisible. He explained that it was relatively weak because it had little effect on the person whose threshold was relatively high at the time of transmission. In fact, he revealed, Sublim could be unpredictable in its influence. The message 'Drink Coke' might lead you to buy a Coke you otherwise wouldn't have bought if you like Coke and if you are thirsty. But it might just as well suggest to you that you should have a drink of water, or it might cause you to dream about drinking, or it might lead you to buy a Cheerwine or a Pepsi-Cola. No, said Mr. Vicary, Sublim wasn't brainwashing, it was merely a way of jogging the memory.

The magic was that it was possible to insert a mild form of reminder advertising at the very peak of attention, the big moment of the movie or television play when the audience is well-motivated to do what the advertiser would like. But Vicary's company was well aware that regulation was necessary and actively sought it. They wanted a law that disclosure that the technique was being used would be mandatory in all circumstances. Vicary insisted that the viewer not only know that he was being Sublimmed, but that he also know what the message was. Disclosure would not reduce the effectiveness of the device enough to matter, he felt, and it was essential to the prevention of 'bootleg' Subliminal advertising sold to willing firms by unscrupulous local stations, a possibility that could become profitable enough that different messages from divergent or competing firms would be sublimated at five second intervals, rather than the prescribed one message flashed every five seconds for one moment. The result of this type of jumbled jargon, warned Vicary, would be ineffectual advertising at best and possible psychologically damaging mental conflicts at worst. (Next article: *Cutthroat radio tactics, early applications with frightening results, regulation and controls: Part II of Subliminal Projection*).

samuel e. spear

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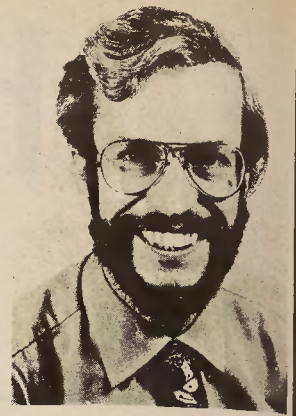
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The Doctor's Bag



Address questions to Dr. Arnold Werner,
c/o Michigan State University, East
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Question: I have heard that wearing platform shoes and high heels can cause varicose veins. Is that medically correct?

Answer: If platform shoes and high heels cause varicose veins, I am sure it occurs subsequent to fracturing an ankle after losing one's balance in those hideous contraptions. By themselves, they should not cause varicose veins although I understand that some people get backaches with them. While all high heel shoes and all platform shoes make one more vulnerable to ankle twists, the ones with inadequate heel support or entirely open heels are the most dangerous.

Question: Would you please help us to settle a dispute on my floor for me? A couple of years ago a good friend of mine had an appendicitis attack. The doctor attributed the cause to popcorn lodged in the appendix. Is it possible for such stuff as popcorn, peanut shells, etc. to get caught in the appendix?

Answer: Although rare, the situation you inquire about can occur. Much more commonly, obstruction of the appendix is caused by fecal material either accumulating or lodging in the opening of this useless organ. In a fair percentage of cases, no particular cause can be found for the appendicitis.

The appendix is a three to four inch long skinny piece of intestine attached to the beginning of the large intestine. It serves no useful function in humans and is thought to be left over from the days when man's intestine was much longer than it is now. It is tucked away in the lower right part of the abdomen. Appendicitis is the commonest acute surgical condition of the abdomen. Interestingly, it was not until the very late 1800's before inflammation of the appendix was recognized as an important clinical condition.

There is no way to prevent the occurrence of appendicitis and I certainly would not advise one to stop eating peanuts and popcorn since this would be a trivial cause of the disorder. Appendicitis tends to occur less frequently as one gets older but still can occur even in the elderly.

Question: Is it true that the shape of the navel is different in women who have never been pregnant compared to women who have been pregnant? I have heard that women who have never been pregnant have a longitudinal navel and those who have been pregnant have a round one.

Answer: Since I was asked this question I had plenty of time to make observations and to ask some discrete questions.

To begin with, the navel (umbilicus) is round. The ultimate shape of the umbilicus is dependent upon what kind of pulling and tugging goes on in the abdominal wall and for some reason, the sex of the belly button's owner.

Women who have never had children indeed seem to have more longitudinal navels than round ones. But, women who have been pregnant have had considerable stretching of the abdominal wall and this seems to account for the change. If there is enough time between pregnancies and the woman does not gain weight, usually the abdominal wall reverts to its original state and the umbilicus more or less does the same. Even so, some women who have never been pregnant have round ones.

Interestingly, men do not have longitudinal navels even when thin and muscular. For some reason, the pull on the umbilicus is lateral in men and vertical in women. I suppose if there is to be a part of the body which will remain shrouded in mystery, it may as well be the umbilicus rather than something more functional.

Question: The other day I noticed a small line of print on my box of salt: "This salt does not supply iodide, a necessary nutrient." Somewhat surprised, I had always thought that salt was still supplied with iodide. I noticed the same admonition on almost all the salt brands in the grocery store.

What gives? Does salt no longer supply our iodide requirements? If so, what food sources can one use to obtain this nutrient?

Answer: Once upon a time many people living in the Great Lakes area suffered from low thyroid function and developed goiters (large swellings of the thyroid gland). The problem stemmed from insufficient amounts of iodide in their food and liquid intake. Iodide is necessary for the production of thyroid hormone.

THE JOURNAL

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