

The Ad Council and Reality Control

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From bus stops to ballparks, television to the internet, nearly every American has encountered the logo of the Ad Council. The Ad Council is chartered as a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and solicits donations, volunteers, pro-bono advertising development, and media space from its partners. On its list of donors, nearly every DOW 30 company is represented in some capacity, as are smaller cap companies like Microsoft and Google as well as individual donors (Ad). The funds and time donated are funneled into extensive amounts of market research and campaign development to stay abreast of issues affecting all Americans; as the Ad Council website stipulates in their requirements for what can become a campaign (no specific demographics or narrow causes). The nature of the Ad Council's campaigns is necessarily one that must affect viewers indiscriminately, and so lends itself to moral order thought dissemination, generated by the brightest minds in the advertising sphere and funded by America's biggest companies.

Consequently, this organization is perhaps the best equipped in the U.S. to subject the entire nation regularly to its agendas. Additionally, most Americans have never seen a time without public service advertisements. We must then, be forced to regard the Ad Council as highly integrated system of control, employed by the U.S. Government and all major U.S. Corporations to its self-professed end of raising awareness, inspiring action, and saving lives. This entails the latter as having the power not only to rule us and sell to us, respectively, but also play an instrumental role in convincing us as to what we *should* do. Arguably, this is the purpose of all advertising and would cause many to regard the latter claim as obvious; however the means are not in question, it is the end that is concerning.

By contrast, the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's 1984 was primarily tasked with reconstructing the past, and specifically the Records Department, "whose primary job was . . . to supply

the citizens of Oceania with newspapers, films, textbooks, telescreen programs, plays, novels –with every conceivable kind of information, instruction, or entertainment, from a statue to a slogan, from a lyric poem to a biological treatise, and from a child’s spelling book to a Newspeak dictionary.” (127) A major difference between the Ministry and the Ad Council is that the Ministry exists in a world that has completely turned itself over to the controlling influence of the government, while the Ad Council quietly gains influence as it continues to take additional stands on issues. Additionally, the Ad Council has chosen to take an approach of moral superiority as an institution, whereas the Ministry is concerned with total control and produces information of all types, including pornography and reading material for *proles*, Oceania’s lower class.

Before juxtaposing the ways, means and ends of the Ministry of Truth and those of the Ad Council, it is necessary to reiterate the connection between mass-market advertising and what can only be reasonably assumed to be the advertiser’s chief end: controlling the conscious thoughts of their watchers. Use of suggestive techniques and combining brand awareness with messages of consumer morality, advertisers have played a major role in the shaping of American consumer culture since before the second world war. An example of this principle in action may be seen in a luxury automobile advertisement in which the driver is portrayed, faceless, wearing a high-quality dress shirt, shining cufflinks, and a designer wrist watch, as the driver wraps the car through a series of precision turns on a dark, deserted road. This advertisement does not even have to mention a single feature of the automobile, only that it is a high performance conveyance for high performance individuals. This is an example of a manner in which producers sell lifestyles rather than a product, a strategy that has reshaped the focus of the advertising industry.

In addition, the schedule of well-funded advertising and the cost of advertising space reflect a high demand for ad space during prime time television, a period of the day that exists between

approximately 8 and 10 pm. It is sufficiently plausible to suggest that any individual that has been awake long enough to dress for and commute to a standard occupation, that returns home to eat a meal and watch television is necessarily mentally exhausted from upwards of 15 hours of continuous mental stimulation. This suggests that the period of programming from 8-10 pm is a period of heavily decreased brain activity and increased susceptibility to suggestion. Similarly, as a technique for interrogation, (as well as one employed by the Ministry of Love in 1984) detainees are held in cells without sleep, until their sleep deprived brains can no longer resist the probes of their captors. The Cell Press also concluded in a 2008 study, when they “created visual cues from scrambled, novel, abstract symbols” they were able to reason that, “if subjects were unable to correctly perceive any difference between the masked cues, then they were also unable to build conscious representations of cue-outcome associations, [and were able to] conclude that, even without conscious processing of contextual cues, our brain can learn their reward value and use them to provide a bias on decision making.” With the latter principle occurring simultaneously as the former, this offers evidence to prove that advertisers have nearly limitless access to a semi-conscious brain. From this it is reasonable to infer that advertisers have a motivation to influence consumers during periods of mental exhaustion with messages of what is to be desirable by all.

After establishing that advertisers have the power to influence entire demographics in a relatively unconscious manner, it becomes necessary to examine the means by which advertisers may employ to control the delivery of their messages, and thusly the viewers of their messages. Firstly, the messages themselves should be naturally compelling and seemingly morally correct; otherwise the potential for conscious questioning becomes present and reduces the mass market appeal of the message. This need is fulfilled by carefully developed psychological propaganda that incorporates effective branding and a portrayal of what the good consumer should do regarding the brand. To revisit the example above, if an consumer sees how the luxury car should be driven, and by whom the luxury

car should be driven, and can make the jump to place themselves in the car, then this person can infer that they must drive the luxury car and that the featured automobile is the one that best fits their lifestyle. When read back, this example seems like the obvious mission of advertising firms everywhere, therefore the task of the skeptical watcher becomes asking oneself, "How am I affected, consciously and unconsciously by these advertisements and how do they alter my perspective on the market?" Effective propaganda will limit the asking of this question as much as it will influence the watcher to succumb to its message.

To increase the effectiveness of their propaganda, advertisers have control over a myriad of channels of message delivery: print and still visual media, from bus stops and billboards, to magazines, audible media that includes radio and television, and motion visual media including television and internet. Given the amount of potential advertising space that exists in the modern urban environment, it becomes difficult to isolate any point in time that an individual is given respite from the barrage of advertising messages. The Ad Council produces campaigns that harness all channels of media and they do so with skill and great ability. The funding they receive allows them access to the full range of media and they routinely use them. One of the initial motivations to research this topic presented itself in the form of the Ad Council's innocuous logo, found nearly everywhere that ads are displayed. Research will show that this command of the breadth of media channels is indicative of the mastery the Ad Council commands over the marketing of propaganda to the American people. As an example then, the Ad Council provides proof that the more ad dollars are spent and the wider the array of media employed, that the advertisements can sell greater morality to greater numbers of people, a condition that the Ad Council stipulates as necessary to the creation of a new campaign.

Given the above: that if the advertiser has access to a broad spectrum of media channels, and is in control of the faculties to produce powerfully suggestive messages, then it is reasonable to infer that

they will utilize their resources to the fullest and attempt to influence the morality of every consumer of their messages. Despite claims by George Orwell in 1984 that the aim of the military-industrial complex is to produce blindly for the sake of production, history has shown us that American politicians and business persons are as astute as they are creative and would never fail to derive the most profit from every dollar of ad generation spent. An example of this is an Ad Council campaign that pairs the woodland creatures of the Walt Disney motion picture Sleeping Beauty with the message “Only you can prevent forest fires.” In addition to ensuring that viewers of the ad associate forest fires with the gruesome deaths of cute, animated critters from their childhoods, Walt Disney company succeeds in branding a message of morality: that it cares about protecting the forest; and if you care about protecting the forest, then you should buy Disney movies, because they will reinforce that ideal in you and your children.

Walt Disney Corporation is listed by the Ad Council as a Benefactor, meaning that they contribute between 50 and 99 thousand dollars annually to the Ad Council. The Ad Council claims, “It is with [our donors] support that we are able to produce the remarkable work that enriches the lives of all Americans.” Given that many of the themes of Ad Council campaigns have consumerism at their core, understanding that these messages are funded by media conglomerates and major corporations that have profit motives (among others) at their core is crucial to seeing the potential for moral hazard that exists with the Ad Council. The campaigns do not explicitly state that specifically one company’s products should be consumed, but campaigns from the 1960’s show the Ad Council as the primary source of instruction for American “belt-tightening and loosening”, as well as a major conduit for waves of anti-communist, pro-consumption propaganda generated after the 1957 launch of Sputnik (Zieger). Until the fall of the Soviet Union, General Electric, a Leadership Circle donor (\$100,000+) to the Ad Council had been the largest producer of nuclear warheads and their delivery systems since the technology was developed. Regarding the 1992 decision of GE to cease production of nuclear weapons

systems, the GE Boycott coordinator for ACT Disarmament is quoted as saying, "GE's departure from the nuclear weapons industry removes one of the most powerful forces driving ongoing nuclear weapons production." (WISE) Until 1992, the Ad Council was being directly funded, in part, by the production and sale of nuclear weapons, while they were encouraging Americans to buy everything from light bulbs to washing machines.

Similarly, in 1984 the Ministry of Truth produces endless floods of propaganda to reinforce Oceania's war efforts abroad. Orwell writes at length about a military industrial complex (later coined by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower) that is meant to exist in Oceania in order to serve as a control mechanism over the people. The basic idea is that, if there is a need (war) then we must produce. Furthermore, if there is always a war, then we must always produce. To reinforce a war effort of this magnitude, propaganda must be employed by the greatest measure possible in order to ensure total support of the government's efforts. From the branding of cigarettes and gin as "Victory" products, to the "Two Minutes Hate" that in context, seems very much like a CNN or FOX newscast. These controls attempt to ensure that each person in the society will produce for the sake of production, and to that end, if they are busy producing, then they will be unable to revolt. In this case, as well as the Ad Council example above, media is used chiefly to boost production and drive consumerism.

In 1984, Big Brother also uses propaganda to drive a message of fear into the eyes and minds of his citizens. The slogan "Big Brother is watching you" continues Orwell's theme of contractions in slogans, by suggesting that, at the same time as Big Brother is vigilantly watching over his *younger siblings*, he is also poised to *correct* any unfit behaviors from them. This creates an environment of fear for all persons in Oceania, as they can never be sure of where they stand with their Big Brother, nor can they ascertain what kind of *mood* he will be in today. This kind of pervasive fear can be helpful when controlling a population because it keeps the stress levels of the citizens high; once again causing them

to think less and produce more, as in Winston's case, his job is "the greatest pleasure in his life." The likely case is that the only thing that Winston knows for sure is that his shower will be lukewarm and his job will be waiting for him as soon as he arrives.

The Ad Council's variety of campaign themes often put forth messages of self-governance and temperance, with consequences for straying. Unlike Big Brother's use of fear through surveillance ("Big Brother is watching you") and fear of physical "vaporization", the Ad Council appears to use socially imposed fear and guilt as its primary mechanism. Many campaigns are focused upon a citizenry that at once appears to be excessive, and thus responsive to guilt-powered messages. In a recent campaign that has begun airing during Comedy Central's Daily Show, a pre-teen girl stands in a doorway, cell phone in hand, looking mildly bewildered and slightly standoffish. The camera pans around to reveal two more pre-teens with clipboards and disapproving looks upon their faces. Clipboard pre-teen girl asks, "Did you know that leaving your cell phone charger plugged into the wall continues to use electricity?" Cell phone pre-teen begins to get squeamish and eventually throws her cell phone into the corner of the room and runs over to where her charger is, ostensibly to remove it from the plug. There is definitely a fear/guilt-powered message here: unplug your cell phone charger or you will contribute to the destruction of the Earth and your friends will marginalize you for it. The Ad Council understands that Americans are excessive and employs the brightest minds in the world of advertising to generate effective propaganda to shape people into a mold defined by their worst emotions.

Guilt and fear are powerful emotions on their own, and when employed in congress represent an assault on the unconscious mind. Both produce copious levels of distress in the individual and when experienced chronically can cause a variety of stress-related lifestyle diseases such as heart disease. Physiologically, fear is as deeply rooted in the psyche as the sex drive (also heavily manipulated by advertising) and is not meant to be experienced unless a survival situation presents itself. The "fight or

flight” response as it is labeled by psychologists is the body’s primitive, autonomic response to actual or perceived danger. The pulse quickens, the sweat glands begin to overproduce and the adrenal glands become primed to saturate the bloodstream with adrenaline; in short, the body readies itself for combat. These responses are completely natural and present themselves when fear is experienced. The problem however, lies in the continued overstimulation of the body’s fear receptors to produce stress that would normally motivate a body to protect itself. This response to advertisements that create fearful stress (in the latter example, fear of isolation) is enough to not only drive in the message, but cause that message to connect with deep-seeded physiological processes. There exists an entire field of associative psychology to measure the effects of psycho/physiological associations and how the overall consciousness is affected. It is plausible then, to suggest that these messages of fear are completely intended to accomplish exactly the latter, and mold watchers at their base layers of consciousness.

The Ministry of Truth, as the chief purveyor of lies in Oceania, is charged with keeping people satisfied that their reality is complete and consistent by means of what they see, doublethink, and read. They accomplish this by achieving full saturation of the market. In addition to producing every bit of Big Brother branded merchandise, they also produce the materials for the counterculture and the proletariat. Their influence is so broad and sweeping, that after only a few years after their inception, any message travelling in any medium was produced by the Ministry of Truth. This was ostensibly the goal of Big Brother: in addition to severely limiting the amount of thought that could exist in society, if that scarce thought did exist, it had to exist in a world that Big Brother had created and not one of free thought. Any semblance of free thought that could lead to revolutionary ideas had already been anticipated by Big Brother, and the Inner Party was well within their means to root out those “thoughtcriminals.”(Orwell, 113)

The mission of the Ad Council is, “to identify a select number of significant public issues and stimulate action on those issues through communications programs that make a measurable difference in our society.” They continue by explaining, “To that end, the Ad Council marshals volunteer talent from the advertising and communications industries, the facilities of the media, and the resources of the business and non-profit communities to create awareness, foster understanding and motivate action.” This is the only explicit statement of the Ad Council’s defined end. If the statement is broken down in to plain language, the mission of the Ad Council is to find the issues that affect Americans, and push them in a single direction to have a position on that issue. They continue by explaining that they will employ volunteers from across the industry and have the philanthropic bankrolls of for- and non-profit companies to accomplish their will. Further examination of the campaign contributors will reveal a heavy involvement from various Congressional and Cabinet bureaus as well. To state it clearly, the Ad Council is perfectly honest in telling the readers of its mission statement that its ends are control, but they have effectively obfuscated the issue by couching it in language of social responsibility and altruism.

After further analysis, the Ad Council appears to be the perfect platform for politicians and CEOs to achieve complete saturation of a particular stance on issue that they never need to specifically address; which, when compared to 1984 can be equated to the lack of explicitly stated laws, specifically for the purpose of creating ambiguity. The tone of many Ad Council ads certainly resonates with an air of “You (the watcher) know exactly what you should do in this scenario; we are just letting you know that someone else out there (We) knows too.” This phrase is nearly, if not perfectly logically equivalent to “Big Brother is watching you.” An example of this can easily be the “Loose Lips Sink Ships” phrase that was employed during World War II. This is a deliberate message of the Orwellian concept *doublethink*. Today the campaign continues with the “Think before you speak” campaign, designed to reinforce politically correct *newspeak* and is sponsored by the LGBT Education Coalition. Though the act of

doublethink may not be as severe as portrayed in 1984, the ad still engenders the watcher to think up to a certain point, and if the idea is not in line with party ideals, silence or change it immediately. To clarify, this is not a defense of bigotry; however the proactive approach to squelching thoughts before they can materialize appears draconian.

To these ends, it is important to consider what success looks like to each respective entity. Ideally, the Ad Council 's mission suggests that its chief end is generating awareness and shifting public sentiment in a specific direction. If there were no issues for the Ad Council to take a stand on, then the Ad Council would have no charter to continue producing work. It is therefore in the best interest of the Ad Council to take as many stands as they can support, as well as constantly generate new issues upon which to stand. Success for the Ad Council then appears to be closely aligned with the idea that people must always be faced with issues and the Ad Council should always be present to stand as a moral beacon, guiding the way to purity. The main goal then of the Ad Council must be total influence of the populace. To lend an example, in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from The Republic, he paints a picture of a populace of prisoners: from birth, bound to the floor of a cave and forced to stare at a blank wall, with their only conception of reality coming as a stream of shadows on the wall, cast by a fire positioned behind a causeway, with free people crossing its light with overhead vessels. If the Ad Council is successful in its aim, they will effectively embody the shadow casters of Plato's cave; though they will be conscious of their actions to create a complete and consistent reality for all that view their work.

Success for Big Brother is very similar. Big Brother has created a reality of consistently inconsistent premises for all of his citizens. The lack of law and the completeness of his authority are evidenced in the slogan "Ignorance is Strength" as, were one to attempt to disseminate any of the propagandist jargon generated by the Ministry of Truth into reasonable expressions of reality, they would find themselves, much like Winston, at the mercy of the Ministry of Love, and at the pinnacle of

helplessness. Big Brother creates a complete reality for his citizens, and in doing so ensures that they are controlled. Reality control is the theme of the doctrine, "He who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future." (Orwell). Reality control that begets continuous stimulation of Oceania's economy is the epitome of Big Brother's success, and without careful analysis, the Ad Council's as well.

Motivated to similar ends and employing similar means and ways: the Ad Council and the Ministry of Truth show remarkable parallels. Positioned in such a manner as to derive maximum response from propagandist broadcasts, they both feature command and mastery over the media channels and the producers of said media. Additionally, they both use this mastery to dictate specifically slanted morality to the masses, as they continue to generate issues to stand upon. They both benefit directly from the consequences of high production: Big Brother from mass consumption of state produced goods, and the Ad Council from donations of large corporations. In doing so, they both offer messages of high production, high consumption, and self-sacrifice to the greater good. They both carry exceptional amounts of authority. The Ad Council approaches issues with the backing of the US government, major corporations, and even the Catholic Church. Big Brother utilizes the Ministry as his voice, though they are the ones that print his face on everything from billboards to currency. In the end, they both seek to control the reality of the persons engaged by them. They do so in a calculated fashion that incorporates psychology and even the autonomic responses of the watchers. Perhaps the example offered by Orwell of institutionalized information control is one that should cause people to examine the conduits of information in their own lives, and decide whether an innocuous message of awareness is harmless or is actually packaging of a morality for quick consumption.

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