



Under the Threshold:

Is There More Than Meets the Eye?

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1957, a market researcher held a press conference in New York City that would capture and excite the imagination of millions. The researcher's name was James Vicary, and on this day he unveiled to the world a new subliminal projection technology that would revolutionize advertising by promoting products directly to the needs and desires of the unconscious mind. Vicary claimed to have demonstrated that subliminal messages flashed on a movie screen could induce audiences to buy more popcorn and Coca-Cola at the intermission. Since that time, the popular notion of subliminal persuasion has remained and become increasingly mythologized with the passing of the years.

The reporting of Vicary's press conference, and not the claims of experimental psychologists, has come to define the popular notion of subliminal persuasion. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Vicary's presentation as follows:

"This story may sound as though a flying saucer is lurking somewhere behind the scenes, but you can rest assured all characters in this drama are real. The tale begins some months ago when several close-mouthed men walked into a New Jersey motion picture house and fitted a strange mechanism to the film projector. Over the next six weeks, as 45,699 unsuspecting movie goers watched Hollywood's newest epics, a strange thing reportedly occurred.

Out of the blue, it is claimed, patrons started deserting their seats and crowding in the lobby. Sales of Coca-Cola reportedly rose 18.1 percent and popcorn purchases zoomed 57.7 percent over the theater's usual sales. These claims — and the explanation of this purported phenomenon — were made at a press conference yesterday afternoon by executives of a new firm called Subliminal Projection Co., Inc. The movie patrons had been subjected to 'invisible advertising' that by-passed their conscious and assertedly struck deep into their subconscious. The trick was accomplished by flashing commercials past the viewers' eyes so rapidly that viewers were unaware they had seen them. The ads, which were flashed every five seconds or so, simply urged the audience to eat popcorn and drink Coca-Cola, and they were projected during the theater's regular movie program."

Nearly four decades later, the intriguing conception of subliminal perception remains vibrant in U.S. popular culture, and surveys consistently report that the general public is aware of the term and believes the "technique" to be in use by advertisers and the mass media. The term invokes the image of mass "covert control" carried out by an elite group of business people and politicians through the use of messages that people cannot see or hear. For the majority of Americans, the term subliminal perception invokes reactions that are negative and perhaps even a little bit frightening: things like brainwashing, mind-control or maybe ESP. But how did we derive these reactions, and why do we talk about subliminal perception the way we do?

POPULAR IMAGES

Subliminal messages bypass conscious recognition and evaluation and communicate directly to the unconscious level of drives, emotions and desires. Many believe that subliminal techniques are in widespread use by media, advertising and public relations agencies, industrial and commercial

corporations and by the federal government. Concerns about the nature of subliminal persuasion have been the subject of a United Nations resolution and a congressional hearing.

Reports of subliminal persuasion in the news media reinforce the notion of covert control. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was reported that a device known as the "black box," itself a name implying mysterious power, could mingle the bland music found in department stores with subliminal anti-theft messages such as "I am honest" and "I will not steal." The hit movie "The Exorcist" was reported to have included subliminal images of a death mask, which some claim significantly contributed to extreme feelings of terror and sickness. Perhaps the most well-known news event involving subliminal persuasion was the case of two teenagers who, in 1985, attempted to commit suicide after listening to the Judas Priest album "Stained Class." The case against Judas Priest and CBS Records built upon a still popular belief that subliminal messages are embedded in rock music for questionable ends.

More recently, the power of subliminal persuasion has been successfully packaged as a product in the form of subliminal self-help tapes. The producers of these tapes claim, among other things, that subliminal messages have the capacity to relieve stress, increase sex appeal, facilitate weight loss, stop cigarette smoking and improve one's golf game.

Popular media representations typically reinforce and exaggerate the "power" of subliminal persuasion techniques to control an individual's thoughts and behavior. For example, in the television series based on H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, aliens implant subliminal messages into a rock album with the intent of brainwashing and controlling the protagonist. In John Carpenter's movie "They Live," aliens control the human population of Earth with subliminal messages in an episode of "The Simpsons," Homer accidentally receives

a subliminal self-help tape that increases vocabulary instead of inducing weight loss, and begins talking like Shakespeare.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY

The idea of "the subliminal" is mysterious in its very definition. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a subliminal stimulus as one that is presented "below the threshold of sensation or consciousness."

A large body of experimental literature dating back to the late 19th century strongly suggests that humans have the ability to "perceive" subliminal stimuli. This phenomenon, known as *subliminal perception*, is defined by Norman Dixon, the pre-eminent researcher on this topic, as "a class of phenomena which have in common the fact that the subject professes unawareness of stimuli which are affecting his/her behavior." In experimental psychology, these behavioral effects are typically small and highly controlled.

Subliminal communication is a broader term that refers to the perception of more complex subliminal messages, such as sentences and images, as indicated by a specific behavioral response to that message. *Subliminal persuasion* posits the existence of a relationship between exposure to subliminal messages, usually through mass media such as television or film, and larger scale and more complex changes in a person's beliefs, emotions and behavior.

Although the evidence for the limited effects attributed to subliminal perception is reliable and consistent, Dixon, in his extensive review of the subliminal literature, concludes that he has not seen a "shred of valid published evidence" to substantiate the claims that subliminal perception can be used for brainwashing or mind control and that "nobody, except perhaps those interested in the commercial exploitation of subliminal stimulation, would maintain that a subliminal stimulus can compete successfully with other more powerful influences."

The most clearly documented effects of subliminal stimuli are obtained only in high-

ly contrived and artificial situations. These effects, when present, are brief and of small magnitude. So how can dramatic terms and phrases such as “mind control,” “persuasion” and “subliminal seduction” so easily free-associate in the speech of ordinary people? Dixon writes in exasperation: “There evidently is something about subliminal perception which invites confusion. But why? What is there about this hypothesis that it should invite such misconceptions?”

A CONGRESSIONAL MATTER

How do we know that a stimulus is below the threshold of consciousness? By definition, we cannot know, because we cannot experience the stimulus. The only person who knows that a subliminal stimulus is present is the person who created it. So a subliminal stimulus has to be deliberately created. It requires the existence of a presenter — a person who deliberately brings such a stimulus into existence. And if the subliminal stimulus is deliberately created, then it must be, at the same time, deliberately hidden. From there, it is not a big leap to consider the subliminal as the domain of mad scientists, science-fiction writers or un-

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scrupulous government conspirators. This line of thinking dominates the conversation about subliminal persuasion, even at the supposed higher levels of inquiry.

On August 6, 1984, testimony was given at a hearing before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Aviation and Materials of the Committee on Science and Technology of the U.S. House of Representatives. The hearing was presided over by U.S. Rep. Dan Glickman of Kansas, chair of the subcommittee. The title of the hearing was “Subliminal Communication Technology.”

Glickman’s opening remarks immediately framed the subject matter in sinister overtones: “This subcommittee has kind of made it a theme this year to explore in addition to the other areas of our jurisdiction those things which concern the public in a kind of Orwellian sense as a result of the nomenclature of this year 1984.”

Glickman cited the example of subliminal tapes and expressed concern that subliminal messages could be used to alter behavior. He said, “Clearly we need to take a closer look at the use of subliminal communication technology given the serious moral, ethical and legal implications posed by some of these recent advances.”

So-called experts testified with both excitement and alarm that subliminal messages could be used to encourage good driving or to manipulate an individual’s thoughts. Yet the “advances” referred to by Glickman and the “research” alluded to by experts simply did not and still do not rise above the level of what-if speculations. The conversation borders on the comical as the elected officials and witnesses indulge in what Glickman refers to as “twilight zone” implications. If this is the tone

set by congressman and expert witnesses, it is not surprising to find that others speak in similar terms.

The reference to “The Twilight Zone” is indicative of another side to our talk about subliminal perception. It implies that we shouldn’t take this stuff too seriously, just as we shouldn’t take the plots seen on “The Twilight Zone”. But Glickman cannot be sure it does not have some reality to it. He said, “Given the rapid advance in computer technology in this country, as well as psychological research — much of

which is being done by the Defense Department — I think it is incumbent upon us in Congress to at least explore the issue to see how widespread it is and see if anything needs to be done about it.” What is this “psychological research” being carried out by the Defense Department? What is this “rapid advance in computer technology”? What is going on behind the scenes, perhaps in places like the legendary Area 51?

THE SOURCE OF THE SCIENCE FICTION

The path toward the realm of “The Twilight Zone” was charted immediately following Vicary’s revelations in 1957. *The Wall Street Journal’s* account, with its image of the “flying saucer lurking somewhere behind the scenes,” explicitly incorporates the themes of suspense and strangeness.

Additional accounts of the press conference further emphasize the science-fiction overtones. Norman Cousins wrote an oft-quoted editorial in the *Saturday Review*, which began as follows:

“Welcome to 1984. A new company has been formed with offices in New York for the purpose of promoting a new invention designed to get at the sources of human motivation. ... The device thrusts images or messages onto a motion picture screen or TV grid. The images are invisible to the human eye. They are ‘subliminal’; that is, they are beamed into the mind below the threshold of awareness.”

The image of messages being “beamed” into the mind is reminiscent of many science-fiction motifs popular in the 1950s. The discourses which followed the Vicary press conference transform and decorate Vicary’s original presentation with a blend of images concerning the nature of the human mind and the manipulation of subconscious desire for questionable ends. This can be seen in the editorial of Cousins when he asks:

“Question: if the device is successful for putting over popcorn, why not politicians or anything else? If it is possible to prompt the subconscious into making certain judgments of human character, why wouldn’t it be possible to use invisible messages for the purpose of annihilating a reputation or promoting it?”

This trend is further exemplified in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World Revisited*, published in 1958. Huxley considered machines the method by which rulers, even in democratic societies, could destroy, control and manipulate individual freedoms while at the same time maintaining the illusion of that freedom. One method that Huxley considers is the use of “subliminal projection machines” to disperse propaganda and advertising messages. He suggests that such subliminal techniques might well become a “powerful instrument for the manipulation of unsuspecting minds” and that “The scientific dictator of tomorrow will set up his whispering machines and subliminal projectors in schools and hospitals ... and in all public places where audiences can be given a preliminary softening up by suggestibility increasing oratory or rituals.”

In one year, from 1957 to 1958, subliminal persuasion had been transformed from a technique for presenting advertisements to a technique for undermining the very fabric of a free society. Vicary’s message was successful in the sense that it was persuasive, but the reaction to it was far beyond what Vicary ever expected. During the period 1957 to 1959, there was a universal condemnation of the technique and its underlying assumptions, and some called for a federal ban of such messages.

The Subliminal Projection Co. Inc. quickly went out of business. Vicary’s legacy, however, has lived on through his original characterization of subliminal persuasion being adopted in modern cultural representations. In an interview printed in *Advertising Age*, five years later, Vicary saw himself as having had a negligible impact on the field. He says: “All I ac-



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Few professors are able to tie the thoughts of John Locke to the lyrics of Led Zeppelin or can easily relate references from “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” or “The Simpsons” to actual course work. But Gary Radford, professor of communication and director of the master of arts in corporate and organizational communication program at the College at Florham, is well-known for making such

connections between popular culture and academic theories.

A native of England, Radford joined Fairleigh Dickinson in 1999 and has been recognized for his teaching and scholarship. He earned the Distinguished Faculty Award for Research and Scholarship in 2005 and was named Maxwell Becton College of Arts and Sciences Teacher of the Year in 2003.

His research has focused on the philosophical and critical treatments of the communication process, using as a foundation the pivotal work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. His books include *On the Philosophy of Communication* and *On Eco*, a creative introduction to the work of cultural and literary theorist Umberto Eco.

His next book, from which this feature article was adapted, delves into our fascination with subliminal persuasion and explores the disconnect between the discourse on the subject among psychologists and that of the general public. As he explains, “This investigation ultimately leads to the question: how do certain discourses attain the status of science and truth, and others wallow in the realm of the marginal or pseudo-scientific?” Titled *A Genealogy of the Threshold*, the book is scheduled for publication in 2007. He also is writing a book focusing on the globalization of communications to be published by Blackwell’s.

Radford is the founder of the widely acclaimed *New Jersey Journal of Communication* — now known as the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* — which he continues to serve as editor-in-chief.

Radford’s ability to mix academic contemplations with mainstream associations springs from his own passions, which include playing guitar in a blues/rock band called The Professors (www.theprofessors.net). His daughter, Meg, is a vocalist for the band. Among their original songs are “Untenured Blues” and “Foucault Funk.”

complished, I guess ... was to put a new word into common usage. And for a man who makes a career out of picking the right names for products and companies, I should have my head examined for using a word like subliminal.”

Vicary has done much more than introduce a new word, however. His press conference sparked an explosion of discourse about subliminal persuasion that has yet to

subside. This discourse introduced the concept of subliminal persuasion to the average person and placed it into their vocabulary and understanding. Vicary’s original framing of the subliminal persuasion paradigm and its visualization in the story of the popcorn experiment has dominated the way in which the effects of subliminal messages are conceptualized, represented and spoken about in American popular culture.