

Deprivation of Liberty by Subliminal Means

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The concept of subliminal persuasion has fascinated the public since its inception at the beginning of the century. Perhaps this is because of the observation by P.T. Barnum that, “people love to be fooled and sometimes they are willing to pay for the pleasure.” The beginnings of subliminal persuasion occur with the controversy that is its definition. The basic foundation of what subliminal means is that “a stimulus is subliminal (that is below threshold) if it cannot be verbally identified” (Epley,1999, pg. 40). This includes the possibility that “an individual perceives that some material was presented, but requires that its exact nature be unidentifiable” (Epley,1999, pg. 40). The science of subliminal persuasion has its roots in 1900 when a scientist, Dunlap, conducted an experiment involving an illusion and the flashing of a shadow to create a different illusion. Even though the experiment could not be immediately replicated the result was that as early as 1913 the issue of subliminal persuasion and its applications were included in an advertising textbook as a tool for selling products” (Pratkanis,1992, pg. 264).

Perhaps the time when fear of the subliminal was at its height was during the cold war. This was a time when the general American public held deeply rooted fears of an entire culture and way of thinking. It was a time when the fear of anything psychological

took the turn into fear of being turned into a mindless zombie for the “evil communists.”

For the most part the public feared two concepts. First they feared being brainwashed abroad by foreigners, and second they feared being brainwashed in their own homes by the government they trusted or another clandestine organization. They feared that the subliminal messages being proposed by corporations for advertising, would be used by the government or by the communists to alter their minds.

The fascination with the subliminal stems then, from as early as 1900 and continues to present times, even with little scientific evidence to support it until recently. The subliminal art of persuasion is of interest to a wide variety of traditional and commercial science. To psychologists the subliminal explores regions of the brain and its conceptual nature that science is just beginning to understand. To commercial science and its advertisers subliminal persuasion offers a previously untapped resource, no matter the morality of the method, with which to persuade an ever-desensitized public to engage in rugged capitalism. To the government, it may represent a way to deprive the public of their liberty and change their personalities to suit the state, or simply a concept to educate the public on, depending on one’s point of view.

To understand the appeal of subliminal persuasion to groups and the interest that the public experiences at being exposed to subliminal messages one must first understand the nature of the subliminal. Psychologists tend to define the subliminal as stimuli that is experienced before the absolute threshold, which in turn is the point where humans detect a stimulus only half of the time. If the absolute threshold, where normal everyday function occurs, is by definition only the sensation of stimulus half the time then the

question of whether or not subliminal stimuli can be sensed must be yes. The mind is interesting in that people can claim to have no knowledge about a particular subject yet their mind has absorbed certain tidbits of information and can often beat chance. Many studies throughout the past century have dissolved accounts of effective subliminal stimuli yet more recent studies have encountered results, which suggest a less clear picture. In certain conditions, recent studies have proven that imperceptible stimuli may affect our judgment and reasoning skills. Therefore, the human mind is capable of processing small amounts of information without being totally aware of it.

The scientific community, while agreeing that some subliminal stimuli is able to be processed by the human mind, is infinitely more skeptical when it comes to the ability of this stimuli to actually influence decisions and substantiate claims that advertisers are able to manipulate the public subliminally. Research psychologists and other scientists have come to a near agreement that subliminal persuasion works no more effectively than a placebo. The most definite researchers on the subject, Anthony Pratkanis and Anthony Greenwald say, "Subliminal procedures offer little or nothing of value to the marketing practitioner."(Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 270) Why then did the mythos evolve that subliminal advertising was effective in the marketing arena?

The beginning of public awareness of what is now subliminal persuasion came about in a 1957 book by Vance Packard who discussed new ways of marketing which could "reach into the hearts and minds of American consumers" (Mikkelsen, 2003, pg. 1). It was not until James Vicary, a self-styled advertising expert, conducted his now infamous 1957 experiment that the public became infatuated with this new style of

advertising. In late summer 1957, in Fort Lee, N.J., Vicary set up a system at a local movie theater that would flash two messages during a movie, for 1/300th of a second each time. For every five minutes during the entirety of the movie the audience was shown the messages, “Drink Coca-Cola” and “Hungry? Eat Popcorn”. The supposed result of this experiment was “an amazing 18.1% increase in Coca-Cola sales and a whopping 57.8% jump in popcorn purchases” (Mikkelson, 2003, pg. 1). Once this experiment was reported the media jumped on the story and within days the general public was outraged at this new devilish technique of advertising that could so invade their minds and alter their opinions. Norman Cousins said in 1957, “If the device is successful for putting popcorn, why not politicians or anything else?” He also thought that the best action would be, “to take this invention and everything connected to it and attach it to the center of the next nuclear explosive scheduled for testing” (Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 262). These remarks suggest the paranoia and permeation of fear that the American public felt during this time, not only of a nuclear attack but of communist intentions to corrupt their physical and mental abilities.

The results of the Vicary experiment were almost immediately felt. In addition to a profound fear produced in the American public, the US government got involved in the regulation of the subliminal technique of persuasion. Almost immediately after the movie experiment, the Federal Communications Commission decided that the use of subliminal messages could end in the loss of a station’s broadcasting license. The National Association of Broadcasters banned the use of subliminal messages in its advertisements, and other countries joined in the ban. Subliminal persuasion was also ruled as not being

protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by a federal judge” (Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 261). This was all without a significant follow-up study or independent verification of Vicary’s procedures. The most enduring mark of the Vicary experiment is still being felt today. The phenomena of subliminal messages and persuasion are a topic of pop culture and are a popular topic in everyday conversations and society.

In 1962 the Vicary experiment was successfully debunked by the man himself when in a “1962 interview, James Vicary announced that the ‘Eat Popcorn/Drink Coke’ study was a fabrication intended to increase customers” (Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 261). This came after Henry Link, the president of the Psychological Corporation, presented a challenge to Vicary to replicate his experiment. When the reproduction finally occurred there was no viable increase in the sales of food products.

Despite the myth being debunked by this admission, it continued full scale and experiments both by advertisers and by government psychologists continued for decades. One of the most telling occurred in 1958 when a Canadian broadcasting station chose to flash imperceptible messages of “phone now” on screen every few seconds through a broadcast of a popular show. Though the message was shown hundreds of times, phone usage did not increase and everyone who was asked to guess at the message got it wrong. What was interesting about the experiment was the placebo effect. During the broadcast a sizable percentage of the viewers reported feeling more hungry or thirsty. It seems they all felt that the message was aimed at advertising such products. It was then seen that the public was easily influenced by the placebo effect of the subliminal advertiser’s claims.

The myth of subliminal advertising's effectiveness continued with the publication of a book called, *Subliminal Seduction* by Wilson Key. This publication suggested that the subliminal messages were not just limited to movies and television. Key saw subliminal images in everything from ice to crackers in advertisements. Again without any experimentation of even experience in advertising, Key convinced the FCC, in 1974 to announce that subliminal techniques, "whether effective or not are contrary to public interest" (Mikkelson, 2003, pg. 2). Again the proof of subliminal persuasion was reliant less upon scientific proof and more on "near science" conclusions and the public's opinion of the time. Key tapped the public's distrust of big corporations and government after the Vietnam War.

Further experimentation continued after Key's work and continues today. Most experiments, such as Dixon's experiment in 1981 found that "participants given a subliminal prime were faster than those who had not seen the prime to later identify a related word (Epley, 1999, pg. 44). Another experiment by Bargh and Pietromonaco in 1982, tested the personality judgments made by people exposed to subliminal words related to emotions. This and other experiments were able to prove that the human mind is able to perceive subliminal messages and can even affect certain knowledge-based functions. They do not however prove that in a consumer setting people can be effected to make behavioral changes based on subliminal messages. Today, based on various experiments and conclusions drawn on subliminal persuasion, companies are cashing in on the publics' fascination with the subliminal. Self-help tapes that promise improvement

through subliminal messages embedded in music are prolific and continue to capture the public's imagination. In 1990, Pratkanis conducted a definitive study on the effectiveness of subliminal messages in self-help tapes. He studied a body of people who were given the tapes and recorded the results. The results signified decades of skepticism and again the value of subliminal persuasion was discounted. Of the people he studied none improved in areas that the tapes promised. The placebo effect was also witnessed (Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 267).

If subliminal messages and persuasion has been proven ineffective in the past four decades, the public's belief in it has only increased by the same degree. While subliminal messages imbedded intentionally in media have proven ineffective, other sorts of subliminal advertising have been effective, whether consumers realize it or not.

Clandestine product placement has been common practice in advertising for years.

Products are being placed into media and while the messages may be directly visible, the subliminal effect cannot be denied. Even if not noticed on a conscious level, the effect of the advertisement is absorbed subconsciously and the effect has been documented.

Psychologists have long relied on clandestine efforts at advertising and the subliminal effect has been documented.

The actual act of subliminal persuasion is still prominent in the public awareness and pop culture, even as science and psychology has disproved its worth and effectiveness. It was found to not be effective as either a commercial tool or a government tool for programming minds. Anthony Pratkanis best sums up the issue of

subliminal persuasion and its worth in saying, “Despite the continued enthrallment of the American public, more than a century of research has failed to find evidence that subliminal commands influence behavior.” (Pratkanis, 1992, pg. 272)

Despite science’s best efforts, the debate of the subliminal and its effectiveness in persuasion will continue for some time in America and further experimentation will be done as long as the public remains infatuated with the subject matter. However, for now it seems that the American populace is safe from unwanted government intervention in their minds. The fear of deprivation of liberty by force is still prevalent in American society and this has not changed from 1900, through the Cold War and to modern society. We are afraid of being turned into someone else, and blindly following a program of obedience and subservience to the government.

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