

Invisible Commercials and Hidden Persuaders:

James M. Vicary and the Subliminal Advertising Controversy of 1957

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

1

Part I: Vicary's Early Life

2

Part II: Origins of Subliminal Advertising

7

Part III: Vicary's Experiment

17

Part IV: Public Opinion Fallout

23

Part V: Dénouement?

30

Part VI: Numerous Controversies

39

Conclusion

50

Primary Sources and Documents (Published)

52

Primary Sources and Documents (Unpublished)

56

Secondary Sources

57

Works Consulted

58

What if a technique existed that could subtly influence an unwitting movie audience to make unwanted purchases? What if this technique were used for insidious purposes, the consumption it drove extending to include political candidates and ideologies? These and similar fears abounded in postwar America. In 1957, James Vicary's announcement of his experiment in subliminal advertising generated a state of frenzy within the media, the advertising industry, and the public. The importance of subliminal advertising, and the vehement reaction to it, were the result of several postwar economic, political, and social trends.

After World War II, the booming economy created mass prosperity for millions of Americans who had known only Depression-era poverty and wartime austerity. After years of patriotically abstaining from unnecessary purchases, consumers began shopping ravenously, and new products flooded the market. In order to sell goods to the American public, advertisers tapped into the research methods of psychologists and sociologists, but the marketing techniques that emerged contributed to the ad man's reputation as a devious huckster. This stereotype formed on the heels of postwar research into authoritarianism, the tendency of people to be led (and led astray) by powerful figures. The ad man's reputation as a manipulator of unwilling consumers culminated in 1957 when Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders*. A searing, if overenthusiastic, indictment of the advertising industry's methods, the book tapped into consumers' fears, citizens' suspicions, and the popular stereotype of the ad man, influencing a generation to distrust advertisers.

Then James Vicary entered the spotlight. A market and opinion researcher with a small company in New York City, Vicary was one of many determined, self-made men who emerged in the wake of World War II. Newspaper articles and *The Hidden Persuaders* brought him to the attention of both the advertising industry and the general public. In September 1957, his

announcement that he had discovered a method for inducing consumption, potentially without the subject's knowledge, began what Stuart Rogers dubbed a subliminal advertising "publicity blitz."¹ Editorialists, citizens, and public officials quickly criticized the technique, yet the vehement opposition subsided after government scrutiny challenged the validity of Vicary's conclusions in January 1958. Thereafter Vicary withdrew from public notice, while subliminal advertising scandal fell into further disrepute. Nevertheless, the controversy has reemerged periodically, most importantly because of the writings of author Wilson Bryan Key in the 1970s. His publications on the supposed subliminal sexiness of advertisements once again generated a heated reaction from former industry men still indignant about what they recalled as Vicary's great deception.

Vicary's life paralleled the story of his controversial experiment. Just as he exemplified the postwar advertising researcher working at the juncture between Freudian psychoanalysis and technological innovation, subliminal advertising was the most potent, well-known example of psychological persuasion at use in the advertising industry. However, his exploration of subliminal perception occurred after a decade-long effort to establish himself as a financially successful and well-respected researcher.

I. Vicary's Early Life

James MacDonald Vicary was never a born seller. His primary trait seems to have been persistence rather than charisma. Vance Packard described him as "handsome" and added that he "might well have stepped out of a clothing ad," but the smooth image that Vicary projected

¹ Stuart Rogers, "How a Publicity Blitz Created The Myth of Subliminal Advertising," *Public Relations Quarterly* 37 (winter 1992-1993): 12.

was the result of hard work.² The financially strapped circumstances of his early life fostered in him determination and drive.

Vicary was born on April 30, 1915, in Detroit, Michigan. He was the youngest of four children, three boys and one girl. His mother, Mabel Rankin Vicary, was a piano teacher and later a nurse, while his father, Louis Edward Vicary, was an actor and operatic singer.³ The pair raised James and his siblings as pacifists.⁴ Louis Vicary died when James was six years old, and James later called his father's death "about the most devastating event in my life."⁵ It sent the family into difficult financial straits that heightened James's sense of social unease. Vicary had a contentious relationship with his slightly older brother who, he revealed, "regarded me as a mother's-boy and a sissy."⁶ However, Vicary enjoyed free run of Detroit throughout his childhood. He "haunted the libraries" and "walked, roller skated, and bicycled" as a boy.⁷ In addition, he acquired physical and mental agility as a result of scuffles with neighborhood boys and explorations of local alleys.

His interest in public opinion began early. At age fifteen, he worked as a copy boy for a local Gallup Poll group, the *Detroit Free Press* Forum. There he conducted his first political straw poll during a tense mayoral campaign. "They put me in a cab and told me to move around town. It was my first cab ride," he recalled.⁸ Vicary was, however, able to contain his

² Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1957), 35.

³ *Who's Who in America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Men and Women, 1960-1961*, The Marquis Biographical Library, vol. 31 (Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Co., 1962), 2981; James M. Vicary to [Miss Selver], 31 March 1955, TL series I, box 1, folder 5, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

⁴ Fred Danzig, "Subliminal Advertising—Today It's Just Historic Flashback for Researcher Vicary," *Advertising Age*, 17 September 1962, 74.

⁵ James M. Vicary to Miss Selver, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Danzig, 74; *Ibid.*

⁸ Danzig, 74.

excitement sufficiently to collect a “well-stratified sample . . . [that] hit the bull’s eye within 0.6 of 1%.”⁹ The experience fascinated him. “I was stuck for life,” he later confessed.¹⁰

At the same time, Vicary may not have much considered pursuing higher education. One of his brothers worked as a tool and die maker, and Vicary himself attended the Henry Ford Trade School twice on summer scholarships.¹¹ In 1934, he served in the Civilian Conservation Corps, followed by a brief period spent “freight-hopping around the country.”¹² However, he maintained good marks throughout high school and his godfather left him a stipend that allowed him to attend college. In 1936, he began taking courses at the University of Michigan. There he pursued numerous interests and considered studying art and biology before focusing on sociology. He balanced his studies with extracurricular activities. In 1937 he organized the university’s Bureau of Student Opinion. He stayed in the Rochdale Cooperative House while in school, demonstrating “persistence and energy” during terms as its president and purchasing agent.¹³ Additionally, Vicary helped found the Robert Owen Cooperative House (1938), which is still in use as student housing at the University of Michigan. While Vicary was in college, he was married briefly to a Jewish girl “whose parents were deliberate in breaking us up.”¹⁴ In 1940 he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and then sought employment in his hometown.

Upon graduation, Vicary first worked for J.L. Hudson Company, a large Detroit department store, conducting studies in operations and merchandising. In December 1941, when the United States entered World War II, Vicary was drafted, though as a conscientious objector.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Vicary to Miss Selver, 1; James M. Vicary, “James M. Vicary,” resume, n.d., series I, box 1, folder 2, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 2.

¹² Danzig, 74.

¹³ Stanley Lebergott, TLS, 9 April 1940, series II, box 4, folder 35, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

¹⁴ Vicary to Miss Selver, 1.

He served his stint in the Civilian Public Service in Wellston, Michigan until December 1943. After he was discharged, Vicary returned to his previous career pursuits. From 1943-44, he conducted “readership, marketing and election prediction” surveys for Benson & Benson, Inc., a polling affiliate of the Gallup Organization located in Princeton, New Jersey. He then transferred to Crowell-Collier Publishing Company in 1945, where he worked in the research department.¹⁵

In 1945, he formed his own firm, the James M. Vicary Company. The company conducted marketing and opinion research and specialized in the analysis of brand and product names. Some of its studies, Vicary recounted, “even influenced the national economy in demonstrable ways.” He added that he became “increasingly facile at inventing new ways of researching difficult problems” In 1948, however, financial and family obligations forced him to seek a post at Benton & Bowles, Inc., the well-known advertising agency, as Head of Advertising Copy Research. “They hired me to modernize and expand their copy testing methods,” he later wrote, adding, “I did; it was rough on their ulcers and we parted company on friendly terms at the turn of this year.” In 1950, he refocused on his personal company while continuing as an independent consultant.¹⁶

After Vicary returned to his own business he regularly published articles and studies. He gained recognition in advertising and market research circles, publishing in *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Printers’ Ink*. He often wrote on projective techniques, such as word association and the circular test of bias, wherein a test subject repeats a lengthy question from memory while a researcher analyzes what is and is not spoken.¹⁷ Vicary also presented some of his more

¹⁵ Vicary, “James M. Vicary,” 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James M. Vicary, “The Circular Test of Bias in Personal Interview Surveys,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (summer 1955): 215.

intriguing studies at several annual conferences of the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers. Meanwhile, the James M. Vicary Company conducted surveys on such diverse topics as trends in magazine readership and consumer attitudes toward carpeting.¹⁸ In addition, Vicary performed studies for prominent clients, such as *TIME* Magazine, Ford Motor Company, General Mills, B.F. Goodrich, and Colgate-Palmolive.¹⁹

In the early 1950s, Vicary's name appeared regularly in popular newspapers as well as trade magazines. He was an enthusiastic, articulate go-to guy for newsmen seeking information on the latest, strangest feats of advertising. He became even more well-known through *The Hidden Persuaders*. Vance Packard's influential critique of postwar marketing trends, published in 1957, featured Vicary alongside Ernest Dichter as a prominent practitioner of the advertising equivalent of the dark arts. Packard described Vicary as "perhaps the most genial and ingratiating of all the major figures operating independent depth-probing firms."²⁰ However, according to Packard, his work exemplified the power advertisers sought over consumers by probing and exploiting unconscious psychological rationales in order to stimulate consumption. In one analysis, Vicary concluded that women bake cakes as a surrogate for childbirth.²¹ In another, he theorized that women in supermarkets, overwhelmed by the quantity of goods before them, entered a "hypnoidal trance."²² Packard also reported that Vicary could, with the use of sophisticated surveys, determine how undecided voters would lean.²³ *The Hidden Persuaders* presented Vicary as an influential postwar advertising researcher, and Packard, the preeminent critic of advertising excess, provided the dominant perspective on Vicary's work in public

¹⁸ James M. Vicary Company, "Index—Table of Contents, vols. 1-14, n.d.," D, n.d., series II, box 1, folder 18, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1 passim.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Packard, 35.

²¹ Ibid., 77.

²² Ibid., 101.

²³ Ibid., 184.

discourse. Vicary's research into subconscious motivation exemplified the book's critique: that advertising was subverting consumers by antidemocratically shaping their choice of products.

By 1957, when Vicary announced the results of his subliminal advertising experiment, he was moderately successful. He straddled the line between renown and infamy for his motivational research studies. Confident in his own abilities and comfortable with the ethical implications of his work, Vicary was a leader among many similar men on the cutting edge of psychologically based advertising. However, subliminal advertising proved an especially volatile example of the soft sell techniques that advertisers trumpeted, and Vicary made his announcement during a remarkable intersection of historical trends. The context in which subliminal advertising became prominent led to the backlash against it and served to define James M. Vicary's career and life for decades afterwards.

II. Origins of Subliminal Advertising

The concept of subliminal advertising supposed that stimuli presented beneath the threshold of conscious perception were interpreted unconsciously by the brain. In the mid-nineteenth century, scientists began conducting experiments using subtle visual and auditory stimuli, but these and later studies provided varying results.²⁴ However, subliminal advertising became important after World War II owing to its emergence at a confluence of several postwar trends. One trend was the use of advertising to boost the postwar economy and to transform wartime thriftiness into a new morality of consumption. In order to stimulate consumption, advertisers explored increasingly sophisticated psychological techniques, epitomized by Motivational Research (MR). Additionally, the aftermath of World War II brought to the forefront concerns about totalitarianism in the United States. Postwar fears of the Authoritarian

²⁴ James V. McConnell, Richard L. Cutler, and Elton B. McNeil, "Subliminal Stimulation: An Overview," *The American Psychologist* 13 (1958): 230.

Personality, coupled with pop culture perceptions of advertising, led to the concern that advertising and consumption could stifle American democracy. *The Hidden Persuaders* articulated these popular fears in a particularly dramatic way. Subliminal advertising touched on all of these issues and provided a frightening vision of the extent to which the American consumer and voter might be manipulated.

The transition process from depression to a wartime economy and, later, to postwar prosperity involved dramatic shifts in the nature of consumerism. For many Americans, the Great Depression necessitated simple, even meager, living. Thus they entered World War II with the sense that the nation's economic malaise was, according to historian Daniel Horowitz, "long-term if not permanent."²⁵ During the war, however, government and advertising propaganda made moderation a patriotic effort rather than an act of survival. In 1942, the Advertising Council formed to assist the government in promoting the sale of war bonds, military recruitment, and other patriotic actions.²⁶ These efforts, wrote Horowitz, "in which the government and Madison Avenue linked the preservation of the American way of life to consumer culture," transformed the economic necessity of sacrifice into a moral and political duty.²⁷

The government, the advertising industry, and corporations undertook the goal of selling sacrifice, using the moral imperative of fighting totalitarianism abroad to cultivate the citizen consumer at home. By monitoring prices, participating in scrap drives, and conserving at home, wrote historian Lizabeth Cohen, Americans "learned that one of the chief ways to support the

²⁵ Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 21.

²⁶ Robert H. Zieger, "The Paradox of Plenty: The Advertising Council and the Post-Sputnik Crisis," *Advertising and Society Review* 4, no. 1 (2003): n.p.

²⁷ Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence*, 37.

war on the home front was as responsible consumers.”²⁸ They eschewed many personal goods and bought \$185.7 billion worth of war bonds.²⁹ Citizens on the home front recycled and made do in order to show their support for the war effort. Thus, manufacturers shortened skirts and eliminated cuffs to save fabric for uniforms and consumers saved toothpaste tubes for tin drives.³⁰

However, as World War II drew to a close, it became economically and socially unsustainable to encourage conservation and thrift among consumers for several reasons. Throughout the period of the United States’ active participation in the war, economic indicators became steadily more positive. During World War II, the quality of life improved for Americans across all social and economic classes. In 1940, unemployment was 14.6 percent, but by 1944 it had dropped to 1.2 percent.³¹ During the same period the gross national product rose from \$91.9 billion in 1939 to \$213.6 billion in 1945.³² The economic boom affected families across all income brackets: real income increased as much as 68 percent for the lowest-earning fifth of the population.³³ Even as disposable income increased, however, government officials pleaded with citizens for restraint in order to avoid inflation. While personal savings in 1940 composed 4.2 percent of income, barely above pre-Depression levels, by 1945 Americans were saving 29 percent of what they took home.³⁴ After the war ended, businessmen and officials proposed that consumers could spend their personal surpluses to prevent a recession.³⁵

²⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 67.

²⁹ Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence*, 37.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), series D 46-47, 73.

³² Ibid., series F 1-5, 139.

³³ Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence*, 36.

³⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, series F 252-260, 153.

³⁵ Cohen, 70.

This emphasis on purchasing power placed the responsibility for the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy in the hands of American consumers. Buyers would aid the economy while being supplied with an endless selection of appliances and clothing. Consumption still defined the American citizen, but his or her duty became spending rather than saving. Two decades of, in Horowitz's words, the "enforced experience of retrenched consumption" effectively came to an end.³⁶ This newfound prosperity heralded a generation that not only sought comfort and freedom from material want, but also had the means to purchase them. William H. Whyte, sociologist and author of *The Organization Man* (1956), later recalled the postwar period with a simple statement: "thrift is now un-American."³⁷

Mass consumption both reflected and stimulated unprecedented economic prosperity to Americans in the postwar era. Many families experienced increases in income that allowed for sustained high levels of consumption. Corporate executives, however, failed to predict this prosperity. They feared that the increase in spending immediately after World War II would soon saturate the market and eventually dry up demand. There were disturbing indicators: for instance, between 1940 and 1950, the proportion of American families with mechanical refrigerators increased from 44 to 80 percent.³⁸ Indeed, such ravenous consumption of homes, cars, and other goods meant that by the mid-1950s, marketers and businessmen feared, the saturation point was at hand.

This fear led to two important marketing innovations. Planned obsolescence, the intentional design of goods to be short-lived, provided consumers with a reason to buy replacement items and created trends that promoted "keeping up with the Joneses." Market segmentation arose from the theory that consumers had different preferences, rational and

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁸ Ibid., 123.

irrational, that influenced their purchases.³⁹ Advertisers began to target consumers on an individual level in order to market goods. These innovations helped advertisers to differentiate products and more successfully market them.

Armed with these tactics, the advertising industry eagerly rose to address the challenge presented by corporations. Many ad men had long felt that their field would be vital to postwar economic reconversion. In 1941, C. Smith, head of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, reported that “if this [postwar production] capacity is to be constructively used for the benefit of the people as a whole it will be because the production, flow, and use of consumer goods is stimulated in volume and power far beyond anything seen in this field before.”⁴⁰ In 1943, speaking before the annual conference of the Advertising Federation of America, John Riley of Fuller & Smith & Ross declared that the twin postwar challenges of his field would be “selling a vastly increased quantity of merchandise and combating the sweep of State socialism by improving the performance of capitalism.”⁴¹

Political and cultural figures also appreciated the new importance of advertisers. In 1944, Joseph D. McGoldrick, the Controller of New York City, laid responsibility for informing the American public about how to ensure postwar affluence on the advertising men of Madison Avenue.⁴² Nearly a decade later, historian David Potter wrote that “advertising now compares with such long-standing institutions as the school and the church in the magnitude of its social influence.”⁴³ By the late 1950s, it seemed natural that the Secretary of Defense would be a man, Neil McElroy, who had started out in Procter & Gamble’s advertising department.⁴⁴ In *The*

³⁹ Ibid., 294.

⁴⁰ “Says Ad Men Face Their Biggest Job,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1941, 31.

⁴¹ “Says Ad Men Face Two Post-War Jobs,” *New York Times*, 1 July 1943, 25.

⁴² “Peace Prosperity Put Up To Ad Men,” *New York Times*, 21 October 1944, 27.

⁴³ Quoted in Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984; Illini Books, 1997), 178.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Affluent Society (1958), influential economist John Kenneth Galbraith condemned advertising for creating “wants that previously did not exist,” but recognized its importance in stimulating the consumption that ensured postwar prosperity.⁴⁵ Indeed, between 1946 and 1955, the amount of money spent annually on advertising in the United States nearly tripled, from \$3.4 billion to \$9 billion.⁴⁶ Throughout the postwar period, the ad man’s real and perceived abilities to influence politics, culture, and the economy steadily grew.

As the consumer market expanded with a plethora of indistinguishable goods, advertisers determined that there must be unexplored motivations that helped consumers to make choices between them. They adopted more sophisticated techniques in response, using scientific methodology, opinion polling, and psychoanalytical insights. At the same time, they added unconscious motivation to the concept of market segmentation. The result was Motivational Research (MR). Based on the works of Sigmund Freud and behaviorist John Watson, MR attempted to reconcile the differences between consumers’ reasons for purchasing or not purchasing a product with their sometimes contradictory personal explanations for their conduct. Increasingly, ad men attempted to exploit consumers’ unconscious desires in order to differentiate and market products, and MR permeated the industry as the “soft sell.”

The preeminent champion of MR was Ernest Dichter, an Austrian Jew who had received his doctorate in psychology from the University of Vienna in 1934. He immigrated to the United States in 1938 and quickly established himself as a leading researcher on matters of consumer motivation.⁴⁷ In 1939, he completed a study for Chrysler Corporation that linked convertibles with mistresses and sedans with wives.⁴⁸ In 1946, he established the Institute for Motivational

⁴⁵ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, College ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1958; 1960), 155.

⁴⁶ “The Sophisticated Sell: Advertisers’ Swing to Subtlety,” *Time*, 3 September 1956, 68.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence*, 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-4.

Research, through which he attempted to release Americans from, as interpreted by Horowitz, the “puritanical tradition which equated consumption with sin.”⁴⁹ Dichter stated that advertising should offer “moral permission” for consumption.⁵⁰ He also believed that the middle class that this advertising was meant to affect could use their consumption to strengthen the economy and prevent the inflation and economic collapse that had burdened Europe after World War II. They would provide a safeguard against fascism, if only they were given the opportunity.

In the 1950s, the emphasis on unconscious motivation grew in the advertising industry. Despite industry hold-outs who dubbed MR “a gimmick” perpetuated by “witch doctors and head shrinkers,” advertising researchers continued to hone psychologists’ techniques.⁵¹ They used projective tests such as Rorschach and depth interviews to evaluate copy, assist in product naming, and create slogans.⁵² However, as the methods of persuasion grew more psychologically complex, and advertisers grew increasingly confident in the power of their techniques, consumers became suspicious of the extent to which they could place faith in advertisers to act in the public’s interest. Many feared that Ernest Dichter and others who used the right of purchase to define the American dream were converting the nation into a land of lemmings in pursuit of name brands. This fear developed into a stereotype of the ad man that soon permeated the mass media. Thus, Frederic Wakeman’s *The Hucksters* (1946) and Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) characterized the advertising industry as hollow and immoral.⁵³ *Mad Magazine* ran numerous satires on advertising, such as “My Fair

⁴⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁵¹ Quoted in Fox, 184.

⁵² John S. Cooper, “Man, Dig These Crazy Tests (to Evaluate Advertising Copy),” *New York Times*, 29 December 1952, 1.

⁵³ Fox, 201.

Ad-Man” and “The *Mad* Madison Avenue Primer.”⁵⁴ These varied sources demonstrated the intensely negative perception of advertisers that echoed throughout the popular imagination.

Consumers might have shrugged off the confidence of the advertising industry as mere hubris if not for darker fears of social conformity that grew out of World War II. The ad man as envisioned by popular culture was both controlled by stultifying conformity and, with his access to sophisticated methods of persuasion, a sinister figure perpetuating that conformity in order to take advantage of Americans’ minds and pocketbooks. The concept of the Authoritarian Personality conveyed the popular fear that powerful figures could easily control individuals’ social and political actions. The American Jewish Committee commissioned the study from which this idea arose as part of a series that analyzed anti-Semitism in the wake of the Holocaust. Published in 1950 as *The Authoritarian Personality*, its authors, including sociologist T. W. Adorno, attempted to determine the characteristics of the “*potentially fascist* individual.”⁵⁵ Samuel H. Flowerman, one of the series editors, summarized the results of the study in a *New York Times Magazine* article. He considered the “Authoritarian Man” someone “whose family background and social environment have made him peculiarly attuned to anti-democratic beliefs.”⁵⁶ He is “a supreme conformist” who finds “security by merging with the herd . . . even when it means oppressing, even killing, other people.”⁵⁷ Flowerman ominously added that authoritarians could be found everywhere, even in societies, such as the United States, that promote independence.⁵⁸ The study equated unthinking obedience with the evils of Nazi Germany, exposing the danger of conformity in even simple behaviors such as consumption.

⁵⁴ Maria Reidelbach, “Chapter 3: The Kiddin’ Dissuaders, or the Mad men versus the Ad men,” in *Completely MAD: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1991), 42-55 passim.

⁵⁵ T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1950), 1.

⁵⁶ Samuel H. Flowerman, “Portrait of the Authoritarian Man,” *New York Times Magazine*, 23 April 1950, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9, 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

Thus advertisers, with their psychologically manipulative methods, became a target for critics who opposed their growing role in shaping popular needs and opinions.

The Adorno study served to inform numerous critical examinations of conformity in American popular culture, but no one connected the stereotype of the ad man with fears of conformity as deftly as Packard. *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), his first and most famous book, spent eighteen weeks as a bestseller.⁵⁹ In it he exposed the Orwellian techniques employed by advertisers to sell products. He separated the text into two sections, “Persuading Us As Consumers” and “Persuading Us As Citizens,” in order to emphasize the fear that the same techniques advertisers used to sell soap and cars could be applied to the political process.

In the first section, Packard described interviews with popular motivational researchers such as Dichter and Vicary, as well as with representatives of the advertising agencies that contracted their work. He described a “multi-million dollar industry” engaged in the process of “systematically feeling out our hidden weaknesses and frailties in the hope that they can more efficiently influence our behavior” in favor of consumption.⁶⁰ Packard cited as evidence case studies of MR success: he pointed, for instance, to the use of word association tests to successfully change the uncomfortable image of prunes from a laxative to a healthful fruit.⁶¹

In the second section, he studied political campaigns to illustrate how advertisers used persuasive techniques in the civic realm. He noted in particular a study that concluded, on the basis of voter profiles, that President Eisenhower was viewed as a grandfatherly figure. As a result, Eisenhower’s campaign staff portrayed him in television and radio campaign advertisements as “courageous” and “kindly.”⁶² Packard also described the future of

⁵⁹ Fox, 185.

⁶⁰ Packard, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 187.

psychologically based advertising, including biocontrol, which used electrical pulses to control mental and physical processes. He quoted a scientist who said that, in the most potent application of the technique, biocontrolled people “would never be permitted to think as individuals.”⁶³ Armed with this and similarly disturbing anecdotes, Packard issued a stern moral rebuke to the advertising industry. He criticized “depth marketers [who . . .] assume that anything that results in raising the gross national product is automatically good for America.”⁶⁴ He provided a frightening vision of a future in which people could be manipulated into purchasing politicians and ideas as well as products.

In the years since *The Hidden Persuaders* was published, Packard has been accused of exaggeration and zealotry. According to one author, he “obtained most of his information from interested parties . . . who wanted to spread the gospel,” and “therefore exaggerated the extent and importance of MR.”⁶⁵ However, at the time, *The Hidden Persuaders* greatly influenced popular culture. Its critique of the advertising industry combined widespread perceptions of the ad man with Cold War fears of conformity, reflecting the growing fear that consumption, as with other postwar rights, was manipulable.

In September 1957, when James Vicary first brought his concept of subliminal advertising to the public, Vance Packard exemplified the popular attitude toward advertising. He effectively united the stereotype of the ad man as a perpetual conformer with the postwar fear of the authoritarian personality. Paradoxically, the ad man represented both a bulwark against fascism by encouraging consumption, and possibly the greatest potential for authoritarianism through subtle methods of persuasion. At the same time, the product differentiation that producers explored in order to effectively market their goods in the wake of postwar mass

⁶³ Ibid., 239.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁵ Fox, 186.

consumption was delivered by the same psychological research that Packard helped the general public to fear. While thriftiness had finally given way to the freedom to consume, the supposed powers of advertising created the fear that people's choices could be altered without their knowledge or consent. The citizen consumer of World War II had yielded to the postwar purchaser consumer, but worried that the transition might remove his or her identity entirely.

III. Vicary's Experiment

Drink Coca-Cola! Eat Popcorn! The words flickered invisibly on the movie screen, and reportedly, the audience followed their advice. In 1957, when James Vicary publicly came forward with his movie theater experiment, Americans expressed widespread fears of authoritarianism and advertising industry deception. Vicary's announcement spun into a media campaign that kept subliminal advertising in the limelight until the spring of 1958. In that time, subliminal ads spawned media and industry critics in a unique public outburst of shock and anger that only government intervention could assuage.

On September 12, 1957, in a New York film studio with a delegation of fifty reporters from the United States and Britain, Vicary held a press conference to announce that his firm had used a new technique to influence people unconsciously to buy products. He was flanked by two associates, Rene Bras and Francis C. Thayer, who was president of both the United States Productions Co. and the newly formed Subliminal Projection Company, Inc. Vicary told of an experiment in which theater audiences were subjected to messages flashed so quickly that they were visible only to the subconscious. He and his colleagues displayed the messages "Drink *Coca-Cola*" and "Eat Popcorn" (sometimes reported as "Hungry? Eat Popcorn"⁶⁶) on alternating nights over a period of six weeks at a Fort Lee, New Jersey, movie theater. The

⁶⁶ Herbert Brean, "'Hidden Sell' Technique Is Almost Here: New subliminal gimmicks now offer blood, skulls, and popcorn to movie fans," *Life*, 31 March 1958, 104.

pictures, which were akin to a watermark, were flashed over the film at 1/3000th of a second every five seconds to some 45,699 people. Vicary reported that theater concession sales of *Coca-Cola* and popcorn increased over that period by 18.1% and 57.7% respectively.⁶⁷

The theory behind the subliminal experiment was simple. “We’re making a visible commercial pint-size, even below a whisper, lighter than a feather,” Vicary said.⁶⁸ “Why send through a whole barrage of advertising when a light touch is better?” he asked, providing the ultimate example of the soft sell.⁶⁹ Not only that, Vicary added, but his technique could “take a whole day’s commercial effort” and “boil it down to a five-minute presentation.”⁷⁰ It could be shown during a program or film rather than at a commercial break. Additionally, subliminal advertising could be applied in other media. Although the experiment that Vicary announced occurred in a movie theater, he reported that his company had also tested subliminal projection on closed circuit television. He hoped to move into the television arena, licensing the device that projected the messages, called a tachistoscope, to an individual firm to put it to use.⁷¹

Even as Vicary enumerated the many benefits of the technique, he also sought to dispel fears of its misuse. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, he stated that subliminal messages were primarily “reminder advertising,” and thus were only useful to promote familiar products. Neither could an advertisement presented subliminally force unwanted behavior: “The ad would have the same impact on the viewer’s subconscious as the constant repetition of a jingle, and would not prompt a viewer to buy something he didn’t consciously want,” said Vicary.⁷² In

⁶⁷ These figures were reported by multiple sources, although *Life* reversed them. In a 1993 article, Stuart Rogers, who is unconvinced that the experiment was actually performed, asserted that Vicary used “the proven propagandist’s ploy” of decimals and odd numbers to give the figures the ring of truth (13).

⁶⁸ “‘Invisible’ ads tested,” *Printers’ Ink*, 20 September 1957, 44.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “James Vicary: Subliminal Svengali?” *Sponsor*, 30 November 1957, 38, 70.

⁷² Carter Henderson, “A Blessing or a Bane? TV Ads You’d See Without Knowing It,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September 1957, 1.

response, William Foster of the London *Sunday Times* commented that, if Vicary wanted to address the desires of his audience at his press conference, he should have projected “gin and tonic” rather than a soda advertisement.⁷³ However, according to *Printers’ Ink*, Vicary stated that if the company “had used any stronger psychology in our theater experiments, the whole audience would have gotten up to buy popcorn and Coca-Cola.”⁷⁴ He and Thayer suggested that government regulation was necessary to prevent misuse of the technique which could be dangerous in the wrong hands. In a November 1957 interview with *Sponsor* magazine, Vicary said that “it’s to our own interests as well as the public’s that someone police this thing.”⁷⁵ He added that his company was working on a subliminal projection detection device for use by a governing body.⁷⁶

By October 1957, the Subliminal Projection Company had reportedly been contacted by several interested parties.⁷⁷ According to *Newsweek*, while advertisers publicly condemned subliminal advertising, “they were actually flocking to it like so many popcorn lovers.”⁷⁸ Richard E. Forrest, the head of the marketing company in charge of promoting the system to advertisers, announced that a contract had been signed with an unidentified movie theater chain that planned to use subliminal advertisements to display coming attractions.⁷⁹ Forrest added that advertising companies had expressed “terrific interest” and were preparing market trials.⁸⁰

⁷³ William Foster, “The 1984 Idea in Advertising: ‘Invisible’ and Subtle,” *Sunday Times* (London), 15 September 1957, 18.

⁷⁴ “‘Invisible’ ads tested,” 44.

⁷⁵ “James Vicary: Subliminal Svengali?” 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Who these clients are, or whether they ever existed, is still unknown. *Printers’ Ink* (“‘Invisible’ ads tested,” 44) listed such major companies as American Telephone and Telegraph Co. and B.F. Goodrich Chemical Co. as clients; however, although they were mentioned in an article related to subliminal advertising, it is unclear from context whether they were in fact interested in the subliminal process or merely clients of Vicary’s for other services contemporary with the initial press release.

⁷⁸ “Devilish?” *Newsweek*, 14 October 1957, 100.

⁷⁹ “The subliminal fight gets hotter,” *Printers’ Ink*, 4 October 1957, 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Newsweek skeptically reported that as of mid-October, Subliminal Projection Co. had spoken “(it claims) to some 250 advertisers” about testing the device on television or in theaters.⁸¹

In November 1957, Congress stepped in to investigate Vicary’s claims. Representative William A. Dawson (R-Utah) and other members of Congress, spurred on by constituents’ complaints and by personal concerns about the integrity of the political process, contacted the Federal Communications Commission about the use of subliminal ads in film and television. On November 6, Dawson publicized private communications with FCC Chairman John Doerfer in which Doerfer stated that the FCC had begun researching subliminal advertising.⁸² The FCC considered rescinding the licenses of stations that “are knowingly engaging in deceptive advertising.”⁸³ In late November, Doerfer informed Sen. Charles Potter (R-Michigan) that Section 317 of the Federal Communications Act, which required station identification of all paid announcements at the time of broadcast, could prevent the use of subliminal ads.⁸⁴ At the same time, the FCC added that major networks including CBS, ABC, and NBC, and the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters had provided assurances that they would not use the technique.⁸⁵

Despite this publicity, Vicary and his associates were able to keep many aspects of the experiment concealed, including where it occurred and what statistical controls it employed. However, in December 1957, *Motion Picture Daily* published an exposé on the test that cast doubt on its validity. The article declared that, according to the B.S. Moss Theater Circuit, their 1,500-seat Fort Lee Theater had been the site of the test.⁸⁶ However, the theater manager,

⁸¹ “Devilish?” 99.

⁸² “Ban on Subliminal Ads, Pending FCC Probe, Is Urged,” *Advertising Age*, 11 November 1957, 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸⁴ “FCC Peers into Subliminal Picture on TV,” *Advertising Age*, 2 December 1957, 81.

⁸⁵ Jack Gould, “A State of Mind: Subliminal Advertising, Invisible to Viewer, Stirs Doubt and Debate,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1957, D15.

⁸⁶ George Schutz, “Just Whom Did Invisible Advertising Sell?” *Motion Picture Daily*, 16 December 1957, 4.

Marvin Rosen, emphatically denied that a sales increase occurred as a result. According to the article, “Circuit executives . . . advise that sales of all items during the six-week period remained at the established average for this theater.”⁸⁷ *Advertising Age* reported that Vicary was “incensed at this story” and visited B.S. Moss, the head of the chain, in order to show him the test data.⁸⁸ Subsequently, *Motion Picture Daily* published a statement from Moss that, although additional testing was prudent, the confidential figures supplied to him by Vicary assured him that “this type of ‘subconscious’ advertising could help to increase sales.”⁸⁹

As a result of political rumblings and *Motion Picture Daily*’s exposé, in mid-December, the owners of Subliminal Projection Co. announced that they would offer a private retest of the experiment. WTOP, a Washington, D.C. radio station, hosted the trial.⁹⁰ On January 13, 1958, about 300 members of Congress, the FCC, and the Federal Trade Commission attended an 11 a.m. screening of the Civil War-themed television program “The Gray Ghost” at WTOP’s Broadcast House Studio 11. The message “EAT POPCORN” was visibly flashed on the screen before the program started, along with the announcement that, because of the sponsorship of the “Popcorn Institute,” it would be displayed subliminally throughout.⁹¹ An audience member later contended that this was akin to saying “Don’t think of the word hippopotamus for five minutes.” To demonstrate the methodology, Vicary and his associates slowed the flashing message down to a visible speed, and then dimmed, split-screened, and finally replaced the phrase with “FIGHT POLIO.”⁹² Vicary addressed audience concerns about the strength and usefulness of the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ “Subliminal Projection Sets Test on WTOP; Expects ‘Go-Ahead from FCC,” *Advertising Age*, 23 December 1957, 51; *Advertising Age* calls the executive Charles Moss, while *Motion Picture Daily* calls him B.S. Moss. I have chosen the *Motion Picture Daily* nomenclature because it is the original source.

⁸⁹ “Sees Further Tests of ‘Subliminal’ Needed,” *Motion Picture Daily*, 17 December 1957, 9.

⁹⁰ “Subliminal Projection Sets Test on WTOP,” 3.

⁹¹ “Subliminal Ad is Transmitted in Test but Scores No Popcorn Sales,” *Advertising Age*, 20 January 1958, 94.

⁹² “Ghostly Ad Device Has Demonstration,” *Washington Post*, 14 January 1958, B14.

technique. “It may remind a Democrat to go out and vote for his Democratic candidates,” he said, “but it won’t cause him to switch and become a Republican.”⁹³

Despite his qualifications as to subliminal advertising’s strength, officials and the media judged the test a failure. No audience members reported desiring popcorn, and according to the *New York Times*, many “seemed disappointed that they had not been prompted to do so.”⁹⁴

Senator Potter facetiously remarked during the demonstration, “I think I want a hot dog.”⁹⁵

Printers’ Ink added, however, “Having gone to see something that is not supposed to be seen, and having not seen it, as forecast, the FCC and Congressmen seemed satisfied.”⁹⁶

After the unsuccessful retest, subliminal advertising quickly dropped from the public eye. However, the retest affected not only Vicary but also a small New Orleans company, the Precon Process & Equipment Corporation (from “preconscious”), which began generating headlines in late 1957 just as Vicary’s announcement exploded across the popular press. Robert E. Corrigan, a former lecturer in psychology, and Hal C. Becker, an electrical engineer and assistant professor in experimental neurology, both of Tulane, founded Precon.⁹⁷ Their method of subliminal stimulation involved a briefcase-sized box “containing a transparent machine with a light behind it”⁹⁸ Like Vicary, they provided few details about the invention because of the patent application process, but described “ample proof” from “exhaustive experiments” in action since 1950.⁹⁹ According to *Popular Science*, they believed that “the technique would be wonderfully useful in education . . . and psychotherapy The commercial possibilities occurred to them

⁹³ “Subliminal Ad is Transmitted,” 2.

⁹⁴ Val Adams, “Subliminal Ads Shown in Capital,” *New York Times* 14 January 1958, 66.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ “Subliminal has a test; can’t see if it works,” *Printers’ Ink*, 17 January 1958, 4-5.

⁹⁷ Brean, 103.

⁹⁸ “Subliminal Ads Wash No Brains, Declare Moore, Becker, Developers of Precon Device,” *Advertising Age*, 2 December 1957, 81.

⁹⁹ Wesley S. Griswold, “TV’s New Trick: Hidden Commercials,” *Popular Science*, April 1958, 97.

later.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Precon had some commercial success in film. Producer William S. Edwards hired them to insert subliminal imagery into his run-of-the-mill horror/mystery flick, *My World Dies Screaming* (1958). The film featured “words and images that normally trigger strong responses in people,” such as pictures of skulls.¹⁰¹ At the same time, the Precon men found themselves inextricably associated with Vicary. During the heated reaction to Vicary’s announcement, Corrigan and Becker “seem[ed] to be waiting to see what becomes of Mr. Vicary and his partners, who so far are absorbing all the criticism . . . from the anti-hidden-commercial faction.”¹⁰² Much of their fame was due to the publicity generated by Vicary, but Corrigan and Becker eventually experienced similar setbacks because of the media backlash against Vicary’s experiment.

James Vicary’s version of subliminal advertising died quickly after January 1958. In time, Vance Packard emerged as the more lasting threat to the industry. Although the frequency and intensity of articles on subliminal ads decreased, a bad taste remained in the mouths of many in the advertising industry. For the next few years, sporadic experiments continued to be conducted on radio and television stations in the United States and Canada, but the Subliminal Projection Co. had lost legitimacy with advertisers and the general public. However, at the time, public fears of the technique’s power led to a substantial backlash, and the reactions generated by Vicary’s announcement encapsulated the attitudes and fears of Americans during the Cold War.

IV. Public Opinion Fallout

Vicary’s September 1957 announcement provoked an intense media reaction. The “storm is blowing too hot and too loud,” confessed representatives of the Subliminal Projection Co. to *Advertising Age*, describing widespread hostile publicity that erupted in late 1957 and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰¹ Brean, 103.

¹⁰² Gay Talese, “Most Hidden Hidden Persuasion,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1958, SM59.

early 1958.¹⁰³ By the time of Vicary's press conference, *The Hidden Persuaders* was a bestseller and many Americans feared that subliminal advertising could covertly take advantage of other-directed personalities. This fear generated stringent critiques in the popular press and in the advertising industry itself. Magazines and newspapers weighed in on subliminal advertising, often with intensely negative commentary. Some sources were more skeptical than others. However, a core group of authors and editors foresaw mass manipulation of consumers and citizens by the devious new technique. Meanwhile, as curious advertising agencies and their clients adopted a wait-and-see approach, prominent ad men provided sharp critiques. Subliminal advertising seemed to them to be another aspect of Vance Packard's assault. At the same time, public opinion surveys later revealed that their intense reaction may have been unfounded.

Some newspaper and magazine articles maintained an amused skepticism amid the heated debate. They insinuated that those who feared a real-life *Brave New World* needed to be less concerned about subliminal coercion and more aware of the limitations of advertising. Gay Talese of the *New York Times* flippantly called subliminal advertising "painless, odorless, noiseless, and definitely sneaky."¹⁰⁴ Several popular magazines treated the subject lightheartedly as well. For example, in a *Life* article the author repeatedly embedded instructions for a famous actress: "Marilyn Monroe: Call Herb Brean."¹⁰⁵ *Vogue* magazine advertised a black silk crepe "subliminal dress," a steal at \$160.¹⁰⁶ These widely-read news and culture sources remained skeptical about the suggestive powers of subliminal advertising, generally viewing the popularity of subliminal advertising with critical humor. While they did not embrace the technique, their aspersions were mild.

¹⁰³ "Subliminal Ad Okay if It Sells: Lessler," *Advertising Age*, 2 December 1957, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Talese, SM22.

¹⁰⁵ Brean, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Talese, SM59.

Special interest magazines offered specific critiques of subliminal advertising, focusing on questions of scientific ethics and the bounds of the experiment. Vicary's press releases provided little information about the parameters of the theater experiment, and his refusal to provide details left him open to criticism. When a researcher at a press conference asked Vicary whether the audience at the theater had been notified that they were part of an experiment, he declined to comment.¹⁰⁷ An article in *The American Psychologist* described prominent experimental factors missing from Vicary's statements. These included the frequency of the ad's repetition and the range of behavior that could be influenced by subliminal stimulation.¹⁰⁸ *Science* placed great importance on both the context in which the ads were used to persuade viewers and on the possibility that excessively using subliminal advertisements could desensitize an audience.¹⁰⁹ This scientific criticism added perspective to the subliminal advertising panic.

However, such calm, erudite critiques often did not receive widespread attention. The majority of articles, speeches, and editorials expressed concern and, at times, fear and anger. The reaction was directed not just at subliminal advertising, but also at the advertising industry at large. Uncertain how far the effects of this new method could reach, some detractors worried that devious advertisers would use subliminal messages to compel people to buy unwanted products. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) proclaimed that the beer and liquor industries were using subliminal advertising to boost sales.¹¹⁰ A writer for the *New York Times* described the possibility that a person might "be hypnotically impelled to cozy up to Big Brother or, even better, buy the king-sized package."¹¹¹ Additionally, *Washington Post* editorialist Phyllis Battelle stated that while advertising "should aid a person in logically

¹⁰⁷ "Is subliminal new?" *Printers' Ink*, 11 October 1957, 58.

¹⁰⁸ McConnell, Cutler, and McNeil, 233.

¹⁰⁹ Graham DuShane, "The Invisible Word, or No Thresholds Barred," *Science*, 11 October 1957, 681.

¹¹⁰ Rogers, 13.

¹¹¹ Gould, "A State of Mind," D15.

selecting products which will best help him live a better life,” subliminal advertising could be “a direct route to incontinence” through excess consumption.¹¹² These statements imagined extensive power for subliminal advertising within the vein of marketing and consumption.

In contrast, other critics foresaw the wholesale demolition of free will. Subliminal advertising was an unknown, scientifically and politically, and the recent success of *The Hidden Persuaders* helped people to assume the worst. Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World* (1932), feared that it could be used to influence political campaigns, thus making “nonsense of the whole democratic procedure which is based on conscious choice”¹¹³ Vance Packard worried about the political implications of subliminal advertising as well, commenting on “[t]he growing boldness with which marketers are seeking to invade the privacy of our minds.”¹¹⁴ Packard criticized ad men for using subliminal advertising and other tricks to prey on Americans’ personal weaknesses and sexual dysfunctions. In addition, *Popular Science* reported “alarm from people who fear that this strange development may bring wholesale invasion of privacy and risk of political tyranny.”¹¹⁵ The *Nation* was vitriolic, sarcastically announcing that its editorial board trusted “the gentlemen on Madison Avenue as implicitly as we trust their brothers in Washington.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, they added, “subliminal advertising is the most alarming and outrageous discovery since Mr. Gatling invented his gun.”¹¹⁷

Some of the most important appraisals of subliminal advertising, however, came from within the advertising establishment itself. Certainly, there was a division of opinion in the industry. On one side were corporations that may have been interested in subliminal advertising

¹¹² Phyllis Battelle, “‘Invisible Commercials’ Stir the Subconscious,” *Washington Post*, 18 September 1957, D8.

¹¹³ “Huxley Fears New Persuasion Methods,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1958, 45.

¹¹⁴ “The great motivation debate,” *Printers’ Ink*, 25 October 1957, 99.

¹¹⁵ Griswold, 95.

¹¹⁶ “Diddling the Subconscious,” *Nation*, 5 October 1957, 206.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

in order to achieve an edge against the competition. They remained unconvinced of subliminal advertising's potential, but did not immediately condemn it. The marketing divisions of major firms such as Seven-Up indicated a wait-and-see approach.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Richard Lessler, vice president of Grey Advertising Agency, compared the technique to a knife "which can have good or bad uses but which in itself is not evil or unethical."¹¹⁹

On the other side of industry opinion stood prominent ad men who saw subliminal experimentation as a weak point in the good-buzz barricades they had worked to construct after Vance Packard's assault. From late 1957 to early 1958, *Advertising Age*, the popular weekly trade magazine, ran at least an article per issue on subliminal advertising. It named James Vicary, along with Vance Packard, one of the men who "Made Advertising News in 1957," but the news he made was largely negative from an industry standpoint.¹²⁰

Some advertisers objected to Vicary's technique because it appeared to be a grotesque exaggeration of many of the subtle psychological methods that advertisers already used. Advertising consultant James D. Woolf argued that "any ad that camouflages its true message with irrelevant words and pictures," including the "soft sell" methods that advertisers already used, could be considered subliminal.¹²¹ Earle Ludgin, chairman of Earle Ludgin & Co. advertising agency, also rejected the potential of subliminal advertising. "The weight of all advertising is greater than ever before," he said at a Chicago Advertising Executives Club meeting, arguing that the glut of advertising desensitized the public and made all ads unnoticeable.¹²² In addition, Walter Weir of the Donahue & Coe agency emerged to defend

¹¹⁸ "Radio Station Testing 'Subliminal' Ads, but Listeners Can Still Hear 'em," *Advertising Age*, 16 December 1957, 2.

¹¹⁹ "Subliminal Ad Okay if It Sells," 1.

¹²⁰ "They Made Advertising News in 1957," *Advertising Age*, 30 December 1957, 1.

¹²¹ James D. Woolf, "Subliminal Perception is Nothing New," *Advertising Age*, 28 October 1957, 96.

¹²² "Ludgin Says Ad Excess Makes All Ads Subliminal," *Advertising Age*, 17 February 1958, 2.

advertisers' reputations. In October 1957, Weir maligned Vance Packard in a one-sided debate before the American Marketing Association. He called *The Hidden Persuaders* "a malicious book" in an attack that shocked Packard.¹²³ Weir turned his attention to subliminal advertising in a "Monday Memo" published in *Broadcasting* magazine. He labeled advertising "a business of fads and fancies," and expected subliminal advertising to fail as other techniques had. He also pointed out the irony of attempting to make subliminal what advertisers have constantly tried to make "supraliminal."¹²⁴ Weir's bemused critique was typical of much of the industry's reaction. But while ad men scoffed at Vicary's technique, they feared the public's response.

Even other motivational researchers working in the advertising industry reacted angrily to Vicary's announcement. In September 1957, shortly after Vicary's initial press release, Ernest Dichter stated that "interviews with tens of thousands of consumers indicate that people generally . . . would resent and resist any effort to manipulate them through subliminal perception, or any other technique which deprives them of their free choice."¹²⁵ Dichter's niche in the industry required gentle persuasion rather than coarse manipulation, such as he perceived Vicary's subliminal technique to be, and he claimed that subliminal projection would "give the whole field of motivation research a bad name."¹²⁶ "It's like saying a whiff of martini is worse than a swallow," Vicary retorted.¹²⁷ Indeed, advertisers in all aspects of the industry feared being associated with Vicary's controversial experiment.

As a result of subliminal advertising, and in the wake of *The Hidden Persuaders*, advertisers undertook a campaign to rehabilitate their negative image. The February 9-15, 1958

¹²³ "The great motivation debate," 97; Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard & American Social Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 180-181.

¹²⁴ Walter Weir, "Subliminal Projection: is it worthwhile or will it just pass away?" from *Broadcasting*, n.d., series II, box 1, folder 21, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., n.p..

¹²⁵ "Ads Aimed at Subconscious Criticized by Researcher," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 September 1957, 13.

¹²⁶ "Devilish?" 100.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Advertising Week took the theme “America is a better America—thanks to advertising.”¹²⁸ The participants hoped to combat recent detractors, such as “popular books spotlighting the evils—real or fancied—of advertising,” that affected the public’s perception of the industry.¹²⁹ The keynote address called advertising “the least understood industry in America,” a circumstance that contributed to the huckster stereotype.¹³⁰ The April 1958 Advertising Conference, held at the University of Michigan, prominently addressed subliminal advertising. Social scientists and advertising experts who spoke at the conference advocated a cooperative relationship between their professions.¹³¹ Advertisers, already burdened by a popular stereotype that presented them as smugly manipulative of consumers and citizens, faced a stiff uphill climb as they tried to convince the public that they were worthy of its trust. Some tried to seek further research and discussion in an open environment, while others tried to bury Vicary and his experiment.

But were the industry’s fears of subliminal advertising realistic? In 1959, a public opinion survey conducted by Ralph Norman Haber revealed that less than half of Americans were familiar with Vicary’s experiment. Haber conducted the survey in May 1958 among 324 respondents in San Francisco, within the context of a general interview on behavioral science. 41 percent of those interviewed had heard of subliminal advertising.¹³² Those most likely to have heard of it were, he wrote, “more likely to be male, were younger, and were more educated in general”¹³³ Additionally, 50 percent of the sample held it to be unethical, but 67 percent of the people sampled said that they would continue to watch television that used subliminal messages. Haber summarized the study by concluding that the small percentage of those

¹²⁸ “AFA, AAW Plan ’58 Ad Week Drive Enumerating Public Benefits,” *Advertising Age*, 13 January 1958, 3.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³¹ “Unconscious Sell Theme Tops ’58 Ad Conference,” *Advertising Age*, 21 April 1958, 1.

¹³² Ralph Norman Haber, “Public Attitudes Regarding Subliminal Advertising,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (summer 1959): 292.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

sampled who both had heard of subliminal advertising and who found it unethical meant that “in spite of the tenor of the current mass media attacks on it, . . . the man on the street is not so frightened of subliminal advertising as are the more intellectual writers.”¹³⁴

His analysis suggested that advertisers’ fears may have been unwarranted. The two-fifths of the population that recalled Vicary’s experiment from eighteen months earlier seemed to be more in tune with Gay Talese than with Vance Packard. After Vicary’s failed retest, the vehement reactions of media and advertising figures quieted. In less than a year, the controversial technique had faded into the background. However, beginning in the late 1970s, several occurrences revived popular and industry interest in subliminal advertising and altered the format of the debate.

V. Dénouement?

By the end of January 1958, James Vicary’s foray into subliminal advertising had been largely discredited. His demonstration before representatives of Congress and the FCC validated critics who considered the test a failure and viewed Vicary as a laughingstock. Subsequently, Vicary avoided the subject of subliminal advertising and attempted to rebuild his career. He shunned the limelight except for rare interviews, and died quietly in 1977. Yet even as Vicary was forgotten, public interest regarding subliminal advertising remained. In the 1970s, subliminal advertising again received recognition in the books of Canadian author Wilson Bryan Key, starting with *Subliminal Seduction* (1973). Key’s books and lectures aroused staunch opposition from the advertising industry, which he accused of using subliminal sexual imagery to manipulate consumers. The responses of ad men connected Key’s theories with Vicary’s mostly-forgotten experiment. At the same time, the advertising industry’s delay in speaking out against Key helped to ensure that the public remained wary of subliminal messages. Throughout

¹³⁴ Ibid., 293.

the 1980s and 1990s, and even as late as the 2000 presidential election, the idea remained that subliminal manipulation could affect the political discourse. Although subliminal advertising is still well-known, Americans today view it less with the fear and confusion of the 1950s, and more with a fascination that even the failure of Vicary's experiment has been unable to dispel.

After the initial publicity furor surrounding subliminal advertising died down in early 1958, James Vicary receded into the industry background. He published no more major articles and gave few interviews. In a 1959 *Wall Street Journal* article, Vicary confessed, alongside Robert E. Corrigan of Precon, that the negative reception of subliminal advertising had affected their companies financially. "I've been taking a heck of a licking," he said.¹³⁵ Despite the subliminal advertising setback, he retained his determination to survive in the market research business. He outlined or drafted several unpublished articles, such as "Measuring Your Corporate Goodwill in Today's Climate," from April 1961, and a year later, "Do Our Big Company's [sic] Have Bad Ethics?"¹³⁶ He maintained a large volume of work, but rarely sought publicity.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of Vicary's major projects was the Taboo Language Checking Service (TLCS), which he developed with the Trademark Management Institute. Vicary studied the conscious and unconscious connotations of product names throughout his career. He even used depth projection surveys, such as those a company might use to choose a brand name, to choose names for his daughters, Christine and Ann.¹³⁷ His interest in linguistics led him to travel. In the late 1950s, he planned a trip to Mexico City and

¹³⁵ Peter S. Bart, "'Hidden' Commercials, Launched by Fanfare, Now Flounder Quietly: Public Opposition Stalls TV, Movie Ads That Aim at Viewer's Subconscious Mind," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 1959, 1.

¹³⁶ [James M. Vicary], "Do Our Big Company's [sic] Have Bad Ethics?" TMs, n.d., series II, box 1, folder 19, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

¹³⁷ Cooper, 1.

the Yucatan to study Mayan and Native American languages in order to develop trademarks from “well-worn symbols which have been shared by many cultures.”¹³⁸ According to Vicary, by 1962 the TLCS was comprised of “the major illicite [sic] words in twenty-one foreign languages.”¹³⁹ The service allowed clients to avoid brand names that translated poorly and to select those with universal positive impact.

The early 1960s were especially challenging for Vicary. In May 1961, the U.S. Treasury Department of Customs seized a book of Danish nudes that Vicary had imported on the grounds that it violated Section 305 of the Tariff Act of 1930 banning the importation of obscene material. He argued that the book was required for his research on universal taboos, but the resolution of the case is unclear.¹⁴⁰ That same year, he underwent minor surgery.¹⁴¹ As a result, since his second marriage to Grace Volkman had ended in 1956, Vicary confided to a friend that he “miss[ed] having a wife to stir things up when I am convalescing. But not just quite enough to marry a third time.”¹⁴² Vicary continued to experience financial difficulties and, in 1962, again sought a position in the advertising mainstream. He spoke to friends and acquaintances, such as H. Donald Wilson of Arthur D. Little, Inc., about openings at larger companies. Vicary intimated to Wilson that there were several reasons behind his company’s financial downfall and his desire to seek a stable position at a larger organization. He revealed that he faced “the

¹³⁸ James M. Vicary to Leland R. Taylor, TL, 31 December 1958, series I, box 1, folder 7, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

¹³⁹ [James M. Vicary], “Increasing Marketing Services Company Profits,” TD, n.d., series II, box 1, folder 20, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 4.

¹⁴⁰ James M. Vicary to Irving Fishman, TL, 10 May 1961, series I, box 1, folder 10, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1-2.

¹⁴¹ James M. Vicary to Leland Taylor, TL, 1 August 1961, series I, box 1, folder 10, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

¹⁴² *Who’s Who in America*, 2981; James M. Vicary to Leland Taylor, 31 December 1958, 1.

necessity of finding a constant income . . . for sending my two daughters to college.”¹⁴³ His eldest daughter, he later wrote, had won a scholarship at the University of Connecticut to earn her Ph.D. in mathematics.¹⁴⁴ Vicary also cited changing research trends as causing a reduction in his business. Work that he might previously have completed through small contracts had become the venture of “a large, big-volume research agency.”¹⁴⁵ Finally, Vicary blamed subliminal advertising for his avoidance of the spotlight since 1958. Because he “tried to stay out of print and definitely off television,” he wrote, “I have tended to use a more direct sales approach . . . in very occasional publicity”¹⁴⁶ One of Vicary’s letters to Wilson described a “deliberate policy of disassociating myself from subliminal advertising.”¹⁴⁷

In 1962, Vicary applied to Dun & Bradstreet for a position in consumer research. He offered the Trademark Management Institute and the Taboo Language Checking Service to the company as well in order to enhance his application. Vicary called the TLCS “a little gem with terrific potential if handled correctly,” and added that a larger company could easily extend the system to encompass nearly a hundred languages.¹⁴⁸ In addition, he described his unique skills. He was “a good public speaker” with “a flair for promotion.”¹⁴⁹ He demonstrated these traits with his ambitious publicity effort in 1957, but Vicary was consistent in trying to distance himself from subliminal advertising. His letter of application never mentioned it.

Shortly thereafter, Dun & Bradstreet hired Vicary as a survey research director. Then, in 1962, he surfaced briefly in the public eye in a controversial, enigmatic interview with

¹⁴³ James M. Vicary to Donald H. Wilson [sic], TL, 23 April 1962, series I, box 1, folder 11, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ [Vicary], “Increasing Marketing Services Company Profits,” 3.

¹⁴⁵ Vicary to Donald H., 23 April 1962, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ [Vicary], “Increasing Marketing Services Company Profits,” 4.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Advertising Age. The article appeared on September 12, 1962, five years to the day after Vicary's initial press conference. Here, again, Vicary distanced himself from the subliminal advertising phenomenon. He placed a different spin on his decision to publicize his movie theater experiment, claiming that "there I was in my own business and the people who were putting up the money thought I should stir things up Maybe it would help business."¹⁵⁰ He went on to describe his patent difficulties and the detrimental effects of subliminal advertising on his career. The article provided a rare glimpse of Vicary's perception of the events, but it also served to provide fodder for later attacks on Vicary by members of the advertising industry.¹⁵¹

After 1962, Vicary disappeared from public view permanently. He held several jobs for short durations before retiring due to a long illness. Finally, in 1967, he moved to Topsfield, Massachusetts, where he died quietly on November 7, 1977.¹⁵² He was survived by a sister, a brother, and his two daughters, Christine and Ann Vicary, who donated his papers to the University of Connecticut. Unfortunately, personal diaries and other important documents have been lost, leaving an incomplete view of a man who was largely maligned, justly or unjustly, by the advertising industry and general public.

After Vicary withdrew from the public eye in 1958, the interest in subliminal ads might never have been revived if not for the emergence in the 1970s of Wilson Bryan Key, a Canadian journalism professor who, like Vance Packard before him, launched a sharp condemnation of the advertising industry for manipulating its audiences. Key's first book, *Subliminal Seduction* (1973), offered a searing indictment of what he regarded as unconscious sexual imagery that advertisers used to sell more products. In the aftermath of Vicary's experiment, he wrote, talk of regulation among politicians lulled the American public into falsely believing they were

¹⁵⁰ Danzig, 72.

¹⁵¹ These criticisms will be discussed in Part VI: Numerous Controversies.

¹⁵² "James M. Vicary, 62," *Salem Evening News*, 9 November 1977, n.p.

protected from the effects of subliminal manipulation.¹⁵³ However, he proclaimed, an immense conspiracy of ad men “victimized and manipulated” consumers, bombarding them with sexual imagery and profanity embedded in advertisements.¹⁵⁴ Key’s outlandish charges included unlikely examples, such as implicit oral-genital symbolism in ads reminding parents to brush baby’s teeth. Additionally, he implied that subliminal advertising had far-reaching consequences beyond stimulating consumption, including use by politicians and the military. “Consider all of the interesting applications which could be made by the CIA and FBI in the development of new techniques for manipulating subversives . . . ,” he wrote.¹⁵⁵ His firebrand accusations proved popular. *Subliminal Seduction* was followed by *Media Sexploitation* (1976), *The Clam Plate Orgy* (1980), and a lucrative lecture tour with frequent stops at colleges and universities.

Key’s fame angered ad men who recalled Vicary and *The Hidden Persuaders* less than fondly. Wilson Bryan Key became the Vance Packard of the 1970s and 1980s as he drove consumer fears about advertising manipulation. The advertising industry, hopeful that his claims would dissipate, was slow to respond to his frightening accusations. Finally, in the mid-1980s, Dr. Jack Haberstroh emerged as Key’s strongest and most prolific critic. Haberstroh, a former advertising professional turned professor of advertising at Virginia Commonwealth University, gave voice to the advertising field in a September 17, 1984 article in *Advertising Age*. He dissected Key’s arguments, but also criticized his popularity in newspaper, television, and radio reports. Haberstroh added that Key gave 80 to 90 major lectures a year, earning up to \$3,000 for each delivery, with stops in “thousands of advertising classrooms along the way.”¹⁵⁶ Meanwhile,

¹⁵³ Wilson Bryan Key, *Subliminal Seduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973; New York: The New American Library, Inc., Signet, 1974), 21-22.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁵⁶ Jack Haberstroh, “Can’t ignore subliminal ad charges: Adfolk laugh, but students listen,” *Advertising Age*, 17 September 1984, 3.

the advertising industry was complicit in Key's popularity. Even as professionals dismissed Key as "'sick,' 'crazy,' 'paranoid' and 'obsessed with sex,'" there were "[t]housands of students . . . graduating every year thoroughly conversant with Mr. Key, his books and his theories."¹⁵⁷

Haberstroh followed this article with a widespread campaign to discredit Key's work. In late 1984, they debated for three hours on-air over the WNWS Miami radio station.¹⁵⁸ He also continued to debunk Key's examples in print, quoting interviews with advertising professionals involved in the production of specific ads criticized by Key. These advertisers vehemently denied using any form of subliminal or subconscious stimulation in their work. In addition, Haberstroh conducted surveys on subliminal advertising within the industry. Professionals denied using subliminal messages and often answered Haberstroh with comments such as that of an anonymous responder: "At our agency we're too busy trying to sell our client's products. We don't have time to play games."¹⁵⁹ Advertising professors, many with extensive practical experience, responded that while they taught their students about subliminal advertising, they did not find Key's claims credible. "The best we can do as educators is answer questions when they arise as professionally as possible," wrote one respondent.¹⁶⁰

Bolstered by this evidence of industry opinion, Haberstroh framed his rebuttals as calls to action for the advertising community. The public saw "the advertising professional as no more ethical than a used car salesman," he wrote, urging advertisers recoup the industry's image.¹⁶¹ Subliminal advertising again became the latest battlefield in a war began by Vance Packard.

Although Haberstroh instigated the industry dialogue over subliminal advertising, it was Walter Weir, author of the *Broadcasting* article critiquing subliminal advertising, who connected

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 42, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Jack Haberstroh, "Ad professors deliver subliminal education," *Advertising Age*, 4 March 1985, 52.

¹⁵⁹ Haberstroh, "Can't ignore subliminal ad charges," 44.

¹⁶⁰ Haberstroh, "Ad professors deliver subliminal education," 52.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Haberstroh's rebuke to Vicary's 1957 experiment. In a follow-up to Haberstroh's September 1984 expose, Weir recalled the movie theater test and added that Vicary was challenged by Henry C. Link, president of the Psychological Corporation, to duplicate the experiment in a separate incidence from the FCC test. Weir contended that Vicary failed to produce results in this experiment as well.¹⁶² He then connected Vicary's presumed deception to Key's "sensationalism," adding that while "Mr. Key's version of subliminal advertising differs from Mr. Vicary's . . . it is as insubstantial."¹⁶³ Weir's account of Vicary's experiment became the basis for subsequent publications on the history and efficacy of subliminal advertising.

Advertisers who crusaded against the popular belief in subliminal advertising had cause to worry. Both awareness of and suspicion toward subliminal advertising increased among the general public in the twenty-five years following Vicary's experiment. While less than half of the population had heard of Vicary's experiment in 1959, in 1983, 81 percent of the sample population recognized the concept of subliminal advertising.¹⁶⁴ Respondents believed that advertisers frequently and successfully embedded subliminal messages in order to sell products, and a large majority found the technique to be harmful, or were uncertain of its effects.¹⁶⁵

The public's growing awareness of subliminal advertising, as a result of the work of Wilson Bryan Key, prevented it from disappearing a second time. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, subliminal advertising surfaced sporadically, sometimes as a gimmick and sometimes as a result of scientific or political trends. In 1979, *Time* described the use of subliminal audio stimulation to prevent shoplifting and inspire employees. The murmurs were provided by a "black box" invented by Hal C. Becker, formerly of Precon, the company that

¹⁶² These and similar assertions will be discussed in Section VI: Numerous Controversies.

¹⁶³ Walter Weir, "Another look at subliminal 'facts,'" *Advertising Age*, 15 October 1984, 46.

¹⁶⁴ Eric J. Zanot, J. David Pincus, and E. Joseph Lamp, "Public Perceptions of Subliminal Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 12, no. 1 (1983): 41.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

competed with Vicary for a patent in the 1950s.¹⁶⁶ Politicians and governmental organizations also sporadically addressed subliminal advertising. The FCC issued a low-key 1974 Public Notice and a 1977 Information Bulletin explaining the technique and the governmental stance against it. In 1984, the Congressional Subcommittee on Transportation, Aviation and Materials met to discuss “subliminal communication technology . . . [and] those things which concern the public in a kind of Orwellian sense as a result of the nomenclature of this year”¹⁶⁷ Dr. John Kamp, of the Mass Media Bureau of the FCC, downplayed the threat it posed.¹⁶⁸ While the proceedings suggested caution, participants did not often address the topic seriously. In response to questioning about the possibility of influencing citizens to “reelect your Congressman,” Kamp jokingly retorted, “It depends on which Congressman.”¹⁶⁹

However, at times the implications of subliminal advertising were seen as potentially devastating. In mid-1990, parents of two teenagers who engaged in a suicide pact after listening to heavy metal music by Judas Priest sued the band for embedding subliminal messages that encouraged the teens’ deaths. Bill Curbishley, Judas Priest’s manager, denied the charges and added that if subliminal messages were used, “I’d be saying, ‘Buy seven copies,’ not telling a couple of screwed-up kids to kill themselves.”¹⁷⁰ The case was decided in favor of the band on the grounds that the messages were neither intentional nor directly a factor in the pair’s deaths.¹⁷¹ However, the resolution left open the debate that subliminal perception was possible, and instances of supposed subliminal messages continued to surface. In 1995, an anti-abortion

¹⁶⁶ “Secret Voices: Messages that manipulate,” *Time*, 10 September 1979, 71.

¹⁶⁷ Congress, House, Committee on Science and Technology, *Subliminal Communication Technology: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Aviation and Materials*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess., 6 August 1984, 1.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ Larry Rohter, “2 Families Sue Heavy-Metal Band As Having Driven Sons to Suicide,” *New York Times*, 17 July 1990, C13.

¹⁷¹ “Rock Group Cleared in Suicide Case: Message on Album Called ‘Unintentional,’” *Washington Post*, 25 August 1990, C1-2.

organization demanded that the Walt Disney Company recall the video release of *The Lion King* on the grounds that the word “SEX” was subtly spelled out by a cloud of dust during the film.¹⁷² During the 2000 presidential campaign, Governor George W. Bush defended a political commercial in which the word “bureaucrats,” referring to his Democratic opposition, turned into a barely perceptible flash of the word “rats.”¹⁷³ Although the subsequent publicity dismissed subliminal advertising as absurd, the reaction of both parties to the commercial demonstrated the extent to which the American people remained aware of the technique.

Wilson Bryan Key revived the intrigue and outrage that surrounded subliminal advertising in 1957. His version of subliminal advertising manipulated consumers rather than citizens, but many of the same fears remained associated with the technique. At the same time, his accusations outraged and invigorated ad men who recalled Vicary’s experiment. Their recollections of the 1957 fiasco generated numerous controversies which have proven just as persistent as subliminal advertising itself.

VI. Numerous Controversies

James Vicary’s experiment with subliminal advertising generated a brief explosion of outrage that was supplanted, much later, by a sense of confusion surrounding what had transpired. The events of 1957 and 1958 have generated a rich mythology that is as much a part of the story as the experiment itself. Even now, despite investigations by members of the advertising community, several aspects of the subliminal advertising scare remain mysterious. Debate within the industry generally focused on four primary points of contention which authors have addressed in their treatment of the subject. The first is whether Vicary actually conducted the movie theater experiment that made him famous. The second question is whether Vicary filed

¹⁷² Peter M. Nichols, “Some See ‘Sex’ in the Clouds of ‘Lion King,’” *New York Times*, 2 September 1995, 20.

¹⁷³ Frank Bruni, “Bush Says Rats Reference in Ad Was Unintentional,” *New York Times*, 13 September 2000, A19.

for and received a patent for the tachistoscope. The third major mystery involves an anecdotal account of a retest of the experiment, separate from that commissioned by Congress and the FCC. The fourth source of controversy is the belief among members of the advertising industry that Vicary disappeared after 1958 and took with him millions of dollars in retainer fees. These eyebrow-raising questions have often been asked, but never successfully answered.

Some authors have questioned whether Vicary did, indeed, conduct the movie theater test that made him famous. Stuart Rogers provided compelling evidence that Vicary's experiment was a hoax. In a 1993 article, he recalled conducting research for a proposed term paper on subliminal advertising as a psychology student at Hofstra College. In late 1957, he drove to nearby Fort Lee, New Jersey to investigate the movie theater in question.¹⁷⁴ Although Vicary claimed that almost 46,000 people were exposed to the subliminal advertisements over a period of six weeks, Rogers denied that this was possible. "The size of that small-town theater suggested it should have taken considerably longer than six weeks to complete a test of nearly 50,000 movie patrons," he wrote.¹⁷⁵ He added that, upon questioning, the theater manager declared that "*no such test had ever been conducted at his theater.*"¹⁷⁶

In contrast, other evidence suggests that Vicary conducted the experiment as described in his press releases. In December 1957, contemporary with Rogers' inquiry, *Motion Picture Daily* revealed information about the theater believed to be the site of Vicary's experiment. At no time was the test itself denied. *Motion Picture Daily* reported that the subliminal projector "was mounted on the parapet of the loge . . . and operated continuously . . . without an attendant." Marvin Rosen, the manager, added that "several youngsters" told him that they had seen the

¹⁷⁴ Rogers, "How a Publicity Blitz," 14.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

ads.¹⁷⁷ Rather, theater representatives disputed the purported results of the test. Vicary rushed to provide B.S. Moss, the executive of the theater chain, with his data, leading to a next-day reversal of opinion.¹⁷⁸ Vicary then stated that, before he provided the information, the manager did not know “what we were doing or when we were doing it” because of the patent process.¹⁷⁹

Additionally, in June 1956, over a year before Vicary publicized his work, the *Sunday Times* of London published a front-page article that described an experiment very similar to the Fort Lee trial. The article described a test in which “[a]n ice-cream advertisement was flashed on a cinema screen in New Jersey for a fraction of a second during the showing of an ordinary feature film.”¹⁸⁰ As a result of these “sub-threshold” messages, ice cream sales increased by 60 percent. The ominous experiment caused a stir in London, triggering skeptical letters to the editor and leading the B.B.C. to conduct public demonstrations of the technique.¹⁸¹ American papers never publicized the ice cream test, and audiences in the United States might not have heard of it if not for the success of *The Hidden Persuaders*. Vance Packard cited the experiment as an example of one of the more “picturesque” techniques of motivational research.¹⁸² Packard also printed a comment from the paper’s spokesman that, “Although the facts we published are well attested, the authorities in question are unwilling to come any further into the article.”¹⁸³ The reluctance of those involved in the experiment to be named may have been due to a patent application, although there remained the curious variation of messages promoting ice cream from those advertising popcorn and soda. If the experiment did in fact occur, the *Sunday Times*

¹⁷⁷ Schutz, 4.

¹⁷⁸ “Sees Further Tests of ‘Subliminal’ Needed,” 9.

¹⁷⁹ “Subliminal Projection Sets Test on WTOP,” 51.

¹⁸⁰ “Sales Through the Sub-Conscious: ‘Invisible’ Advertisements,” *Sunday Times* (London), 10 June 1956, 1.

¹⁸¹ “TV Tries the ‘Invisible’: B.B.C. Experiment,” *Sunday Times* (London), 1 July 1956, 9; “‘Invisible’ TV Advertising,” *Sunday Times* (London), 8 July 1956, 7.

¹⁸² Packard, 38.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 43.

articles and *The Hidden Persuaders* established a chronology for the test and the public's increasing awareness of it.

Did Vicary, in fact, conduct the subliminal advertising theater trial? While Rogers' research suggested that the test may not have occurred, at least as described, articles published in London newspapers suggest otherwise. If these accounts are to be believed, they describe either Vicary's experiment, a similar experiment by a different organization, or an elaborate hoax begun over a year before it was perpetrated. If Rogers is to be believed, either the experiment was mysteriously conducted without theater approval, or it was an example of elaborate trickery with sloppy execution. Which possibility remains unclear. However, the search for a patent for Vicary's invention addresses and attempts to explain many similar issues.

In addition to these conflicts over whether Vicary's test legitimately took place, his 1962 interview in *Advertising Age* played a prominent role in the work of researchers who declared the experiment a hoax. Some authors regarded the interview as a confession to falsifying the movie theater evidence, although Vicary's statements are not so clear-cut. He described subliminal advertising as, initially, "a form of high jinks I didn't want to have anything to do with."¹⁸⁴ Vicary stated that he and his associates applied for a patent after conducting the Fort Lee test, but were forced to announce their findings prematurely because of an information leak. He went on to say, in a statement that has been frequently misconstrued, "Worse than the timing, though, was the fact that we hadn't done any research, except what was needed for filing a patent. I had only . . . a small amount of data—too small to be meaningful. And what we had shouldn't have been used promotionally."¹⁸⁵ Vicary never admitted to falsifying the Fort Lee test and, in fact, reiterated that it occurred. The statement might be interpreted to mean that he had exaggerated

¹⁸⁴ Danzig, 72.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

the test data, or that a single test was insufficient to draw the bold conclusions that he promulgated in 1957. However, Vicary never openly admitted that subliminal advertising was a hoax, as has been claimed. Rather, he called it “a gimmick” that failed.¹⁸⁶ When the Danzig interview is situated with earlier evidence, it provides a realistic possibility that an experiment of some kind took place, but that Vicary exaggerated the ensuing results for the sake of publicity.

A second major issue that several authors have debated concerns the lack of a patent for Vicary’s tachistoscope. Vicary repeatedly claimed that the ambiguity in his press releases regarding the details of the experiment was a result of discretion during the patent application process. His first public announcement of subliminal advertising capped a slow sequence of information leaks. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that the publicity began because of a “statement by one of the firm’s [Subliminal Projection Corporation’s] stockholders while visiting London.”¹⁸⁷ The statement led to the 1956 London *Sunday Times* article that Vance Packard quoted in *The Hidden Persuaders*. The subsequent popularity of the book presumably forced Vicary’s hand, although some might argue that Vicary intended to capitalize on Vance Packard’s critique of the industry, and his personal newfound fame from the book. But while reports of the experiment point to the existence of a patent application, the reality is more complicated.

Both Stuart Rogers and Anthony Pratkanis, a professor of psychology at the University of California in Santa Cruz, searched the U.S. Patent Office for records of a patent concerning subliminal advertising and attributed to Vicary. Neither inquiry was successful. Rogers claimed that, in 1969, as an employee of Eastman Kodak responsible for recording patent records to microfilm for storage, he discovered that “no one there could find any record of a Vicary patent

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Frederick W. Roevekamp, “Ad Firms Ponder Success of ‘Invisible Commercials,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 January 1958, 3.

application, nor anything related to a device to project subliminal advertising.”¹⁸⁸ In a later letter to Rogers, Pratkanis described his unsuccessful search for the patent, conducted with Dr. Tim Moore, a researcher on subliminal perception.¹⁸⁹ However, Pratkanis added that they discovered research similar to what Vicary might have collected at the California State Library in Sacramento. This research, dated 1958, was conducted by Precon.

While Vicary did not receive a patent for a subliminal stimulus device, his competitors at Precon did. On May 7, 1958, Drs. Robert E. Corrigan and Hal C. Becker of Precon filed a patent application for an “Apparatus for producing visual stimulation.” The Patent Office granted the application as a utility patent, number 3,060,795, on October 30, 1962. The patent described an “apparatus for imparting useful information to an observer by subconscious stimulation and subsequently resulting in conscious purposive behavior”¹⁹⁰ The device was a dual projector with separate film loops for supra- and subliminal film. The subliminal projector aspect flashed images and messages faster or lighter than the threshold of conscious perception. This description is similar to the device presented by Vicary, which could flash words or pictures at a rate of 1/3000th of a second. The device he described, called a tachistoscope, was popularized by the Eastman Kodak Company for high-speed photography.¹⁹¹ However, the characteristics he attributed to the machine were very similar to those accorded the Precon device, which ultimately was patented while Vicary’s invention was not.

The granting of a patent for subliminal advertising to Corrigan and Becker does not preclude an application attempt on Vicary’s part. There are reasons, besides his statements in

¹⁸⁸ Stuart Rogers, SA-2, 15 (currently in process); Rogers, “How a Publicity Blitz,” 15.

¹⁸⁹ Anthony R. Pratkanis to Stuart Rogers, TLS, received 8 March 1994, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Robert E. Corrigan and Hal C. Becker, “Apparatus for producing visual stimulation,” U.S. Patent no. 3,060,795, 30 October 1962, 12.

¹⁹¹ Rogers, “How a Publicity Blitz,” 12.

popular magazines, to believe that he did indeed attempt to receive a patent. Gordon Coplein, a former U.S. patent examiner (1956-58) who reviewed new television technologies, recalled a patent interview conducted by a coworker, Robert Segal. The meeting consisted of Segal and three other men, one of whom was Floyd Crews, a future colleague of Coplein's at the law firm of Darby & Darby. Crews was Vicary's patent attorney, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, which also quoted him as calling the invention "unique" and reported that his firm ordered the Subliminal Projection Corporation to maintain secrecy about the application process.¹⁹² Coplein placed the meeting in late 1956, not long after he began working for the Patent Office. He added that he was interested in subliminal stimulation for several reasons; he had a personal interest in advertising, and, as a new examiner, he was curious to observe an interview with a seasoned coworker. Besides Crews, the second man at the interview, according to Coplein, was "a well-dressed Madison Avenue kind of a guy" who attempted to sell the invention.¹⁹³

There are potential difficulties with Coplein's story. He recalled few specifics, and did not recognize Floyd Crews as the patent attorney from this exchange when he began his long tenure at Darby & Darby in 1958.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, the competition between the Subliminal Projection Corporation and the Precon Corporation, alluded to in the press, makes it difficult to reliably determine the meeting's participants. Both companies were interested in applying the technique to television, although Stuart Rogers later contested the technological feasibility of subliminal television.¹⁹⁵ Finally, the time placement of the interview could fit either applicant. Vicary claimed that his company filed for a patent in September of 1956.¹⁹⁶ Corrigan and

¹⁹² Carter Henderson, "A Blessing or a Bane? TV Ads You'd See Without Knowing It," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September 1957, 1.

¹⁹³ Gordon Coplein, interview by author, tape recording, 18 March 2006, Subliminal Advertising Collection (SA-1) at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla., 11 (currently in process).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Griswold, 96; "James Vicary: Subliminal Svengali?" 38-39, 70-71; Rogers, "How a Publicity Blitz," 15.

¹⁹⁶ Brooks, 8.

Becker reportedly applied for a patent as early as 1955, although their granted patent is listed as filed in 1958.¹⁹⁷ However, Coplein's account of a slick salesman, and the association with Floyd Crews, seem more closely to describe Vicary and the Subliminal Projection application.

A final piece of evidence suggests some validity behind Vicary's claim that he did apply for a patent. A patent application for the device, an "Apparatus for and method of transmitting intelligence," was filed with the U.S. Patent Office on September 4, 1956, under serial number 607,955.¹⁹⁸ On February 8, 1957, according to the same notarized document, Vicary sold the patent to the Subliminal Projection Company for one dollar. The patent was not granted, but this document, and Coplein's recollection, suggest that the attempt was at least made.

The third major controversy surrounding subliminal advertising involves the duplication of the original movie theater experiment. Allegedly, a group of advertising industry heads challenged Vicary to repeat his test separately from the FCC demonstration. This aspect of the controversy draws on the recollections of Walter Weir. Weir's career in the advertising industry spanned decades. During World War II, he worked with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., on advertising war bonds, and later became a prolific author and a professor of advertising.¹⁹⁹ As such, he was highly-regarded by other advertisers, who viewed his writings on subliminal advertising as extremely credible. In a 1984 *Advertising Age* article, Weir wrote that Henry C. Link, the president of the Psychological Corporation, argued against the effectiveness of subliminal advertisement and "challenged Mr. Vicary to repeat the test under agreed upon controls and supervised by a major research company."²⁰⁰ He further described the

¹⁹⁷ Griswold, 96.

¹⁹⁸ "Assignment," TLD, 8 February 1957, series I, box 1, folder 6, James A. [sic] Vicary Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Conn., 1.

¹⁹⁹ Walter Weir, "About the Author" in *How to Create Interest-Evoking, Sales-Inducing, Non-Irritating Advertising* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, Inc., 1993), ix.

²⁰⁰ Weir, "Another look at subliminal 'facts,'" 46.

incident in a series of personal communications with Stuart Rogers and in a book, *How to Create Interest-Evoking, Sales-Inducing, Non-Irritating Advertising* (1993).

Weir added that Link made the challenge as part of the Copy Research Council, founded by himself and Marion Harper, Jr.²⁰¹ The CRC was an “assembly of research directors and top copywriters” that met at the New York City Harvard Club each month.²⁰² Weir told Rogers that Vicary approached him initially to present subliminal advertising, although it is unclear when this would have occurred. “I never knew why he selected me,” Weir wrote.²⁰³ When Weir presented Vicary’s information to the Copy Research Council, which held secret meetings, the organization unanimously voted to require a retest. Vicary had no choice but to assent, as the group contained many members of the advertising industry with whom Vicary would be seeking contracts. According to Weir, sometime in 1957 Henry C. Link supervised the test, which did not increase sales of popcorn or soda. Like the FCC demonstration, it was a failure.

However, there are flaws in Weir’s recollection of events. The most egregious error involves Link’s role in the retest. Dr. Henry C. Link was a Yale-trained psychologist and consultant. According to Link’s obituary, the Psychological Corporation, which he joined in 1931, was a research organization which provided information on public opinion and buying habits to a variety of industries. The obituary also stated that he died on January 10, 1952—over five years before Vicary’s subliminal experiment even occurred.²⁰⁴ Thus, while the Psychological Corporation may have had a role in the duplication challenge, Link clearly did not.

There are other factual errors in Weir’s writings, such as his description of Vicary’s “1956” announcement in his 1993 book, but none were as important to the mythos as the Link

²⁰¹ Walter Weir to Stuart C. Rogers, TLS, 6 January 1993, 1.

²⁰² Walter Weir, “Chapter 39: Subliminal Advertising,” in *How to Create*, 193.

²⁰³ Walter Weir to Stuart C. Rogers, 6 January 1993, 1.

²⁰⁴ “Dr. Henry Link, 62, Psychologist, Dies,” *New York Times*, 10 January 1952, 29.

error.²⁰⁵ Dr. Jack Haberstroh used Weir's recollection as part of the subliminal advertising story in *Ice Cube Sex: The Truth About Subliminal Advertising* (1994), which is generally considered the major authoritative publication on the subject.²⁰⁶ When presented with the Link obituary, Dr. Haberstroh recognized the error.²⁰⁷ However, his work and that of Walter Weir have been widely cited in subsequent articles on subliminal advertising, leading to the persistence of the Link challenge. Weir, a widely-respected member of the advertising industry, appears to be an unfortunate source of inexact memories. His writings leave more questions than they answer.

The fourth and final major controversy of the subliminal advertising "scandal" is the alleged disappearance of James Vicary, reportedly after scamming a number of advertising agencies with overpriced, unfulfilled subliminal advertising contracts. A 1957 *Newsweek* article stated that Vicary had spoken to 250 companies about subliminal advertising contracts.²⁰⁸ Other articles described discussions between the Subliminal Projection Corporation and major theater chains. However, after the failed demonstration before Congress and the FCC in January 1958, Vicary disappeared from the spotlight. The popular wisdom on Madison Avenue was that he left New York, and possibly the country, absconding with millions of dollars in fees for subliminal advertising contracts. According to Stuart Rogers, "It has been estimated that he collected retainer and consulting fees from America's largest advertisers totaling some \$4.5 million" "Then," he added, "some time in June 1958, Mr. Vicary *disappeared* from the New York marketing scene, reportedly leaving no bank accounts, no clothes in his closet, and no hint as to where he might have gone."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Weir, *How to Create*, 191.

²⁰⁶ Jack Haberstroh, *Ice Cube Sex: The Truth About Subliminal Advertising* (Notre Dame: Cross Cultural Publications, Inc., 1994), 9.

²⁰⁷ Jack Haberstroh to author, TLS, 21 February 2004, 1-2.

²⁰⁸ "Devilish?" 99.

²⁰⁹ Rogers, "How a Publicity Blitz," 16.

As with other aspects of the subliminal advertising story, some portions of Rogers' supposition may be accurate while others remain unsubstantiated. Vicary did disappear briefly from New York, but it was only while discussion of subliminal advertisements remained heated. In a December 1957 *Advertising Age* article, Vicary reported that the fallout from his announcement caused him such stress that he left for England on a whim to see his father's birthplace. "I had a wonderful time . . . and when I came back, I found things were still going full blast," he said.²¹⁰ In 1962, Vicary stated that he unlisted his phone number during the most intense period of the controversy because of hostile letters to the editor that left him afraid of an attack.²¹¹ Additionally, Vicary sought a low profile after the subliminal advertising venture fizzled and faced financial difficulties that he attributed to the negative publicity it generated.

Thus, Vicary did not in fact disappear from the advertising scene, nor is it likely that he received millions of dollars in fees. Walter Weir stated that Vicary did not receive any business from major advertising agencies because the research and copy directors who would have hired him were on the Copy Research Council and "knew him to be a phony."²¹² Rogers also communicated with Chester Burger, who served as president of the public relations firm of McCann-Erickson. Burger suggested that Vicary could not have received the fees attributed to him because "such fees were simply impossible to obtain for such consulting services at the time."²¹³ It would appear that Vicary neither signed large subliminal advertising contracts, nor did he disappear from the advertising world.

These four controversies are the most widely debated aspects of Vicary's subliminal advertising story. While Vicary did not disappear from New York with an ill-gotten fortune,

²¹⁰ "Subliminal Projection Sets Test on WTOP; Expects 'Go-Ahead' from FCC," *Advertising Age*, 23 December 1957, 51.

²¹¹ Danzig, 74.

²¹² Walter Weir to Stuart Rogers, TLS, 25 February 1994, 2.

²¹³ Chester Burger to Stuart Rogers, TLS, 3 October 1993, 1.

questions regarding the validity of his experiment, the patent application, and the retest challenge remain. There are many reasons why the interest in subliminal advertising has persisted and has kept the controversies alive. The theory itself was mysterious: it involved sinister manipulations performed by a cadre of advertising insiders intent on swaying the American public to buy a certain item or vote a certain way. Its creator, after a remarkable deluge of publicity, failed to duplicate his test. He then appeared to vanish, except for occasional enigmatic interviews. Furthermore, the concept of subliminal advertising evoked a visceral reaction which divided people into believers terrified of its potential and disbelievers enraged by its popularity. These trends led to a series of controversies which still surround the history of James Vicary's version of subliminal advertising.

Conclusion

In 1957, when Vicary made public the results of his experiment, did he have any sense of the reaction it would cause? It is unlikely that he foresaw both the public outrage and continued fascination that his test generated. However, the reaction it provoked became both a landmark in Vicary's life and a reflection of broader social and political concerns in postwar America.

There are many reasons why Vicary's experiment engendered such widespread wrath. By 1957, economic development in the United States converted the austere citizen consumer into the purchaser consumer, whose ravenous pursuit of material goods propelled the nation's economic strength. In turn, advertisers and marketers undertook the patriotic task of stimulating demand. However, their newfound interest in psychology frightened consumers, who grew suspicious of the myriad ways in which advertisers stimulated want. At the same time, the concept of the Authoritarian Personality led Americans to fear the exploitation of other-directed individuals by powerful leaders. In 1957, *The Hidden Persuaders* united a critique of advertising

manipulation with the idea of the Authoritarian Personality to describe how both consumption and the political process itself could be manipulated.

Then, with the advent of subliminal advertising, critics of motivational research found a new outlet for their concerns. By January 1958, the widespread outrage evident among editorialists, citizens, and advertisers led to governmental scrutiny; as doubts surrounded the validity of Vicary's experiment, the popular interest in the technique died down. Vicary disappeared from the public eye, as did subliminal advertising. However, in the 1970s, Wilson Bryan Key's accusations of advertising industry manipulation recalled Vance Packard's earlier critique, and the vehement response of the advertising industry placed Vicary back in the spotlight. The resulting proliferation of publications related to subliminal advertising, many written by advertisers who personally recalled Vicary's experiment, helped to generate numerous controversies over such issues as Vicary's alleged retainer fees and the validity of his patent application. As a result, the concept of subliminal advertising remains even today shrouded in mystery and historical inaccuracies. Yet despite its subsequent infamy, Vicary's experiment remains an important reflection of postwar attitudes and ideas.

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