

Subliminal messages essay



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Have you ever seen or heard a commercial and then suddenly had an urge for something? Your urge may have been the result of subliminal messaging. “ Subliminal messaging” can be defined as a technique of projecting information below an individual’s threshold of sensation or awareness (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin on Subliminals” 1). These messages were everywhere from radio broadcasts to Disney movies to commercials. “ In 1958, a survey taken by Ralph Hauber showed that out of 42 people interviewed: 50 percent thought of subliminal messages to be unethical and 50 percent thought of them as unethical” (The Subliminal Scares: “ Hidden Persuasion” 4). I feel that these messages are extremely unethical and the messages are taking away people’s privacy.

The man responsible for inventing subliminals is James Vicary. This man used social science and psychology to develop a new method to promote sales. It took a lot of in depth research and patience to develop a new way of advertising, but Vicary developed a method no one will ever forget (The Subliminal Scares: “ Hidden Persuasion” 1-2).

In 1957, Vicary announced that he had designed a subliminal projection machine, which was capable of flashing unnoticeable messages during big-screen movies (The Subliminal Scares: “ Hidden Persuasion 2”). When people were introduced to these unnoticeable messages they all basically asked the same question: “ What’s the point? Why advertise something when you can’t see what it is?” The point is very simple. Let’s say that the subliminal message, “ Eat nachos”, is flashed during a movie you are watching. You may not have wanted nachos before, but now you have a sudden craving for them. Since it was a “ subliminal message” you were not able to see it.

However, you subconsciously read the message. This method may be useful to advertisers, but it is harmful to the viewers of the ad.

The very first experiment using subliminals took place in Fort Lee, New Jersey in 1956. It took place in a movie theater during the movie “ Picnic.” ” The words ‘ Drink Coca-Cola’ and ‘ Hungry? Buy popcorn’ were flashed periodically using Vicary’s machine. As a result, there was an increase of 18 percent in the sales of Coca-Cola and a 58 percent increase in popcorn” (The Subliminal Scares: “ Hidden Persuasion” 3). The results of this experiment baffled millions of people, but this technique, they thought was assaulting people’s minds. As you can see, right from the start, this method was controversial.

After the Fort Lee experiment, many other people wanted to try this subliminal advertising. In 1958, many radio stations began experimenting with it. One particular radio station, WAAF Chicago, tried to use a subliminal during a song. The disc jockeys pre-recorded barely audible phrases designated as ‘ Phantom spots.’ These phrases were faded under musical recordings or dropped into pauses in the DJs’ dialogue in quick low voices (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin” 4). This experiment failed because listeners heard the phrases.

The experiments didn’t stop at movie theaters and radio stations. Television programs also ran a series of subliminal experiments. A television station, BBC-TV in England, was the first to use a subliminal message during a regular broadcast. After the program was over, viewers were asked to report whether they noticed anything unusual. Of the relatively few who responded,

only a small percentage correctly identified the message (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin” 3).

As people were seeing more and more tests being done, they became more and more concerned. Most people had the same opinion: “ it was a sneaky advertising device used to influence audiences to react, in a manner contrary to their normal likes and dislikes, to information that they could not ‘ see’ or ‘ hear’” (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin” 1).

United States Representative William L Dawson made an attempt to persuade the FCC to request that all radio and television stations to stop using subliminals. However, the FCC didn’t see it necessary to forbid them. In fact, the FCC referred to Section 326 of the Communications Act. The section states, “ The FCC is prohibited from censoring broadcast material, including advertising” (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin” 4).

After much concern and many attempts, some progress was eventually made. At a convention of the National Association of Broadcasters in 1958, the broadcasters had made some changes to the NAB Broadcasting Code. The new and improved code states:” Any technique whereby an attempt is made to convey information to the listener by transmitted messages below the threshold of normal awareness is not prohibited” (The Subliminal Scares: “ FCC Information Bulletin” 7).

Although this was passed, some people were still not satisfied.

Representatives Wright and Hosmer took an extra step to outlaw the use of subliminal messages. On March 12, 1958, they proposed Bills HR. 10820 and 11363. These bills would make the use of subliminal messaging illegal.

Although the bills were taken to the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, no hearings were held. These bills were not even taken into consideration by the people needed to stop the subliminal messaging. Right now the only restriction on using subliminals is the amended NAB Broadcasting Code. (The Subliminal Scares: " FCC Information Bulletin on Subliminals" 7)

Passing the NAB Broadcasting Code most likely made and continues to make people feel better about advertising. They can put aside the fear of being manipulated into buying things. How does advertising businesses feel about the restriction? They feel that they do not need subliminals to be successful. Of course it would help, but overall they are not worried. subliminal scare finally died down as we entered the 1980s. In the 1990s, a new controversy arose: it was said that our children were being exposed to sexual subliminal messages. Some of the most well known Disney movies have been accused of incorporating sexual gestures into the popular cartoon movies. A conservative Christian group by the name of the American Life League (ALL) studied the alleged sexual subliminals. (The Subliminal Scares: " Subliminal Survives" 2). Disney movie amongst the controversy was The Little Mermaid. On the cover of the videotape box, there appears to be a picture of a penis on the sea castle. Although most children would probably not notice, ALL was outraged. In one scene on the Little Mermaid, Ariel and the Prince get married. ALL noticed a suspected bulge on the priest that was said to be an erection. Another Disney movie that ALL was disgusted with was The Lion King. When a character plops onto the ground, a cloud of dust rises into the air and they say dust spells out the word S-E-X. Even though the scene is

only about two seconds long, the words are very noticeable. In Aladdin, another Disney movie, a character was meant to say, “ Scat good tiger, take off and go”. Instead, ALL heard, “ Good teenagers, take of your clothes” (Subliminal Survives 2). ALL insists that these types of messages are corruptive to children, however there has not been any legal action taken against the animators of the Walt Disney Company, but many parents are disturbed by ALL’s allegations. (The Subliminal Scares: “ Subliminal Survives” 2).

Since then there have not been any reports of subliminals being used. But now the question is: Have advertisers taken up another form of subliminal advertising? Is there some sort of influential ads being displayed on the Internet? The new advertising technique called profiling strongly resembles subliminal advertising. By using this method, advertisers can watch what you do on the Internet. Then they try to promote things that resemble what you like on each website you visit. This invaded people’s privacy just like Vicary’s subliminals in 1956. They were unethical before and profiling is following in its footsteps. (Academic Universe: “ Profiling” 1-3).

Vicary’s controversial method of subliminal messaging has made people aware that they can be influenced by anyone at any time. Even our children were in danger of being influenced by these messages. At least there were some measures taken, in order to protect us from being manipulated by these messages. I don’t feel that there was enough emphasis on the method. I believe that if things were taken care of in 1958, we wouldn’t be facing the profiling problem today. Whether it is embedded messages in commercials and television shows or Internet profiling, advertisers should not manipulate

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people. It is important that people recognize the techniques that people may be using to make us think a certain way. Subliminal messages are unethical and they are unnecessary.

Bibliography:

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