

Sound-Bite Sabotage

Illustrative Stories and Techniques

Built on a foundation of urban legend mixed with the occasional true story, supported by selective references to academic studies, and repeated so often even the mythmakers forget the exaggeration, half truth, and outright misinformation employed in the service of their greater good, the medical malpractice myth has filled doctors, patients, legislators, and voters with the kind of fear that short circuits critical thinking.

—Thomas Baker, *The Medical Malpractice Myth*

“Blowback”. . . It’s a CIA term. Blowback does not mean simply the unintended consequences of foreign operations. It means the unintended consequences of foreign operations that are deliberately kept secret from the American public. So that when the retaliation comes, the American public is not able to put it in context, to put cause and effect together, then they come up with questions like “why do they hate us?”

—Chalmers Johnson, former CIA agent, in *Why We Fight*

I. Introduction

This book is about sound-bite sabotage—the saturation of our communication channels with interested messages disguised to appear as disinterested public information—and these phenomena are growing,

and of growing concern. In 2004, during an intensely fought presidential election, Dan Rather claimed on *60 Minutes II* that he had new evidence to prove that President Bush had not completed his Texas Air National Guard duties and had lied about it. An investigation resulted in the firing of four senior executives. The Republican and Democratic Party spin on the president's new prescription drug plan only adds to citizen confusion about how to fix our health care crisis. Interest groups on all sides of the aisle saturate communication channels with interested messages designed to sell branded information about policy alternatives, candidate positions, and war and peace. Fake news emerges as a major growth industry, colonizing our living rooms and schools, town hall meetings, and water cooler conversations with reconstructed conventional wisdom that is often contrary to the best available data, and yet widely accepted as simply common sense. Taken together, this amounts to a phenomena we call sound-bite sabotage, and it is poisoning democracy in America. We start our analysis with the following recent examples:

Rather's scoop began to unravel almost instantly, thanks to intrepid bloggers. CBS posted the documents on its website the night of the *60 Minutes II* broadcast. "Buckhead," a conservative lawyer writing in the conservative FreeRepublic.com site, called the memos forgeries a few hours later. . . . CBS dug in, calling the bloggers "partisan political" operatives. . . . Talk radio started to cover Rathergate "like a blanket," says veteran radio host Mike Siegel. Fox News did, too. At last, the pressure grew so great that mainstream outlets ABC News and the *Washington Post* began to report the story. *The New York Times* held out a bit longer—it so wanted to believe that the story would hurt Bush that it actually ran a headline proclaiming the memos "Fake but Accurate". . . . What emerged under this new-media and old-media spotlight wasn't pretty. CBS, it turned out, had received the memos from notorious Texan Bush-hater Bill Burkett. The network's own document experts refused to authenticate the memos. (Anderson 2005, x-xiii).

Democrats are overselling their Medicare prescription drug bill. They claim it will bring about big price cuts for medication while Medicare experts say it won't. Republicans have been equally misleading, describing the bill as a system of severe price controls, which it isn't.

The fact is that the bill would do little more than require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to talk to drug companies about granting discounts. It specifically denies him the bargaining leverage of paying only for some drugs and not others. (Factcheck.org, January 17, 2007)

MoveOn.org Political Action began airing ads attacking four Republican senators in their home states, accusing them of favoring escalation of the war in Iraq and saying all are “willing to send tens of thousands more troops to face danger in Iraq.” The ads clearly misrepresent the stands of three of the targeted senators, who in fact had publicly expressed strong disapproval of sending additional U.S. troops. (Factcheck.org, February 9, 2007)

The mid-term elections of 2006 brought an unprecedented barrage of advertising containing much that is false or misleading. We found examples of disregard for facts and honesty—on both sides—that would get a reporter fired in a heartbeat from any decent news organization. Candidates, parties and independent groups have faked quotes, twisted words, misrepresented votes and positions, and engaged in rank fear-mongering and outright fabrication. In addition to a general disregard for factual accuracy, we also found systematic attempts to mislead voters about some of the most important issues of the day. [What follows are only two examples from a much longer account.] A Democratic-leaning group ran false ads accusing a few Republican senators of voting to deny modern body armor for troops in Iraq. In fact, the amendment cited by the ad didn’t mention body armor, and passing it wouldn’t have allowed the Pentagon to acquire a single additional armored vest: It already was buying as many as the economy could produce. A Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee ad repeated this false claim even after we de-bunked it. Republicans repeatedly mischaracterized the Democratic position on President Bush’s National Security Agency eavesdropping program, which is being conducted without court warrants or review. An ad by the pro-Bush group Progress for America falsely gave those wiretaps credit for the thwarting of a hijack plot that was actually uncovered by Scotland Yard following up an informant’s tip. (Factcheck.org).¹

In seeking to defeat the nomination of John Ashcroft as attorney general, liberals tried to do more than make Ashcroft out to be a racist. Without argument, they sought to relocate the “mainstream” leftward, in order to make any conservative seem well out of it, an extremist. Even ostensible moderate Joe Lieberman exploited this tactic: “On issues ranging from civil rights to privacy rights,” Lieberman intoned in voting against his former Senate colleague, “Senator Ashcroft has repeatedly taken positions considerably outside the mainstream of American thinking.” But consider Lieberman’s two stated examples: civil rights (read: racial preferences) and privacy rights (read: abortion). Columnist Charles Krauthammer correctly responds, “In a country so divided on these issues, can one seriously argue that opposing abortion and racial preferences is proof of extremism?” (Anderson 2005, 28–29)

In 2007 four Republican lawmakers visited Iraq and reported that the situation was improving. One of the four, Senator John McCain, took the opportunity to repeat the Bush Administration’s sound bite about the media failing to report the good news in Iraq, as he noted how safe he was simply strolling through a Bagdad market. Representative Mike Pence (R-Indiana) added that “thousands and thousands of Iraqis were moving about in regular everyday life, like a normal outdoor market in Indiana in the summertime.” But his observations were challenged in the Associated Press by a textile merchant with a shop in that market who said that the politicians “sealed off the area, put themselves in flak jackets and walked in the middle of tens of American soldiers. The market has been the target of car bombs in the past and yesterday it was the scene of sniper fire.” (AP, morning edition, April 3, 2007)

II. Sound-Bite Sabotage Defined

Sound-bite saboteurs on all sides of the aisle try to move the opinion of publics toward positions that are contrary to the best available data. Rather than communicating with publics to enable more informed decision making, sound-bite sabotage occurs when public and private leaders use the tools of public relations to discredit the importance of

using data, engaging in scholarly inquiry, and supporting democratic deliberation.

Seeing (hearing, reading, experiencing) sound-bite sabotage draws our attention to the commodification of political discourse rather than to the political spectacles constructed, to distract citizens from the communicative strategies mobilized by public and private elites. These strategies, like sound-bite sabotage, increase citizen confusion, encourage more passive forms of citizenship, and make citizens more vulnerable to distorted information and elites more dependent on fear mongering and spin in their efforts to manage blowback. Our analysis focuses directly on the instrumental and institutional biases that distort our information systems in ways that privilege certain ways of framing news and policy debates and water cooler conversations over others.

The organizational biases of interest group activities, news media work routines, the pressure from public relations experts to govern in order to win elections (instead of winning elections in order to govern), concentration of media ownership, deliberate efforts to weaken Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversight of political communication, and other institutional factors converge to promote the privatization of political discourse by enabling sound-bite saboteurs to more effectively saturate old and new communication channels with interested messages, what we call branded information. Before we proceed with our identification of the techniques used by sound-bite saboteurs, we offer two more detailed illustrations of sound-bite sabotage. The first is based on work done by Jeffrey Smith on the political struggles over genetically modified foods, and the second is based on Eric Schlosser's detailed analysis of the real costs of living in a fast food nation.

Planting Seeds of Deception?

Information about nutrition that we often take as common sense or basic science—information that impacts how we feed ourselves and our children—is increasingly branded information.² The widespread production and consumption of genetically modified (GM) foods today is a potentially very serious risk to public health, because the science, largely controlled by private corporations, has yet to demonstrate that genetically modified food is safe to produce or consume. In fact, there has yet to be a serious effort to test, measure, and publish studies needed to even begin responding to myriad concerns about cancers, damage to DNA, allergies, the propagation of new viruses, increased

antibiotic resistance, and threats to sustainable agriculture. Instead of spending on published research and support for Food and Drug Administration (FDA) testing, GM manufacturers have invested in public relations efforts to persuade us that their secret processes are highly precise (when the evidence suggests they are not) and so safe that testing and labeling—widespread outside of the United States—are unnecessary. Barry Commoner, senior scientist for the Center for Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College, said,

None of [the] essential tests are being performed, and billions of transgenic plants are now being grown with only the most rudimentary knowledge about [their changes]. . . . Without detailed, ongoing analyses, there is no way of knowing if hazardous consequences might arise. . . . The genetically engineered crops now being grown represent a massive uncontrolled experiment whose outcome is inherently unpredictable. The results could be catastrophic. (qtd. in Smith 2003, 75)

In 1986, Monsanto came to the White House in search of *more* government regulation. They were investing billions in new technologies to genetically modify food, and they were afraid that consumers would reject GM foods as unsafe, because consumers might recall earlier Monsanto falsehoods about the safety of Agent Orange and PCBs, both now linked to cancer, birth defects, and environmental degradation. In addition to Monsanto's massive public relations efforts, aimed at making public opinion an instrument of business power, "they also needed federal regulations." As Smith argues,

With that in place, it would be the government, not Monsanto, who would be assuring the public that GM products were safe. . . . Washington insiders watched with astonishment as the company dictated policy to the Agriculture Department (USDA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and ultimately the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). According to Henry Miller, who was in charge of biotechnology issues at the FDA from 1979–1994, "the U.S. government agencies have done exactly what big agribusiness has asked them to do and told them to do." (2003, 29)

Smith reports that public criticism of lax FDA regulation led the Clinton administration to propose changes that Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) described as "meaningless changes" designed to

“deflect legitimate concerns” (2003, 146). And even these meaningless changes were never implemented by the Clinton administration. With the United States standing virtually alone, President Clinton chose to distract our attention from public safety issues as he pressured British Prime Minister Tony Blair to increase United Kingdom (UK) support for GM foods and U.S. leadership in the biotechnology sector. This public-sector spin was coordinated with private-sector public relations efforts. “Many of the world’s media, particularly in the United States, have been the target of an intensive pro-biotech campaign by the industry” (2003, 183). It was so intensive that two reporters for a Florida Fox television station who researched a story that challenged Monsanto safety claims discovered that the Monsanto spokesperson routinely used phrases calculated to divert attention and to misinform, and Fox News would not support the reporters’ investigative work. After Monsanto, a major advertiser on Fox, raised concerns, the station manager was fired. Fox offered to buy out the contracts of the two reporters, and when they refused, Fox attorneys insisted on eighty-three rewrites over the next six months.

Among the numerous changes, Akre and Wilson were instructed to never reveal that the FDA’s approval of rbGH was based on “short-term” testing. They were allowed to include an interview with Samuel Epstein, M.D., who stated, there “are lines of evidence showing that consumption of this milk poses risks of breast and colon cancer.” The reporters were instructed, however, “not to include information that details the basis for this frightening claim.” They had to remove all mention of IGF-1 [Monsanto’s own studies showed an increase in IGF-1 in milk from treated cows, and other studies suggest that undigested IGF-1 is a serious problem] and any relevant studies and were not to use the word cancer again in any segments—referring only to “human health implications.” The reporters also had to downplay Epstein’s credentials.

According to a website that documents the rewrites [see <http://www.foxbghsuit.com>] and the dispute, despite Epstein’s “three medical degrees, a professorship of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the University of Illinois School of Public Health, his frequent Congressional testimony as an expert on public health and environmental causes of cancer, his authorship of seven books. . . . Original references to him as a ‘reputable scientist’ . . . later changed

to 'respected scientist' . . . and then 'well-credentialed M.D.' which was okay in Versions 10–18 until, ultimately, reporters were told no such reference was acceptable." The final reference was simply "Scientist, University of Illinois." Similarly, the credentials of a second scientist, William von Meyer, were stripped. (Smith 2003, 191)

In this case the revisions moved from: "Dr. von Meyer has spent thirty years studying chemical products and testing their effects on humans. He's supervised many such tests on thousands of animals at schools such as the University of London and UCLA. He's headed agricultural, chemical and genetic research at some of America's most prestigious companies" to: "scientist in Wisconsin" (Smith 2003, 191). Smith continues:

Despite the intense scrutiny of every claim that opposed rbGH, Akre and Wilson "were repeatedly instructed to include unverified and even some outright false statements by Monsanto's research director." These included:

- Dr. von Meyer "has no credentials in human safety evaluation."
- "The cancer experts don't see the health issue."
- "There are no human or animal safety issues that would prevent approval."

Monsanto's director also repeated a popular Monsanto claim that "Posilac [rbGH] is the single most-tested product in history." According to the reporters, however, "experts in the field of domestic animal science say that this claim is demonstrably false." (Smith 2003, 191–92)

When Fox insisted on even more falsehoods and the reporters refused, they were fired. Then they sued Fox. While the reporters won numerous prestigious awards for courage in journalism, and the initial jury ruled in their favor, an appeals court threw it out and compelled them to pay the legal fees Fox News had incurred, a team that included President Clinton's former personal attorney, fees amounting to millions of dollars (Smith 2003, 193).

What Are the Real Costs of Fast Food?

Anyone who has read the magnificent investigative analysis done by Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation* knows that he debunks several

interrelated myths that both prop up the fast food industry and harm Americans. One myth is that the West was won simply by rugged individualists entirely disdainful of big government. Schlosser writes:

The political philosophy that now prevails in so much of the West—with its demand for lower taxes, smaller government, an unbridled free market—stands in total contradiction to the region’s true economic underpinnings. No other region of the United States has been so dependent on government subsidies for so long, from the nineteenth-century construction of railroads to the twentieth-century financing of its military bases and dams. One historian has described the federal government’s 1950’s highway-building binge as a case study in “interstate socialism”—a phrase that aptly describes how the West was really won. The fast food industry took root alongside that interstate highway system. . . . [And] the fast food industry has worked closely with its allies in Congress and the White House to oppose new worker safety, food safety, and minimum wage laws. While publicly espousing support for the free market, the fast food chains have quietly pursued and greatly benefited from a wide variety of government subsidies. Far from being inevitable, America’s fast food industry in its present form is the logical outcome of certain political and economic choices. (Schlosser 2002, 7–8)

When we are misinformed about how the West was won, our energies in defense of what actually does make America strong are dissipated into trivial and counterproductive sound-bite battles. We battle over insulating corporations from public oversight instead of a reasoned debate about which of the various ways that the government might regulate the economy are the most likely to continue and enhance our long tradition of balancing support for private property rights, and for protecting public health, public education, small farmers, and small businessmen.

When we are misinformed about how the West was won, this intentionally distorted context provides no way for us to understand why groups such as the IFA (International Franchise Association) hire insider lobbyists to stop government regulation that would have protected small business owners and to pressure public officials to ensure passage of government regulations providing loans to corporate headquarters that were originally designated for small businesses.

In this case, by defining franchises as small businesses only for the purposes of securing these loans, additional pressure was applied to be sure that franchise managers would not be defined as small business owners for the purposes of securing protection from corporate policies that would be illegal if applied to small businesses (Schlosser 2002, 101).

When we are misinformed about how the West was won, we are less vigilant about preventing government regulation that amounts to corporate welfare and encouraging government regulation that helps ease the transition from sunset to sunrise industries. We are also less vigilant about punishing corporate misconduct that does more harm to Americans each year than the total number of homicides nationwide, particularly misconduct like that of Enron or LTV Steel that undermines resilient communities, weakens family values, squanders the retirement savings of others, and disrupts the ability of the free market to generate general prosperity. While public and private leaders are always ready to focus citizen attention to support Wars on Crime, they are conspicuously silent on the even greater need for a War on the Unsafe Workplace.

American deaths from work-related injuries per day: 16
American deaths from work-related disease per day: 137
Total work-related deaths per day: 153
Total American work-related deaths per year: 55,845
(Source: <http://www.ucop.edu/cprc/occuhealth.pdf>)

When we are misinformed about how the West was won, we are more likely to dismiss policy positions that involve government action or tax increases, even though we know from history that it was taxpayer dollars—government subsidies—that paid for the railroads and moon launches . . . and the highways that allowed Iowa Beef Packers (IBP) to “put its new slaughterhouses in rural areas close to the feedlots and far away from the urban strongholds of the nation’s labor unions” (Schlosser 2002, 154). And these new slaughterhouses paid wages that were more than 50 percent lower than what the existing, community-centered, union, and pro-family values locations in Chicago were paying. The enormous corporate profits that resulted were not, then, a result of rugged individualists shunning government but, rather, taxpayer supported and individualistic corporate leaders *seeking* government intervention and support to undermine the financial stability of ordinary working class families and their communities. Instead of a reasonable debate about how to best raise

funds to accomplish shared objectives, we are misinformed into dismissing any mention of taxation as if taxes were a threat to democratic prosperity rather than an investment in American power and wealth and progress, as a sober analysis of our history demonstrates. When we allow ourselves to believe that it was a market free from government regulation that made us the most prosperous nation on earth, we accept a phony and an inaccurate portrayal of the context within which we debate tax and spend questions today. And, importantly, we cripple our efforts to achieve our shared objective for an equally prosperous future.

When we are misinformed about how the West was won, the displacement of sober analysis by branded information creates an informational context within which we cannot fully understand the self-interested hypocrisy advertised when Walt Disney and Ray Kroc tell us American prosperity depends on a market freed from government regulation even as they pressure public officials for government regulation favorable to their private interests. While both men were self-made and innovative, particularly in developing powerful ways to market to children, their own behavior contradicts their rhetorical love affair with bashing government involvement in the economy. They contributed to candidates and pressured officials to regularly secure enormous government support and favors. "Despite a passionate opposition to socialism and to any government meddling with free enterprise, Walt Disney relied on federal funds in the 1940s to keep his business afloat." Disney and Kroc used their influence to secure special legislation giving them approval to pay below the minimum wage, to raise prices during a national price freeze, and to market to young children on television (Schlosser 2002, 31–46). And despite all the bluster about individual liberty and freedom from large bureaucratic organizations, both men treated customers and employees as enemies, because customer and employee individuality threatened the uniformity required to drive these organizations' business model and to recreate America as a fast food nation. Schlosser writes:

Franchises and chain stores strive to offer exactly the same product or service at numerous locations. Customers are drawn to familiar brands by an instinct to avoid the unknown. A brand offers a feeling of reassurance when its products are always and everywhere the same. "We have found out . . . that we cannot trust some people who are nonconformists," declared Ray Kroc, one of the founders of McDonalds, angered by some of his franchisees. "We will

make conformists out of them in a hurry. . . . The organization cannot trust the individual; the individual must trust the organization." (2002, 5)

Only when we are misinformed about something as fundamental as the observed relationship between public and private sectors does it then make sense to see our choices as either (1) interest group activity is corrupt or (2) interest group activity is democracy in action. This is a false choice, and *Fast Food Nation* demonstrates that fact. Interest group activity (party activity, media activity, institutional activity, social movement activity) is complex, sometimes corrupt, and other times democratizing, but when we approach analysis wielding a branded and mythical view of the relationship between market and government, we are not equipped to reject this false choice and replace it with the analysis needed to address the actual conflicts we face.

Interest group politics is neither corrupt nor democracy in action; it does, however, have a major influence on policy making. It *can* be democracy in action, it *can* be conducted in more or less corrupt ways, and the level of corruption rises and falls over time, as a function of many factors (including the rise or decline in effective government oversight). We need to see these complex and contingent dynamics clearly to understand politics, and the impact of sound-bite sabotage on public discourse and civic education. When interest groups work well, they provide powerfully important and timely information to policy makers, and regulations reflect the best available data, emerging from a process where all of the key stakeholders have provided meaningful input and contributed to an open and a deliberative process that even those on different sides of the aisle can support as legitimate. When interest group activity corrupts decision making and distorts information, political scientists call it "capture." Capture suggests that the executive and congressional branch agencies set up to oversee the free market actors in any relevant industry have been transformed. Instead of providing public-sector oversight, they become passive enablers or industry cheerleaders, dependent on industry funds and information to win elections and justify policy decisions. We can see this dynamic in *Fast Food Nation*, tort reform advocacy, medical malpractice legislation, campaign finance reform, FDA regulatory efforts, and other areas we will discuss throughout this book.

In Scholsser's words, this view of politics sees outcomes as "far from inevitable. America's fast food industry in its present form is the logical outcome of certain political and economic choices," (2002, 8), and it is our job as citizens to understand that, and to reward those

choices we approve of and punish those we disapprove of when we vote, when we choose a career, and in what we choose to consume. And with this in mind, we are now able to see, and debate, the real costs of living in a fast food culture. Costs—hidden by sound-bite sabotage—that would at least include declining public health, rising obesity costing nearly \$100 billion a year (with half of this sum paid with public tax dollars), cancers, heart disease, strokes, a declining quality of life, shrinking family farms, and disappearing living-wage manufacturing jobs being replaced by service-sector jobs, real wages that peaked in 1973, more two-income families, fewer families eating together at the dining room table, 30,000 commercials a year to overwhelm 365 dinner times a year as a branded public pedagogy suffocating parental efforts to teach our children, more children who recognize the golden arches than the Christian cross, landscapes redrawn with identical, corporate-owned franchises replacing locally owned, neighborhood mom-and-pop stores, corporate-sponsored playgrounds and children's clubs designed as viral marketing tools, and conformist managers who sign away their legal rights as a new ideal for citizenship (Schlosser 2002, 3–10, 42–47).

A more sober view of how particular forms of public-sector and private-sector partnerships have, historically, accounted for American prosperity and freedom (as well as inequality) would begin with an analysis of “the centrality of government in wealth creation from ancient times . . . as well as at its continuing great importance” (xix), as done by Republican Party strategist Kevin Phillips in his detailed political history of the American rich, *Wealth and Democracy*.³ Phillips identifies right utopianism as the Republican malady that parallels the more commonly criticized left utopianism of Democrats. He writes:

Whereas liberal eras often fail through utopias of social justice, brotherhood, and peace, the repetitious abuses by conservatives in the United States in turn involve worship of markets (the utopianism of the Right), elevation of self-interest rather than community, and belief in Darwinian precepts such as survival of the fittest. (2002, xxi)

And Phillips concludes that right utopian thinking results in an empirically unfounded faith in sound-bite bugaboos such as big government, or platitudes such as an unconstrained free market, mobilized to obscure the fact that wealth creation and prosperity in America have always been intimately linked to strong and widespread government action in and in support of private-sector actors. His analysis of

our own history reveals both a very different formula for American prosperity and ongoing efforts to miseducate citizens with branded information peddling an ahistorical and un-American perspective on democratic capitalism.

Laissez-faire is a pretense. Government power and preferment have been used by the rich, not shunned. As wealth concentration grows, especially near the crest of a drawn-out boom, so has upper-bracket control of politics and its ability to shape its own preferment. The public has reason to be aroused, because the cost to ordinary Americans has been substantial—in reduced median family income, in stagnant wages, in a diminished sense of community and commonweal, in fewer private and governmental services, and sometimes in poorer physical and mental health amid money-culture values, work hours, and competitive consumption. (Phillips 2002, xiv, emphasis added)

As Phillips points out, the proportion of total U.S. income going to the top 1 percent of our population has steadily increased over the past twenty years. In 1981, it was 9.3 percent. In 1997, it had risen to 15.8 percent, bringing it back up to 1929 levels. When we examine family wealth rather than income, the data is even more telling. The top 1 percent of American families controlled 19.9 percent of total family wealth in 1976, but that has risen steadily since that time to again reach a level not seen since 1929—in 1997, the top 1 percent of American families controlled 40.1 percent of total family wealth. The land of the free and home of the brave now stands, according to World Bank data, as a nation with more extreme economic inequality than that found in any of our closest allies, a gap that has grown through Republican and Democratic presidencies. From 1977 to 1994, according to the Congressional Budget Office, the changes in income by quintile are as follows:

Percent Change in After-Tax Income, 1977–1994

Poorest quintile of Americans: -16%

Lower-middle-class quintile: -8%

Middle-class quintile: -1%

Upper-middle-class quintile: +4%

Wealthiest 1 percent of Americans: +72%

(Source: Phillips 2002, 121–37)

But U.S. income inequality is not only extreme relative to our allies, but it is extreme relative to our own history. When compared to the income distribution that prevailed in the four decades following World War II, we get a more accurate sense of what nostalgia for the fifties ought to really mean. In 1950, corporations paid 26.5 percent of total taxes collected, and payroll taxes were only 6.9 percent of the total. In 2000, corporations paid 10.2 percent (*before* the Bush administration's enormous tax cuts for the wealthiest individuals and corporations), and payroll taxes made up 31.1 percent of total taxes collected (Phillips 2002, 149). In this context, it is not difficult to imagine a political utility in sound-bite sabotage at the policy level and at the meta-conflict level of seeding public opinion with interested and favorable perspectives on democratic governance that serve to distract our attention from fears that point to the powerful, with fears that target tree-hugging liberals, teachers' unions, frivolous litigation, stranger predators, and political correctness.

Understanding how sound-bite sabotage works focuses our attention on the instrumental and institutional factors contributing to the commodification of political discourse by public-sector and private-sector leaders willing and able to saturate our communication channels with interested messages—about a variety of topics, from political opponents, to genetically modified foods, the free market, or the nature of democratic deliberation—messages we call branded information. The privatization of the ways we talk about politics matters in at least two important ways. First, as private-sector communication techniques, developed to sell Coke in the private sector, gradually come to dominate institutional dynamics central to our political communication, we observe a learning process that is antithetical to democratic deliberations. While it may be true that our choice of Coke over Pepsi is benign, a matter of personal preferences, when this logic, this perspective on communication, this cavalier attitude toward the power of advertising on our decision making is transferred to political problem solving, we begin to treat political decisions like consumer choices. We unlearn the skills of democratic citizenship and teach ourselves that invading Iraq or not, fighting global warming or not, providing affordable health care or not are similarly just matters of personal preference.⁴ Everything is just opinion, so why not stick with our own, familiar, and comfortable views, insulated from bothersome data, expertise, analysis, or deliberation? Only in this context can the culture wars' suggestion that disagreements or conflicts of interest are best understood as lifestyle differences even remotely begin to make sense, much less be taken as common sense.⁵

Here and in the next section of this chapter, we will begin our examination of the phenomena illustrated in the aforementioned narratives that we call sound-bite sabotage. Throughout the book we will use a variety of sources to support our claim that there is now a deliberate effort, or what we call a calculated and an interested effort, to privatize political communication in America. We use the term *interested* to try to denote soft intentionality, for two reasons. First, it is not that controversial to contend that people tend to act in their own self-interest, nor to argue that those with superior resources have identifiable advantages in this process. Second, our objective is to link these observations about individual agency and the unequal distribution of power to the ways that organizational and institutional structures (treating culture, along with politics and economics, as a structure for analysis) amplify the advantages and agency of public and private leaders willing to distort our information systems to advance their private interests. Some of this distortion is clearly deliberate, while some is made possible by existing organizational frameworks and communicative dynamics that privilege consumerist narratives even in political, cultural, and economic arenas.

We use the word “interested” for its ordinary meaning (to be interested in this or that) and because it captures a deeper, analytical point as well: sound-bite saboteurs peddle interested messages, *designed* to exploit (and recreate) relatively independent, institutional conditions that contribute in powerful ways to the ability of some and not other agents to control their image and message—and set the agenda for deliberation—in the news. Once we mention the news, many readers are likely to imagine we are taking a position on the question of media bias. We are, and we are not, so a word of explanation is in order.

The media bias question, when framed as a liberal or conservative bias, is an analytical black hole, a perennial question better designed to keep philosophers employed than to guide productive thinking toward addressing real problems. Our strategy has been to avoid mention of “media bias” for two reasons. First, research shows that different audiences (readers, listeners, viewers) experience the same news sources as containing a liberal or conservative bias, providing powerful evidence that media bias is often in the eyes of the beholder. Second, we instead choose to use “interested” or “distorted” because our argument hopes to move beyond what we see as a tired and circular framework, instead focusing beyond just the media and arguing that sound-bite sabotage distorts our information system from a variety of directions, not just through the news media, and it is driven by the interested actions of both public and private leaders.

Therefore, while we do not directly address the liberal bias question, were we to address it, we would suggest that we are in a period of potentially significant transition from news dominated by an *official bias* (where the more objective journalists become, the more official bias they inject into the news)⁶ to an information system where more explicitly partisan and commercially biased information, what we call branded information, begins to dominate news, entertainment, classroom materials, and advertising—to sell Coke, candidates, laissez-faire, or a conceptualization of limited government where public power is limited to national defense and punishing street crime. Finally, while the current period analyzed here has been dominated by conservative leadership, resulting in more illustrations of conservative sound-bite sabotage, our analytical framework is not primarily aimed at the Right, but at the powerful, and, more specifically in the next section, at the techniques they use their resource advantages to employ.

III. Sound-Bite Sabotage Techniques

First, sound-bite saboteurs try to move the opinion of publics toward positions that are contrary to the best available data. The interested messages of insurance industry lobbyists, tort reform advocates, and the genetically modified foods industry described earlier, while inconsistent with the best available data, have succeeded in colonizing conventional wisdom today. Like these, the “Southern Strategy” displaced concerns about demonstrated racial discrimination with law and order rhetoric to amplify moderate racist attitudes and awaken latent racist attitudes in voters driven to reframe black victims as a threat to white power.⁷ Similarly, the Democratic Party has insisted that there is no Social Security crisis in response to President Bush’s partial privatization plan, even though Democrats were themselves arguing the system was in crisis while they controlled the White House.⁸

Our interest is in understanding this approach to political and civic communication, an approach we call sound-bite sabotage. We will examine in detail throughout this book the techniques and tactics mobilized by sound-bite saboteurs, including saturating communication channels by repeating calculated messages through multiple sources to create an appearance of independent confirmation, consciously constructing prepackaged stories, amplified through old and new media, to be accepted by reporters as newsworthy (and as designed to be newsworthy), broadening the scope of the misinformation efforts, and more rapidly encouraging passive and

more cynical forms of citizenship, both in our classrooms and in the larger public square.⁹

Sound-bite saboteurs construct language and issue frames to divert public attention without increasing public awareness.¹⁰ While sound-bite saboteurs are effective leaders who learn how to *use* conflicts, they count on and aggravate citizen confusion about the fundamentally strategic nature of political conflicts.¹¹ Sound-bite saboteurs, recognizing conflicts as opportunities, divert public attention from leadership failures and concentrate that attention on their interested messages, cognitive schema designed by public relations experts to reconstruct common sense and reassure citizens, as subjects without agency. And the distortion constitutive of sound-bite sabotage is not random but systematic and loosely coordinated; the stories with which saboteurs saturate our communication channels are designed to carry advertisements that advance a private interest, representing it as the public interest.

Second, when sound-bite saboteurs move the opinion of publics toward positions that are contrary to the best available data, they also discredit the importance of using data to address the conflicts we face, attacking a central pillar of communication and argumentation.¹² They displace scholarly debate with public relations as a primary knowledge production mechanism—a mechanism that may be more culturally resonant because it can present an image of itself as less ambiguous and more action oriented. Public relations work is less constrained by data or peer review, meaning these experts can use their resource advantage to construct messages that are, as William Haltom and Michael McCann note in their analysis of the tort reform movement that we discuss in chapter 3, more “available, accessible, adaptable, and affirmatively actionable” (2004, 70). To the degree that argumentation is displaced by sound-bite sabotage, we undermine our capacity to come to agreements and achieve the shared values constitutive of resilient community life. This political and cultural dynamic discredits data makers and the data making process itself, as can be seen clearly in the intelligent design controversy, the stem cell controversy, Rathergate, the proliferation of PR knowledge production in sponsored think tanks, and other high-profile, elite-driven efforts to distract our attention from leadership failures and other elite-citizen conflicts. Such attempts to distract us rely on an anti-intellectualism designed to turn all positions into merely equivalent, if different, opinions and replace data analysis and serious deliberation with familiarity as the criteria for weighing one opinion or position against another.¹³

We know from our own experiences, and from J. S. Mill (1975) in *On Liberty*, that facts do not speak for themselves. To become useful knowledge, ideas must be subjected to vigorous and ongoing contestation, bringing together people who disagree yet value the open-mindedness and hope of achieving (even provisional) agreements that link individual freedom to collective prosperity.

Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning. The whole strength and value, then, of human judgment, depending on the one property, that it can be set right when it is wrong, reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand. (Mill 1975, 27)

And the means of setting it right is not a naïve objectivity but the vigorous contestation of ideas, focusing us on the political and cultural preconditions for democratic deliberation. Sound-bite sabotage both undermines this dynamic and dissipates our energies to make us afraid of conflict and politics as we slowly *unlearn* the foundations of our own beliefs in individual freedom or the free market, thus remaking us without the intellectual and rhetorical skills needed to be free and prosperous. Sound-bite saboteurs short-circuit debate by truncating our thought processes with familiar sounding, but deceptively inaccurate, reassurance that silencing anyone who opposes the familiar and comfortable can only be right.

There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right. (Mill 1975, 26–27)

Third, we argue that, as a consequence, sound-bite saboteurs are responsible for a widespread and growing assault on the possibility and

the desirability of democratic decision making. Sound-bite saboteurs, it turns out, are driving a political and cultural process that is eroding the preconditions for democratic deliberation.¹⁴ They use public relations tools to redivide key publics along cultural lines expected to be favorable to the saboteurs own narrow, private interest and to privatize conflict management in general. This process is clearest in the stridently partisan and extremist debates animating politics in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals across the country, but it is also manifest in the ways that these debates have turned moderate leaders on both sides of the aisle into endangered species. Cooperation, as a result, is now seen by many as a sign of weakness to be overcome by remaining resolute despite the best available data (and this approach is seen as just common sense). Instead of understanding that to be free and prosperous we must “fully, frequently, and fearlessly” debate ideas directly with those who disagree with us, sound-bite sabotage encourages a cultural preference for holding our own isolated views “as a dead dogma, not a living truth” (Mill 1975, 44). Mill explains:

There is a class of persons . . . who think it enough if a person assents undoubtingly to what they think true, though he has no knowledge whatever of the grounds of the opinion, and could not make a tenable defense of it against the most superficial objections. Such persons, if they can once get their creed taught from authority, naturally think that no good, and some harm, comes of its being allowed to be questioned. Where their influence prevails, they make it nearly impossible for the received opinion to be rejected wisely and considerately, though it may still be rejected rashly and ignorantly; for to shut out discussion entirely is seldom possible, and when it once gets in, beliefs not grounded on conviction are apt to give way before the slightest semblance of an argument. Waiving, however, this possibility—assuming that the true opinion abides in the mind, but abides as a prejudice, a belief independent of, and proof against, argument—this is not the way in which truth ought to be held by a rational being. This is not knowing the truth. Truth, thus held, is but one superstition the more, accidentally clinging to the words which enunciate a truth. (Mill 1975, 45)

Fourth, sound-bite saboteurs make it nearly impossible for us to understand the grounds of even our correctly held positions,