

# THE SUBLIMINAL SCARES

by Jon Elliston  
Dossier Editor  
[pscpdocs@aol.com](mailto:pscpdocs@aol.com)

[<http://www.parascope.com/articles/0397/sublim.htm>]

**D**o hidden stimuli pass stealthily through the doors of perception? If so, do subliminal messages have any effect on the minds they invade? In the late 1950s, the American public was troubled with such questions after concealed ads were reportedly shown to unwitting movie-goers. The initial obsession with subliminals was short-lived, however, as the controversial practice of advertising "below the threshold of awareness" was neither proven effective nor widely used. But the seeds of subsequent subliminal scares were planted, and the notion that what you don't see may be as important as what you do see would rise again and again into the American consciousness. This Dossier special report explores the hysteria surrounding subliminal messages, from the 1950s to the not-so-distant future.

## Hidden Persuasion?

For the average American, there was plenty to be afraid of in the 1950s. Rock 'n' roll. "Reefer madness." The atom bomb. "Red" China. The Soviets and their spacecraft Sputnik. As people in the United States struggled to make sense of a rapidly changing world, a controversial breakthrough in broadcast technology called "subliminal projection" pushed the national paranoia index through the roof.



*James Vicary ignited a firestorm of controversy when he introduced subliminal advertising.*

Advertisers were becoming increasingly adept at scripting their pitches, slogans, and brand names. In fact, according to a popular 1957 book by Vance Packard, advertising firms had probed the psychology of buying so thoroughly that they now knew exactly what made consumers tick. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, Packard sounded the alarm over the rise of the

"professional persuaders" – ad men who applied psychology and social science to sales. The "depth approach," as it was called, was based on extensive "motivational research" (MR) financed by the ad industry. Packard described how many advertisers, including some of the largest firms in the country, were using MR to concoct new ways of marketing goods and increasing buying habits, methods that pushed the margins of acceptable persuasion.

Packard emphasized the deceptive nature of the new techniques: "Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes.... Typically these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness; so that the appeals which move us are often, in a sense, hidden." Packard's book introduced thousands of Americans to the latest advances in advertising and generated unprecedented scrutiny of the manipulators of Madison Avenue.

Among the new MR specialists Packard profiled was the enterprising James Vicary, the man whose sales scheme would kick off decades of subliminal scares in the United States. Vicary had conducted MR on various groups of shoppers, and attracted some attention for his studies of the eye-blink rate of female customers in various store settings. (Vicary sought to use the blink rate as an indicator of interest in products and displays.) In 1957, Vicary announced that he had designed a subliminal projection machine, capable of flashing unnoticeable messages within big-screen movies.

Many people reacted skeptically when first hearing of the technique, asking "What's the point of an ad you can't see?" But Vicary claimed to have conducted a six-week test run at a theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey that caused a noticeable increase in sales. The messages "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coke" blipped on the screen every five seconds throughout the feature films, appearing so briefly that they were not consciously perceived by the viewers. Vicary said that the subliminals increased sales of cola by 18% and of popcorn by 58%.

Though Vicary did not produce many details or records of his experiment, the notion that subliminal communication could effect people's thinking and actions spread quickly. (Even today, forty years later, no subliminal experiment has replicated the success Vicary claimed to have had with the technique.) Whatever the effectiveness of Vicary's machine, the very idea of subliminal persuasion persuaded millions of people that their minds were under assault as never before. Maybe you can't see subliminals, reasoned many, but you damn sure better watch out for them.

The leaders of the broadcasting industry quickly recognized the fact that whatever gains they might make

with subliminal advertising would likely be canceled out by the rapidly developing stigma associated with the sneaky technique. In November 1957 the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters asked its 300 member stations to refrain from using subliminals pending "review and consideration" by the group. The memo requesting the ban cautioned that subliminals could frighten consumers and hurt advertisers' credibility: "A very serious problem is the reaction of the public to having subliminal advertising thrust upon them. There may well be grave concern over the idea of advertising which affects people below their level of conscious awareness, so that they are not able to exercise conscious control over their acceptance or rejection of the messages."

British author Aldous Huxley, who wrote *A Brave New World* and other popular future-looking works, saw subliminal persuasion a potentially alarming development. He told an American TV show of his concern: "I feel very strongly that we mustn't be caught by surprise by our own advance in technology. This has happened again and again in history with technology's advance, and this changes social conditions and suddenly people have found themselves in a situation which they didn't foresee and doing all sorts of things they didn't really want to do."

The news about subliminals was certainly unsettling, but while many people feared they would be secretly manipulated by invisible slogans, others were willing to face the subliminal scourge, come what may. A May 1958 survey of public opinion on subliminals indicated that about 42 percent of the population had heard of the technique. Of those who had, 50 percent said they considered subliminal advertising unethical and 50 percent considered it ethical. A significant majority – 69 percent – said they would watch television programs even if they knew subliminals were used in the show. Ralph Haber, the Yale researcher who conducted the survey, concluded that "the fact that half the people who had heard of subliminal advertising thought there would be nothing wrong with it, in spite of the tenor of recent mass media attack on it, shows that the man on the street is not so frightened of subliminal advertising as

are the more intellectual writers." But enough people were spooked by the prospect of subliminals invading their minds that it was only a matter of time before the nation's leaders would be forced to grapple with the issue.



*Rep. William Dawson led the congressional charge against subliminal telecasts.*

## Washington Reacts

The concern over subliminal manipulation spread to Washington, D.C., where a handful of legislators launched a brief campaign to eradicate the subliminal menace by banning the technique. Representative William Dawson, a Republican from Utah, led the congressional charge against subliminals. In October 1957 Dawson asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to get to the bottom of the "secret pitch" that had reared its ugly hidden head on a New Jersey movie screen. Dawson said the subliminal method, if successful, entailed "worrisome, if not frightening aspects." For instance, he warned, "put to political propaganda purposes, [it] would be made to order for the establishment and maintenance of a totalitarian government." Weeks later, the FCC issued a public notice on subliminal projection stating that "caution in using the new technique would evidence proper regard for the public interest." Such meager statements would not satisfy the likes of Representative Dawson. For months he unsuccessfully prodded the FCC to shut down subliminals for good.

Struggling to allay Congress' fears and save his subliminal advertising clientele, in January 1958 James Vicary took his subliminal show to the nation's capital, where several members of Congress and FCC chairman John Doerfer viewed a demonstration of the controversial technique. In a Washington television studio, Vicary showed the group a few minutes of a movie with split-second "Eat Popcorn" messages inserted in the film.

During the screening, Senator Charles E. Potter of Michigan quipped: "I think I want a hot dog." Jokes aside, Potter said he believed the technique should not be used on television until federal regulations were established.

Vicary took the occasion to downplay the power of subliminals, calling them "a mild form of advertising" and "a very weak persuader." The man behind the outbreak of subliminal fears assured his official audience that he would insist that television viewers be informed in advance by stations who were planning to use subliminals. What's more, said Vicary, whatever power subliminals do have could be put to good use spreading public service messages like "Fight Polio."

Throughout the debate over subliminal ads, Vicary said that he would welcome government regulation of his methods, but would challenge any attempt to ban subliminal speech. "We have a freedom to communicate," he said. "If we get into a hassle, we'll go to the Supreme Court and some decision will be made." ...

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