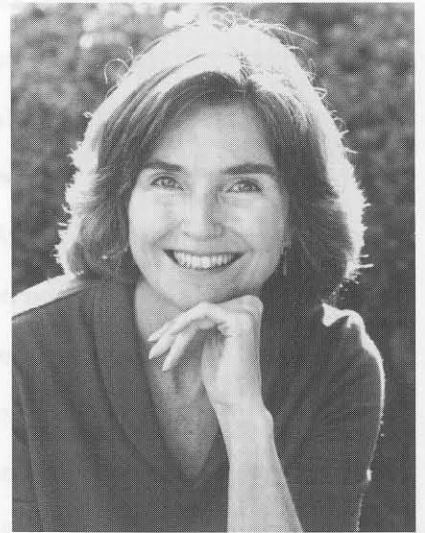


Media Education and Lights

by Jean Kilbourne
West Newton, Mass.

Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D., is internationally recognized for her pioneering work on alcohol and tobacco advertising and the image of women in advertising. The award-winning films "Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness," "Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women," "Pack of Lies: The Advertising of Tobacco," and "Calling the Shots: Advertising Alcohol" are based on her lectures. She is a Visiting Scholar at Wellesley College and is on the Board of Directors of the Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems. For further information, including a resource list, visit her website (www.jeankilbourne.com).



A new beer (just what the country needs) called Bad Frog features on the label, and in its advertising, a frog raising a middle finger, with accompanying slogans such as "He just don't care" and "An amphibian with an attitude." In a media-literate society, beer companies would be less likely to propose such outrageous campaigns and, if they did, informed citizens would launch massive protests (thus exercising their own free speech rights). These educated citizens would understand that the campaign was designed to target kids, especially those kids most at risk for alcohol-related problems. Further, they would understand that the alcohol industry depends on alcoholics for their profits and that the risk of addiction is much greater for people who start drinking in their teens. What is a risk from a societal point of view is an opportunity to those selling addictive products. Thus the alcohol industry, like the tobacco industry, is in the business of hooking people early, so they can be customers for life.

Media education can and has revolutionized the way we think about public health. The shift to a focus on the environment rather than the traditional focus on the host or agent has come about largely because of media education. We've begun to see all kinds of problems that used to be seen as individual choices or flaws—from violence

to substance abuse to eating disorders—as partly the result of the environment in which people make their choices. And the most important aspect of our environment, of course, is the media.

My own work has always been about media education as a way to improve public health—although I didn't know that in the beginning. When I started looking at the image of women in advertising in the late 1960s, I wasn't thinking of it as a public health problem. But, of course, it is. The objectification of women is related to violence, the sexual abuse of children, low self-esteem and depression, eating disorders and other problems that are now clearly seen as public health problems.

Looking at alcohol ads in the 1970s, I realized with horror that the alcohol industry understood alcoholism better than any other group—and that they were using that knowledge to create a climate of denial in which alcoholics were unlikely to recover. This led to my realization that the alcoholic is the alcohol industry's best customer. Ten percent of drinkers consume sixty percent of all the alcohol sold, which certainly sheds light on the alcohol industry's claim to want people to "drink responsibly." The truth is that so-called "responsible drinking" would destroy them. This new way of looking

When we're wearing a swimsuit, there is no such thing as "constructive criticism."

VIRGINIA SLIMS
It's a woman thing.

© 1998 Lorillard Inc.
8 mg. "tar," 0.7 mg. nicotine av. per cigarette by FTC method.

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

As Saul Alinksy said,

power comes in two forms—money and people.

These industries that undermine our nation's public health have the money, to be sure, which enables them to have tragically undue influence on our government.

But we have the people. As people become educated and informed, America can once again become a democracy.

at the alcohol industry—and the tobacco industry—came about through media education.

We've come a long way. But as we become more sophisticated and aware, the industries that depend on our ignorance for their profit also become more sophisticated, more clever. Years ago all Virginia Slims had to do was to use very thin models and say their product was not like the "fat cigarettes men smoke" in order to make the link between smoking and weight control. Nowadays, the ads are more subtle. "When we're wearing a bathing suit, there is no such thing as constructive criticism," says a recent one. This normalizes the anxiety that women and girls are made to feel about their bodies, their weight, while subliminally offering the cigarette as the solution. The woman in the ad is young, thin and beautiful -- and yet she is anxious about being seen in a bathing suit. How are we mortals supposed to feel?

Activists forced R.J. Reynolds to discontinue the use of Joe Camel in this country (he is still pushing cigarettes to children all around the world), but Camel has responded with a campaign that still targets kids, while slyly mocking those who protest. These ads feature outrageous scenes, such as a maid flicking her ashes into the food she's about to serve or a man running from a woman's bedroom while her shotgun-toting father chases him. The ads contain "warnings" such as PA for Premeditated Ashing, SS for Satisfied Smoking, and AN for Animal Nudity, thus ridiculing both the warning labels on the ads and cigarette packs and those prudish public health morons who care about such things.

Media education teaches us to look behind the scenes, to understand campaigns like this, and also to understand how the tobacco and alcohol industries are trying to shape the debate about these issues. "The smell of cigarette smoke annoys me, but not nearly as much as the government telling me what to do," says a smug-looking woman in a full-page ad

placed by the tobacco industry in virtually every newspaper in the country. "Absolut DC," says one of the notorious vodka ads, this one featuring the bottle wrapped in red tape. In both instances, the advertisers are trying to turn a public health issue into a political issue, to encourage people to see this as the government versus individual freedom. In truth, this is about the government versus corporate greed. And sometimes the government is our only defense against corporate greed. In a media-literate society, people would not be fooled by campaigns like this.

Huge and powerful industries—alcohol, tobacco, junk food, guns, diet—depend upon a media-illiterate population. Indeed they depend upon a population that is disempowered and addicted. These industries will and do fight our efforts with all their mighty resources. And we will fight back, using the tools of media education which enable us to understand, analyze, interpret, to expose hidden agendas and manipulation, to bring about constructive change, and to further positive aspects of the media.

As Saul Alinksy said, power comes in two forms -- money and people. These industries that undermine our nation's public health have the money, to be sure, which enables them to have tragically undue influence on our government. But we have the people. As people become educated and informed, America can once again become a democracy.

