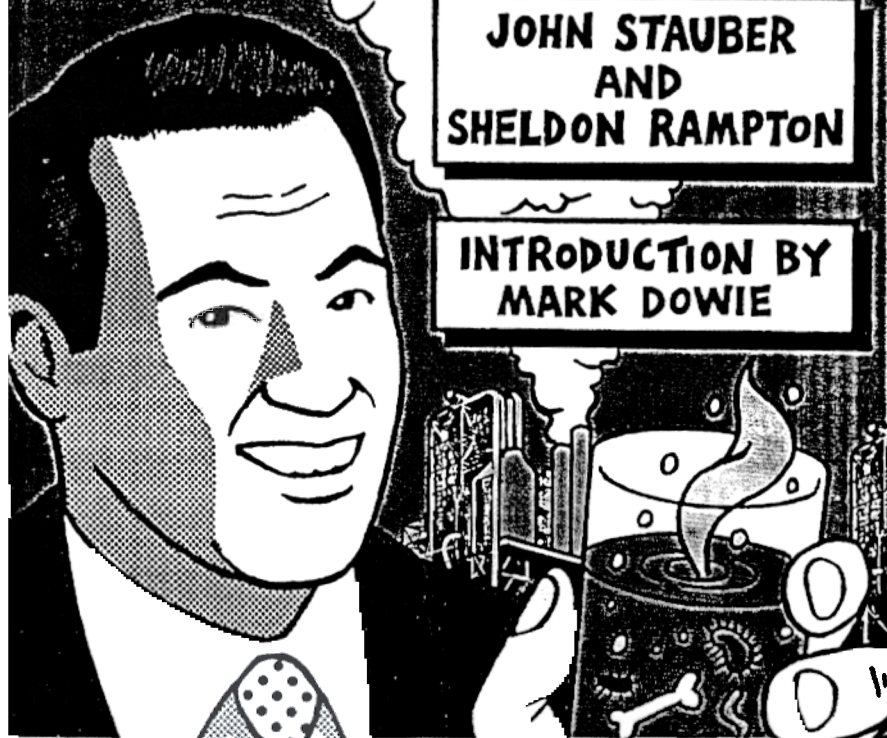


# TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU!

## LIES, DAMN LIES AND THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY

### JOHN STAUBER AND SHELDON RAMPTON

#### INTRODUCTION BY MARK DOWIE



"Terrific! Don't miss it."

—Molly Ivins

forming it into a giant shopping mall. He predicts "a flurry of competition followed by the establishment of a stable oligopoly dominated by a handful of enormous firms . . . a world of information haves and have-nots, thereby exacerbating our society's already considerable social and economic inequality."

PR firms are jumping on the online bandwagon, establishing "world wide web" sites and using servers and games to gather marketing and opinion information from users of cyberspace, and developing new techniques to reach reporters and other online users.

The information superhighway is only one of the technologies enabling PR firms to "reach audiences more directly and efficiently than ever before," writes Kirk Hallahan in the Summer 1994 *Public Relations Quarterly*. "Today, with many more options available, PR professionals are much less dependent upon mass media for publicity. . . . In the decade ahead, the largest American corporations could underwrite entire, sponsored channels. Organizations such as Procter & Gamble might circumvent public media altogether and subsidize programming that combines promotional and otherwise conducive messages—news, talk shows, infomercials, or sponsored entertainment or sports. . . . Shows such as 'Entertainment Tonight' stand to become the prototype for programming of tomorrow, in which the source doubles as the deliverer of the message. . . . Channel sponsors will be able to reach coveted super-heavy users . . . with a highly tailored message over which they exert complete control."

Ironically, Hallahan worries that the growing interpenetration of news and advertising is "troublesome" because it weakens the credibility of the traditional news media. "Every time that a newspaper produces an advertorial section that offers free puff pieces to advertisers," he writes, "and every time that a television station presents an infomercial in the guise of programming . . . media organizations cheapen the value of their product. . . . When a news medium covered a story in the past, the information sponsor gained more than mere exposure. The client, product or cause gained salience, stature and legitimacy." That legitimacy will be lost, he warns, if the public ceases to see a difference between news and paid propaganda. "While PR people might circumvent the press occasionally, we aren't going to want to do so all the time," Hallahan writes. "We can't kill the goose that laid the golden egg. A loss of public reliance upon and confidence in the mass media could be devastating."<sup>44</sup>