

How advertising influenced sinister scientists

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

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This concept has been well documented by Graeme Donald in his book *When the earth was flat...*, which is a fabulous read, by the way.



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At about the same time as Vance Packard published his book *The Hidden Persuaders* in 1957, a market researcher named James Vicary burst onto Madison Avenue with a theory that would send Don Draper scurrying for a martini - with all the other *Mad Men* totally mesmerised right behind him.

The reason?

Vicary said he'd conducted experiments in a New Jersey cinema and had discovered "subliminal advertising".

The advertising industry went ballistic. Vicary said he'd exposed 45,000 people with flash-images saying "Drink Coke" or "Eat popcorn".

These flash-images were 1/3,000 of a second, which was too fast for the conscious brain to notice but were like headlines to the subliminal mind.

Because the brain had been influenced on an almost-hypnotic level, no defensive actions had been activated. The result, said Vicary, had been an increase in Coke sales (18%) and popcorn sales (57%).

Everyone agreed it made perfect sense.

Of course it took hardly any time at all before politicians started to become excited, too. Just imagine the possibilities!

As Graham Donald says, "there was a sudden and undignified scramble in the political arena as vast salaries were offered as incentives to entice opinion-makers and so-called Depth Men (psychological manipulators) away from their Madison Avenue desks and up to Capitol Hill."

Of course, the CIA were very quick to pick up on the idea. "The CIA had spirited back to America numerous Nazi scientists and doctors, some of whom had used death camp inmates in various psychotropic and sensory-privation experiments in their own attempts to achieve total mind control. More than 30 war criminals were given new identities and employed in the set-up of the deadly sinister MK-Ultra programme, which used unwitting members of the public in a series of dangerous and, in some cases, lethal psychotropic experiments."

Despite the best efforts of the ad industry, politicians, the CIA, scientists and many authors, nobody could make the concept work.

In fact, the experiments had never even taken place in that little New Jersey cinema!

In 1962, Vicary admitted it had all been a scam... there was no such thing as subliminal messaging. But it's a funny world, because nobody believed him.

The more he shouted "scam!" The more they believed it.

Apparently, studies conducted in 2006 showed that, in America, 80% of people - including those who work in advertising or teach psychology - still believe in the sinister power of subliminal messaging.

And still, to this day, many broadcasters ban the production of this type of advertisement although (a) I don't see how they can tell, and (b) I'm fairly sure that in South Africa, no agency makes them. And, even if they did, they don't work anyway.

However, if someone ever suggests using this technique to promote your brand you might want to rather join Don Draper in the bar and put your ad budget to much better use.

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ABOUT CHRIS BREWER

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