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The Story Behind a New York Billboard and the Interests It Serves

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG

Ever since May, a small black-and-white billboard has looked south into Times Square from the top of a building on Broadway. It says simply: "[PETA Kills Animals.com](http://PETA.Kills.Animals.com)." You would think that the visual chaos of Times Square would hide a modest black-and-white sign. But if anything, the colliding planes of color in the foreground - the pulsating staircase of signage - make this reticent billboard all the more visible.

Like an increasing number of the signs around us, this one merely points to another source of information - in this case, to a Web site whose name sounds like a headline: PETA Kills Animals. PETA, of course, is the activist animal-rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The sign assumes we know this and that an organization devoted to the ethical treatment of animals probably should not be killing them. But the sign also raises the question, what is PETA Kills Animals.com?

It turns out that this is one of a series of Web sites sponsored by the Center for Consumer Freedom, which describes itself as "a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the full range of choices that American consumers currently enjoy." We live in an age of organizations with anodyne names that conceal their real agenda, and the Center for Consumer Freedom is one of them. We're all consumers, and what could be better than freedom? But C.C.F. was founded by a Washington lobbyist named Richard Berman and is financed, according to at least one watchdog group, by many of the same meat, fast-food, restaurant and beverage companies that have hired him as a lobbyist. Seed money came from Philip Morris.

C.C.F.'s reasons for attacking PETA are obvious. When it comes to limiting "the full range of choices" that Americans are used to finding at the supermarket, it is hard to beat an organization that opposes nearly every imaginable human relation with animals, including, of course, eating them. I hold no brief for PETA, which seems to me to be wrongheaded about as often as it is right-minded. But it has made common cause with more-thoughtful organizations in opposing the contemptible practice of raising animals like hogs and chickens - the source of most Americans' meat - in close confinement. And it is probably capable of defending itself in a billboard war.

What strikes me is C.C.F.'s mission description and its implications. Here is the rest of its statement: "In addition to malicious animal-rights activists, we stand up to the 'food police,' environmental scaremongers, neo-prohibitionists, meddling bureaucrats and other self-anointed saints who claim to 'know what's best' for you." There's a hidden equation lurking in this sentence. It assumes that your interests - as a free consumer - are synonymous with the interests of corporations that are being closely watched, and often openly opposed, by organizations like the highly respectable Center for Science in the Public Interest, a lead advocate in the fight against obesity.

In fact, the language of the Center for Consumer Freedom is as Orwellian as it is possible to get. Its basic linguistic strategy could have been taken directly from George Orwell's "Politics and the English

Language," still the most important single essay on how to lie without seeming to. It would hardly work for C.C.F. simply to tell the truth - to say to consumers, on behalf of the food and beverage industries, "Activists and watchdog groups are trying to stop us from selling you anything we want to sell you." Much better to say, "These groups are trying to prevent you from buying anything you want to buy." Then it becomes a matter of sustaining freedom, protecting individual rights and keeping the prairie of consumer choices unfenced.

The blurring of the distinction between corporate interests and the individual and collective rights of humans is one of the central tropes of our time and the source of much purposeful confusion, of the kind that the Center for Consumer Freedom exploits. It may have its root, philosophically, in the legal fiction that a corporation is a person. But it is used again and again to hide from people exactly how their interests are being abused. It also keeps people from seeing the delicate balance that must be struck between their individual rights and the rights of the community at large. When you hear someone howling about freedom, it is worth asking whose freedom he means.

Protecting "the full range of choices that American consumers currently enjoy" can only be the mission of someone who believes that those choices come without cost and that the only ethic that matters is the bottom line. But every consumer choice carries a cost, and the purpose of a real consumer advocate should be to make those costs - both moral and financial, to oneself and to others - perfectly clear. That, of course, is something that industries profiting from the untrammelled appetites of Americans cannot afford.

Is it hypocritical for C.C.F. to attack PETA? Since its basic rhetorical strategy is hypocritical, the answer is almost certainly yes. Is it hypocritical for PETA to euthanize dogs and cats, as C.C.F. claims it does? Only if you believe that the ethical treatment of animals never includes euthanasia. The obvious retort to PETA Kills Animals is PETA Saves Animals. But that doesn't make much of a billboard.

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