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Taking on Alcohol, Pharmaceutical and Tobacco Advertising: An Interview with Dr. Jean Kilbourne

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Introduction

I first heard Dr. Jean Kilbourne speak at an NCADD meeting in Kansas City many years ago. I can still recall the power of this presentation and the images she used to illustrate the tactics and messages used to promote alcohol, tobacco and psychoactive prescription drugs. It was one of those presentations you walk away from never looking again at the world in the same way. Following that, I have been an avid reader and admirer of Dr. Kilbourne's continued contributions. In November 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Kilbourne about her life and her work.

Dr. Kilbourne's books and films are available through the following link:
<http://www.jeankilbourne.com/>

Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Creating a New Profession

Bill White: For more than four decades you have pursued a professional career focus—a blended role of media analyst, lecturer, author, filmmaker, and public health advocate—that did not exist before you created it. How did the portrayal of women in media advertising first capture your attention?

Jean Kilbourne: Let me start at the very beginning. In 1968 I saw an ad that changed my life. At the time, I had a series of very mindless jobs. I graduated from Wellesley College in 1964 and had to go to secretarial school right afterwards in order to get a job. A few years later I had a job placing ads in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. One of the ads was for a birth control pill called "Ovulen 21." The ad said, "Ovulen 21 works the way a woman thinks--by weekdays, not by cycle days." Basically, the ad was saying that women were too stupid to remember our cycles, but we could remember the days of the week. But to help us, there was a smiling photograph of a woman in the ad and there were seven boxes in her head, one for each day of the week. So, Monday was a laundry

basket, Tuesday was an iron, that kind of thing. I looked at this and I thought, "There's something really wrong with this." I took it home and I put it on my refrigerator.

Then I began to look at other ads and to collect them. I put them up with magnets on my refrigerator and started to see a pattern in the images. In those days, nobody else was looking at advertising in this way. I think everyone felt that advertising was stupid and trivial and that we had many more important things to deal with. As far as I know, I was the first person to do this in any kind of systematic way. I continued collecting the ads and got a camera and a copy stand and made slides out of them. Then I put together a slideshow and began to show it to people. One thing led to another. I didn't intend to have this be my life work but that is what happened.

Bill White: Did you have a sense early on that this was part of your personal destiny?

Jean Kilbourne: Yes. I would say that happened very quickly. I was involved in the beginning of the second wave of the women's movement at that time. I'd also had some experience as a model. Job opportunities for women in those days were very limited. I could be a secretary or a waitress or maybe a teacher if I went back to school. Those were all very low-paying jobs, but I could also be a model and make a thousand dollars a day, which in those days was big money and still isn't at all bad! I experienced a lot of pressure to capitalize on the way that I looked at that time and to do some modeling. I did some photographic modeling. I did a little bit of runway modeling for the fashion designer Oleg Cassini in New York City. I did a little bit when I lived in London and Paris. But it was very soul-destroying. There wasn't any language in those days to describe feeling objectified. A woman was supposed to simply be grateful for the attention, but it didn't feel good to me.

There was also a huge amount of sexual harassment that came with the territory. So I would sort of dabble in the modeling and then I'd step back and I'd get a job as a waitress. I knew I wasn't going to

try to make a career out of modeling. Whether I could have or not, I don't know. But I decided not to do that. But it left me with a life-long interest in the whole idea of what beauty is and what does it mean and who wins and who loses and why is the image so powerful.

Those were the kinds of questions that drew me in as I looked at the images in these ads I was collecting. With my own experience of being turned into an object and how that felt, I was very aware of the fact that this attention was going to be very short-lived--that to be a beautiful young woman was somewhat like being very rich but with the absolute assurance that you would someday be bankrupt. And I could see that happening all around me. As women aged out, which in those days was hitting thirty, they were often treated with contempt. Or, at the very least, they became invisible.

In 1969 I decided to become a teacher and I went back to school. I got a master's degree and I taught at a suburban high school for three years and then I taught at Emerson College in Boston for three years. It was during that time that I really started using the slides of the ads that I'd collected. I had put together a slide presentation that I called "The Naked Truth: Advertising's Image of Women." It was very powerful when I used it in my classes. The students loved it. They had never thought of any of this before and it forced them to look at things in a very different way.

So I knew that I was onto something but it took me quite a while to really make it my career. There were a couple of reasons for that. One is that I had a real terror of public speaking. I was always a good public speaker but I was just so terrified of it. But I had something I really wanted to say. So I just did it and, as with anything, eventually it became much easier.

The other thing that really coincided with my deciding to make this a career was that I quit drinking in the spring of 1976. It was soon thereafter that I got an agent and started to give the slide presentations all around the country. Sobriety gave me energy and it gave me confidence and a

sense of possibility. I hadn't had any of this before.

This is also one of the reasons why I've been so concerned for so many decades about alcohol and alcoholism, particularly as they affect women. I saw what happened to me—all this potential was being drowned. I was a very high-functioning alcoholic but nonetheless I was running on one cylinder. My sobriety helped launch my career and my feeling that this was what I wanted to do.

Bill White: When did your work begin to focus on alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical advertising?

Jean Kilbourne: In the 1970s I started to look at alcohol and tobacco advertising and I developed slide presentations on these topics. So I had presentations on the image of women in advertising and on alcohol and tobacco advertising. Students generally responded very positively to the presentations because the information was all so new to them. I also use a lot of humor in my presentations and they weren't expecting that. I think they were grateful that they weren't being harangued and that instead I was encouraging them to ridicule and to laugh at these ads.

I was using a very different angle than what was traditionally used for alcohol and tobacco education in those days. The emphasis had always been on how bad this stuff was for you and how it might kill you, none of which I felt was going to make very much difference to a teenager. I started smoking when I was thirteen and if someone had said to me, "You'll be dead by the time you're fifty," I would've said, "Good. Who wants to live to be that old?" If they showed me pictures of a diseased lung, I wouldn't have cared either because I wouldn't have thought of that as applying to me.

So I think my big insight during the '70s was that the way to reach kids wasn't to talk about mortality or illness but rather to show them that they were being manipulated and how this was being done. I used media literacy to suggest that the real authorities that they should be rebelling against were Phillip Morris and Anheuser Busch, not their

parents or their health educators or teachers. I wanted them to be angry at the right targets. Gradually this became standard practice so that now media literacy is a part of virtually every kind of prevention program, but it really wasn't then.

Bill White: Media researcher George Gerbner described your presentations as a "form of mass vaccination" against manipulative media advertising and I think I actually experienced this after the first time I saw you present. I have never been able to look at advertisements the same. How did you refine this vaccination effect?

Jean Kilbourne: You know, I loved that comment of George Gerbner's and I loved George Gerbner. He was a really important person to me. He was extraordinarily supportive when I was just starting out and was a wonderful mentor. That is a great quote from him.

Bill White: How consciously were you trying to "vaccinate" people?

Jean Kilbourne: Not very. I was trying to get people to take advertising seriously because very few people did and this is still the case. I always hear people say, "I don't pay attention to ads. I just tune them out. They have no effect on me." So I wanted people to take it seriously. But more important, I wanted them to take these issues seriously, the sexism and the high-risk drinking and the dangers of tobacco and to see these as serious issues fueled by advertising. I wanted them to see past the harm and look at the profits these industries were making and how they were making them

Bill White: You once described the work you do as a "form of judo." Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

Jean Kilbourne: What I meant when I described it as judo is that I was taking on these huge industries--the alcohol industry, the tobacco industry, the fashion industry, the beauty industry, the diet industry, the junk food industry. They had huge resources

and huge amounts of power and control of the media through their advertising dollars. And here I am--this lone woman and her slideshow. There was no way I was going to have resources that even remotely approached those wielded by these companies, but what I could do is use their own weight against them. I could use their material, their ads, and flip it so that people would look at them from a different point of view, a different perspective. That's what I meant when I said it was a kind of judo.

Bill White: What are your most vivid recollections of trying to convey your work to mass audiences through television shows and interviews?

Jean Kilbourne: I remember that at first it was terrifying. When I talked earlier about being afraid of public speaking, it was like every step I would overcome, there'd be another level. In the beginning, it was just being able to get up in front of a group of people and be able to speak and not be shaking. Then I got comfortable doing that. And then it was larger groups and I eventually got comfortable doing that, and then it was television, which was really scary in the beginning, particularly national television. The first national show that I did was "The Today Show" in the late 1970s. I was just incredibly nervous and my oldest brother said, "Well, relax, Jean. The worst that can happen is you'll disgrace yourself in front of twenty million people." Which was very typical of my brother but then, of course, it's also true.

It was easier in those days to be on television because people didn't have recorders and you were on and then you were off. Today people can analyze what you said, put it on YouTube, and criticize your clothing and do all kinds of stuff that they weren't able to do in those days. I was interviewed by Jane Pauley and it was great exposure, and then I did a lot more shows and finally was on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." That was a whole other level of reaching people. I felt like all of the shows were a terrific way to get the message out to millions of people. I could be traipsing

around the country for another five lifetimes and not be able to reach the numbers of people that I did just doing one of those shows.

I also did a lot of radio, which I actually prefer to television. With radio you can get into a lot more depth and it's a more thoughtful medium. And you don't have to care about how you look! Preparing for television takes up a huge amount of time, particularly for women, because we know we're going to be judged at least partly by how we look

Alcohol and Tobacco Advertising

Bill White: You know, I'd like to explore the whole issue of women, addiction and advertising a bit more in depth and I'm wondering if we could start by having you give some examples of some of the themes you found within alcohol and tobacco ads targeting women.

Jean Kilbourne: When I first started looking at alcohol ads, I realized with absolute horror that the alcohol industry understood alcoholism better than any other group. They really got it. They understood addiction in general but they certainly understood alcoholism. And one of the things that they understood was the core of loneliness that is at the heart of all addictions. Even if one doesn't start out lonely, to be an addict is to end up lonely. And they were playing on that in the ads by offering the bottle as the friend and as the lover.

Alcohol ads encourage people to feel that they are in a relationship with alcohol, which is, of course, how alcoholics feel. I used to joke that Jack Daniels was my most constant lover, that Jack Daniels wouldn't let me down. So they were on to this. And, of course, they use sex to sell alcohol to both women and men. Alcohol ads are often about how the bottle will help a man have sex or have better sex or that the bottle itself will be the lover and partner, metaphorically speaking. For women, the pitch is more about romance and intimacy. Alcohol ads often show a couple in a romantic setting with this wonderful amber light around them,

as if by drinking you could get into this cozy situation. This was part of what was done and still is in alcohol ads targeting women.

But there were so many other things, too. Marian Sandmaier published her wonderful book *The Invisible Alcoholics*, which I believe was the first book about women and alcoholism, in 1980. It was a very powerful book that resonated with me. She wrote that in our culture high-risk drinking is seen as making men more masculine but as making women less feminine. Women alcoholics are especially seen as less feminine. There is such a powerful stigma against female alcoholics. So the alcohol ads hyper-feminize women in order to offset this. The ads use beautiful, young women to convey to other women that this sophisticated drink will make them look like these women. The alcohol advertisers have really done their homework. They understand how addiction works and, in particular, how addiction works with women. The same thing is done with cigarette advertising—portraying the cigarette as a friend, a constant companion.

Bill White: Do you see a relationship between this targeting of women by the alcohol and tobacco industries and the dramatic growth of alcohol and tobacco addiction among women over the course of the twentieth century?

Jean Kilbourne: Absolutely. One of the things that happened was that the alcohol industry began targeting women more and more directly, in part because they had to constantly open up new markets. Of course, they continued to target men, but they wanted to get women to drink more because that was such a huge potential market. So they did and continue to do all kinds of advertising that makes drinking seem sophisticated and feminine and romantic. It parallels what the tobacco industry did in promoting cigarettes to women in the twenties and thirties when smoking was still not really acceptable for women. The tobacco industry promoted smoking as something that was not only acceptable but

was also daring and a symbol of liberation. And they did this with tremendous success.

Bill White: I'm thinking of this long line of tobacco and alcohol products that were developed specifically for women.

Jean Kilbourne: Yes, like Virginia Slims. And now the alcohol industry has developed this whole line of very sweet drinks for kids that bridge the gap between soft drinks and alcohol. They target girls most often because most boys wouldn't be caught dead drinking these feminized drinks because of the hyper-masculine code that is so often such a straitjacket for boys. So girls are offered things like chocolate beer and tequila lollipops and ice cream with alcohol and Jello with alcohol. The alcohol industry calls these drinks "entry drinks" because they're designed to get girls used to drinking alcohol. One of the dangers of these products is that they're so sweet one can miss the fact that they contain a lot of alcohol. Girls tend to weigh less than boys and so there's been a lot of trouble with girls drinking way too much of this stuff and then getting alcohol poisoning.

Bill White: I'm wondering if through the course of your studies whether you've had an opportunity to reflect on how the media portrays addicted and recovering women.

Jean Kilbourne: Addicted women have been portrayed forever as sexually promiscuous and bad mothers, but I can't recall many images of women in addiction recovery.

Bill White: Maybe the absence of recovering women is the story.

Jean Kilbourne: Maybe that is the story. You're right. There aren't very many portrayals of women in recovery, although more than there used to be. On television there have been far more men who are in recovery than women in recovery. I believe that Christine Cagney in "Cagney and Lacey" was the first. Jane Tennison in "Prime Suspect" gets sober at the end of the

series. There have been some movies, of course, such as “The Morning After” and “28 Days.”

Bill White: I’m wondering if you’ve got a particular slant on alcohol advertising as a woman in recovery. Do you think women in addiction treatment need to be inoculated against the effects of the advertising you have described?

Jean Kilbourne: Oh, I actually think men and women both need to be inoculated against it. The research being done today by alcohol and tobacco marketers is far more sophisticated than it was when I started looking at these ads. Now they’re very aware of psychological cues and what sort of things trigger relapses in addiction--things like the flare of a match as you’re lighting a cigarette or the amber light in the alcohol ads. I remember from my own drinking days that it was like stepping into this cave of amber light and so I think that’s a psychological cue, as is the foam on the head of beer in a beer ad. These are the kinds of cues that can trigger relapses and they’re meant to -- that’s the whole point. This is why both men and women need to have media literacy be a part of their treatment because they’re going to be going out into a world in which they will be bombarded with these beckoning cues to have a drink or a cigarette.

Bill White: Are treatment programs using any of your films to do this kind of education.

Jean Kilbourne: A lot of them do. I’ve also talked about eating disorders for decades and a lot of the eating disorder treatment centers use my films *Killing Us Softly* and *Slim Hopes: Advertising & the Obsession with Thinness*.

Film Projects

Bill White: Could you talk about the films?

Jean Kilbourne: A huge step for me was making *Killing Us Softly* in 1979. That turned my lecture “The Naked Truth: Advertising’s Image of Women” into a film. The first

version was unbelievably simple. It was one camera aimed at me as I gave a lecture and cost something like six thousand dollars to make. It was really cheap and cheaply made but, in today’s language, it went viral. It became a huge hit and was widely used on college campuses and lots of other places. I’ve remade it three times since then, most recently in 2010 as *Killing Us Softly 4*. I’ve often heard that it’s one of the most popular educational films of all times. When Upworthy recently promoted the trailer to “Killing Us Softly 4” on YouTube, it had over 4 million hits.

In 1982 I made a film called *Calling the Shots: Advertising Alcohol* (which I remade in 1991). I made *Pack of Lies: The Advertising of Tobacco* in 1992. In 2004 I combined the two into a film called *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol and Tobacco*.

In 1995 I made *Slim Hopes: Advertising & the Obsession with Thinness*. And in 2004 I made a film with my friend and colleague Jackson Katz called *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies, & Alcohol*, which is about drinking on college campuses. I’ve also hosted films by Neil Postman and George Gerbner. So I’ve made a wide range of films to get this information to small groups and to groups that can’t afford speakers.

Industry Response to Her Work

Bill White: What has been the response of the alcohol and tobacco industries to your work?

Jean Kilbourne: Their response has been nothing! But what they can do, because they have so much control over the media, is to make sure their critics don’t get very much publicity. So when *Can’t Buy My Love*, my first book (which was called *Deadly Persuasion* in hard cover) came out in 1999, the editor of a really big women’s magazine said to me, “I love your book. I’d love to do something with it but I can’t touch it because Absolut is one of our biggest sponsors.” So they don’t need to kill their critics and they don’t need to sue them -- all they need to do is deny them publicity.

One of the things that the alcohol industry did do to me in the beginning, however, when I was out there alone speaking about alcohol advertising was to label me a “neo-prohibitionist” and “Carrie Nation.” They said that I was trying to bring back prohibition, which was completely untrue and incredibly stupid, but I had to waste time addressing that whole argument instead of talking about the real issues.

Career Reflections

Bill White: As you reflect back over your career to date in which you have received so much international recognition and innumerable awards, is there an aspect of your work that you feel personally best about?

Jean Kilbourne: Well, there are a couple of things. One is I get e-mails constantly from people all around the world because of the films, particularly *Killing Us Softly*, telling me how my work has really opened their eyes or made a difference in their lives. I’ve had lots and lots of young women say that they never identified as feminists until they saw the film and now they do and I feel very good about that. And I do occasionally hear from people who, after reading my books or seeing my films, got sober or quit smoking. What could be better than that?

Bill White: Are there big items still on your agenda that you’re currently tackling or hope to tackle in the near future?

Jean Kilbourne: That’s a really good question. I’m not sure. I’m sort of at a crossroads right now. I’m still doing my lectures but I’m not going to remake *Killing Us Softly*. I think four is enough! I’d like to write another book but I’d like it to be a different kind of book, not a research-oriented book. So I’m thinking I might write a memoir about what it’s been like to be an activist all these years.

Bill White: That would be wonderful, particularly as a primer for other young activists coming behind you. I’m wondering

in that regard if there are others that you see coming behind you who are going to carry this work far into the future.

Jean Kilbourne: There are a lot of young women out there and some young men too who are doing really good work. Jennifer Siebel Newsom made a film a couple of years ago called *Miss Representation*. Her film is about the ways in which media images limit women’s political efficacy and make it more difficult for women to become active politically or to see themselves as politicians or even involved in politics. It’s a wonderful film. There’s a young woman named Jennifer Pozner, who wrote a terrific book about reality TV called *Reality Bites Back*. She’s a very smart writer and speaker and she’s been doing a lot too. Andrea Quijada, the Executive Director of the Media Literacy Project, is doing great work.

My friend Jackson Katz has been talking about images of men for over twenty years and works to get men involved in ending violence against women. Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti and other young feminists are doing a lot of work on these issues these days. Amy Jussel has a terrific blog and website called Shaping Youth. I know I’m leaving out so many people!

There’s also an organization called About Face which is all about images of women in advertising. There are many other organizations now too, such as the Brave Girls Alliance. There’s an extensive resource list on my website. So there are a lot of things going on now that give me hope that my work will continue.

Bill White: What advice would you offer young people interested in pursuing this advocacy work as a career.

Jean Kilbourne: I’d encourage people to do it. It’s work that feels meaningful and I’ve just loved it. I still feel amazed that people actually pay me to talk about what I think. So, even though it can be exhausting--particularly the first decade or so when I was doing 110 lectures a year and going out on Monday and coming back on Friday -- it is

exciting. One has to have a lot of grit and determination and stamina, but the rewards are terrific. I've also found it very important to work for myself and to be independent in that way.

Bill White: You and I have both seen people take on causes they're passionate about and then burn themselves out quickly. How have you been able to sustain your health and vitality over this long marathon you've run?

Jean Kilbourne: That's a very good question (laughing). There are lots of things: I have a very strong support system of friends and I'm also a part of the recovering community, which is a huge support system. I try to take care of myself and exercise and I love to be outdoors and to walk. But I would say that the main thing has been my close friendships, particularly with other women, that have been so nurturing. And my close

relationship with my daughter, who is doing very exciting work herself.

Bill White: Dr. Kilbourne, thank you so much for taking this time to reflect on your life and the advocacy work that you've pursued.

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