



Changing Tastes: Coca-Cola, Water and the Commercialization of Higher Education

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Increasingly, we are told, commercial potential is the measure of all value, corporations should be free to exploit anything and anyone for profit, and human beings are creatures of pure self-interest and materialistic desire. These are the elements of an emerging order that may prove to be as dangerous as any fundamentalism that history has produced. For in a world where anything or anyone can be owned, manipulated, and exploited for profit, everything and everyone will eventually be. (Bakan, 2004, p. 138)

In this article, we explore the interrelationships between the University of British Columbia's (UBC) cold-beverage contract with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company and the removal or disabling of forty-four percent (44%) of the drinking fountains on campus. The details of this turn of events provide a distressing glimpse of the impact of corporate sponsorships, and corporate values in general, on educational institutions (Cook, 2004). At the very least, this case demonstrates the extent to which UBC's increasing commitment to maximizing revenue distorts the always tenuous ties between higher education and the public interest.

Commercialization of Education

Corporate sponsors giving money or goods to public institution in exchange for the right to conduct an element of their business (e.g. exclusive provision of beverages) is just one example of the increasingly common and contentious phenomenon of commercialism. Commercialism has been defined in a number of ways. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "the principles and practice of commerce; excessive adherence to financial return as a measure of worth" (Brown, 1993, p. 451). In *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*, James Twitchell describes commercialism as two processes: "*commodification*, or stripping an object of all other values except its value for sale to someone else, and *marketing*, the insertion of the object

into a network of exchanges only some of which involve money" (Twitchell, 1999, p. 30).

In the context of broader educational issues, *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools* (Barlow & Robertson, 1994) provides a starting point for understanding commercialism. Barlow and Robertson articulate the negative trends in public education: "Canadians are engaged in a struggle over their institutions that is taking on the characteristics of class warfare" (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. vi). The authors place our current educational challenges within a social and economic context:

On one side stand those who have embraced the free market as the means and purpose of participation in public life. On the other are those who must live with the effects of a system dedicated, by definition, to the acquisition of privilege and profit. This is an ideological conflict. (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. vi)

Having established this underlying clash between corporate and public interests, the authors describe what they consider to be the myths surrounding public education in an increasingly corporate world: schools are failing children in a variety of ways, graduates have no job ready skills, and corporations are creating jobs that graduates cannot fill. (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, pp. 23-61). After debunking these myths, they define what businesses want from the institutions they sponsor: to secure the ideological allegiance of young people, to gain access to the market that students represent, and to transform public institutions into training centers for transnational corporations (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, pp. 77-93).

One criticism of Barlow and Robertson is that their overtly anti-business stance diminishes their objectivity and thereby decreases their credibility. This explains why political opponents dismiss their work as "having no basis in fact" and driven by an "ideological agenda which figures so prominently in their work" (Bloom, 1996, p. 123). In promoting the merits of publicly funded schools, Barlow and Robertson are indeed taking a left-wing political stance. Their criticism of those who want more business involvement in schools does not necessarily

suggest a lack of balance. The effect is the opposite: writing with an overt moral position suggests transparency and intellectual honesty.

Barlow and Robertson assign very reasonable motivations to those who seek to commercialize public education. Given that the essential principal of the corporation is to maximize revenue, corporate leaders are acting reasonably:

Some corporate leaders may have a personal sense of philanthropy to the community or the less privileged, but the business of business is to make money. It is not in a business leader's interest to challenge a system under which so few can earn so much and give back so little. (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 78)

This type of straightforward analysis provides a strong foundation on which the authors build their case against the commercialization of public education. Despite its left leaning politics, *Class Warfare* would prepare one for participating meaningfully on either side of the debate, whether to protect public education or profit from it. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the ideas put forth by Michael Bloom, a prominent defender of corporate involvement in schools.

As a Senior Research Associate for the National Business and Education Center and the Conference Board of Canada, Michael Bloom is an advocate of corporate involvement in public education. In his essay "Corporate Involvement in Curriculum: Partnership Not Coercion", he defends corporate involvement in schools: "Business people want to work with educators to enhance the quality of the already superior education system being delivered at every level" (Bloom, 1996, p. 119).

Unlike Barlow and Robertson, a lack of thoroughness does mar Bloom's argument. Whereas Barlow and Robertson provide a reasonable explanation for business's desire to participate in public education, Bloom offers no explanation for the concerns that reasonable people have about corporations in schools. For him, the view "that business people wish for...the privatization of public education – has no basis in fact" (Bloom, 1996, p. 121). This article provides little insight into the case against

businesses partnering with schools. The result is a problematic lack of balance. Rather than acknowledge the conflicting values at the heart of the debate, Bloom shrugs of his critics by suggesting their concerns are not based in fact but are, one is left to conclude, imaginary.

The absence of an accurate depiction of the case *for* corporate involvement in education further reduces the credibility of Bloom's argument. He states that despite "the fears of some commentators and educators that there is a secret agenda for education that is being pushed by a faceless group of backroom corporate conspiracists, the reality is much different." (Bloom, 1996, p. 119) We are led to believe that businesses want nothing more than to improve the quality of Canadian public education. Bloom does not acknowledge that business involvement in schools is necessarily related to their primary objective of maximizing revenue, either in the short or long run. This oversight significantly undermines his credibility.

For conclusive evidence that a "faceless group of backroom corporate conspiracists", in this case blue chip investors, are indeed working for the privatization of public education, one need only read the business literature itself. In 1999, Merrill Lynch published its *In-depth Report, The Book of Knowledge: Investing in the Growing Education and Training Industry* (Moe, Bailey, Lau, 1999). The document, written to promote investment in education, advances the case for privatizing public education. It is a most significant piece of literature in that the strategy for privatizing public education is clearly articulated, not by those who oppose it, but by Merrill-Lynch, one of the largest, most respected and best known American financial institutions. The following citations prove that there is significant investment interest already working toward the conversion of American public education into a for profit enterprise:

The \$360 billion [U.S.] K-12 segment is the largest in the education industry, but is the most difficult to invest in. Impediments to change include the entrenched status quo that argues for more time and more money to improve the current dismal situation.

It is our prediction that 10% of the publicly funded K-12 school market will be privately managed ten years from now, implying a market of over \$30 billion in today's dollars.

The compelling dynamics of the education industry have not been lost on investors. This sector has attracted significant interest from leading financiers, venture capitalists and visionary business leaders. Since 1994, 38 IPOs [initial public stock offerings] have been completed, raising \$3.4 billion of equity. Education is nearly 10% of the GDP, yet just 0.2% of U.S. capital markets.... In our view, this will result in sustainable high P/E [price to earning] ratios in the sector and significant opportunity for investors. (Moe, Bailey, & Lau, 1999, p. 2)

These quotations, coming from Merrill Lynch, confirm the suspicion that public education, given its immense value is an appealing target for revenue seeking corporations. The \$3.4 billion (US) that had already been raised through stock offerings by April of 1999, for the purpose of entering into the public education market, leaves little doubt as to the goals of big business. The fact that this document is an American publication does not make it less relevant to the study of corporate sponsorship in Canadian communities. Given the multi-national nature of corporations and the nature of our North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Canadian public education is equally vulnerable to the investment objectives confirmed in the Merrill Lynch document.

One of the most outspoken critics of commercialism in schools is Alex Molnar, Professor and Director of the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) at Arizona State University. CERU has monitored media references to commercialism in schools since 1990. CERU defines and tracks media references to eight categories of commercial activity in schools through searches on news archival services. (Molnar, 2003a, p. 2). The eight categories are sponsorship of programs and activities, exclusive arrangements, incentive programs, appropriation of space, sponsored educational materials, electronic marketing,

fundraising and the private management of public education.

Molnar's research provides useful quantitative data regarding the increasing prevalence of commercial activity in schools. In the July 2002-June 2003 study period, for example, six of the eight categories saw a considerable rise in references compared to the 2001-2002 study (Molnar, 2003b, p. 1). Molnar understands that this debate hinges on "fundamental issues of public policy, curriculum content, the proper relationship of educators to the students entrusted to them, and the values that the schools embody" (Molnar, 2003a, p. 10). Unlike Bloom's attempt to dismiss his opponents by declaring their arguments to have no basis in fact, Molnar understands the complexity and contentiousness of the issues. It is in this context that administrators, coping with diminishing public funds, must make difficult decisions to accept or refuse contracts and money from corporations.

Water, Water Everywhere:

On a hot August afternoon in the summer of 2003, after using my last few coins for parking, I (S. Cook) began the fifteen-minute walk from UBC's Parking Lot B to the Faculty of Education. A few moments later, in search of a drinking fountain, I stepped into the state-of-the-art Forest Sciences Centre that lies en route. To my surprise, there were no public drinking fountains in the building.

My preference for waiting to find a drinking fountain, rather than buying Dasani Water from one of the many Coca-Cola machines in the Forest Sciences Centre, both for environmental and financial reasons, was irrelevant as I had spent my last coins on parking. Not to be disheartened, I continued on to the Faculty of Education where I knew there to be fountains

Ten minutes later, the walk and my failed attempt to find water having accentuated my thirst, I arrived at the Faculty of Education, located in the Scarfe Building. To my chagrin, the first fountain I came across had been neatly covered in clear plastic. I walked to where I remembered another fountain to be only to discover that it too had been covered in plastic.

In fact, as I would soon learn, every fountain in the building, save one in the basement, had been neatly bagged.

As I walked through the Scarfe Building, I recalled having read of students elsewhere who had suspected their university of diminishing access to drinking fountains in order to promote beverage sales. I shook my head in disbelief at the possibility.

For the time being, however, I was genuinely frustrated by my inability to quench my thirst. A Coke machine selling Dasani water, conspicuously placed at the main entrance sometime after I had completed my Bachelor of Education in 1997, reminded me that my circumstantial lack of funds was also playing a role in my inability to find water.

These events initiated an ongoing investigation of a direct correlation between the removal or disabling of 114 drinking fountains, 44% of all drinking fountains on campus,¹ and UBC's signing of a lucrative cold-beverage contract with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. This is a troubling account of how a significant number of students and staff were persuaded, over the course of approximately six years, of the false notion that the tap water at UBC was unfit for consumption. Whether the result of misunderstanding and excess credulity, or a willful misrepresentation of the facts in order to sell more beverages, the result was the same: the University's actions placed undue pressure on students and staff to consume Coca-Cola products, including Dasani Water, and thereby increase sales revenue for both the university and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company.

After wandering the halls, quiet in the final days of August, I came across two instructors of whom I asked why the fountains were covered in plastic. They suggested two

¹ In a letter dated February 9, 2004, UBC Vice-President-Administration and Finance, states that there are "some 165 water fountains on campus". Seventeen of these were covered in plastic. Before UBC plumbers removed ninety-seven fountains, between 1997-1999, there would have been 262 fountains. Therefore, 44% represents the total number of disabled or removed fountains, 114, expressed as percentage of the previous total of 262 fountains on campus.

possible explanations: either the water was not safe to drink due to old pipes or, rumor had it, it was somehow related to the contract with Coca-Cola. One instructor offered me a coffee cup to fill from the faucets in the washroom. I thanked him but chose to grapple with my thirst until I could find a working fountain, which I eventually did a few hundred meters away in the Student Union Building.

During the next few months, as I settled into life as a graduate student, my curiosity about the fountains persisted. On Thursday, November 6th, 2003, I began a formal investigation by emailing the Dean of the Faculty of Education (FoE): "Since returning to Scarfe in August," I began, "I have been quite curious as to why all the drinking fountains are covered in plastic. If you could take a moment to explain the reason for this I would certainly appreciate it" (Cook, 2003).

The following day, the dean forwarded my email to the Director of Administration of the FoE (Building Director). On Tuesday, November 11th, the Building Director emailed me the following explanation:

UBC Plant Operations actually covered them quite some time ago, as they had concerns about the quality of the water, which is affected by our 40-year-old (sic) plumbing system. Many of our administrative offices within the building are therefore forced to purchase commercial water from Canadian Springs because of this deficiency...the building water supply is currently being tested by the UBC Utilities Office to ensure that it can be properly filtered in such a way that no possible contaminants such as lead, or whatever, remain in the supply after it has been filtered. Assuming this can be achieved, we plan to install such a filtered system in the ESA [Education Students Association] Lounge (Scarfe room 2F). It is a significant problem and I appreciate your concern. As you are a CUST [Curriculum Studies graduate] student I understand you have access to bottled water through your department, which provides a supply in,

the CUST photocopy room. (Building Director, 2003)

The fact that the Director responded publicly on the faculty and staff email list became apparent when, that same day, I received a number of related emails.

One staff member, who did not send her message publicly², emailed to offer other reasons for closing the fountains: "Besides the old piping and horrible tasting water, the cleaning staff got tired of cleaning out fountains that had coffee dumped into them." Furthermore, "[W]hen the building was renovated, the pipes didn't get redone!" Her message reiterated the widely held belief that the water was contaminated due to "old piping" and introduced the alternative explanation that the cleaning staff had grown tired of cleaning them. It is worth noting that in her view, preference also played a role i.e. that the cleaning staff, and those who employed them, *preferred* not to maintain fountains.

I received another email from a recent doctoral graduate from the FoE at UBC, who wrote the following:

I'm interested in your pursuing the matter of drinking fountains in Scarfe... Last year one of the students running for an ESA position claimed that the fountains were disabled because there was some deal with the bottled water suppliers. The other interesting thing about Win Hunter's letter is that he assumed since your personal needs were being taken care of (i.e. you are a CUST [Curriculum Studies] student and therefore have access to bottled water) that you should not care if other people's needs aren't being met.

² Throughout this article, only those sources that meet at least one of the following criteria are identified: they gave permission to publish their words, their words were previously published, or their professional responsibilities within a public institution include being accountable for that on which they provided information.

On Tuesday, November 11th, a Professor at the Faculty of Education sent the Building Director the following email:

Thank you very much. In thinking about our own coffee-making (and that of other offices on our wing) for which we use tap water, I think we will have to move to bottled water. But that led me to the next question: are coffees and teas in Edibles [the FoE cafeteria] made with tap water?

This faculty member recognized some significant inconsistencies with the administration's claim that the water was not safe to drink. The cafeteria appeared to be using the "contaminated" tap water, and there had been no effort to prevent consumption from faucets throughout the building. Furthermore, this professor articulated an example of how the belief that the fountain water is contaminated leads one to consume more bottled water.

Since the Building Director had responded publicly, on Wednesday, November 12, I sent an email to him and my advisor, Dr. Stephen Petrina, asking the latter to forward my message through the FoE email list:

In the brief note that Dr. ... cc'd to me, he posed what I thought was an interesting question: are the coffees and teas in Edibles made with Scarfe tap water? I inquired and, sure enough, they are. But that's just one example of how the covering of fountains is a little difficult to understand. Given that the water is [presumed to be] below acceptable health standards for drinking, would not common sense suggest that serious steps should be taken to prevent people from consuming the water in any way i.e. coffee, tea, soup or just filling their water containers in the washroom? I think that UBC is putting themselves at risk in allowing unsafe water to come out of faucets with no warning whatsoever. In fact, I know a number of students who regularly fill their water bottles from the taps in the washrooms.

If it is not too much of a problem, I would be most interested in knowing what exactly is in the water that makes it unfit for consumption, and how far out of the range of acceptability it is.

Although the evidence was not yet available, the absence of any warning against the consumption of water from the faucets was a strong indication that there was no real threat from "possible contaminants such as lead" (Building Director, 2003). One can reasonably assume that if the water contained dangerous amounts of lead, for example, UBC would have taken immediate action to prevent harm befalling students and staff.

That same day, in response to the above-mentioned query, the Building Director, expecting that "Food Services [had] recognized the condemned Scarfe water supply at the fountains and addressed the problem in an appropriate way", referred the message to the Director of Food Services at UBC. The Director of Food Services responded on November 12th:

Thanks for your questions and I'm pleased to bring you a good answer! Tap water is used, however, all coffee brewers, hot water dispensers and bulk beverage dispensers on campus have had an "after market" filtration system added to them. We added these about five years ago at great initial and on-going cost (filter replacement) but it is well worth it as the quality of water on campus is the worst in the city. Believe it or not, the GVRD tests the water here on campus and if it is OK here they assume that it is OK everywhere!!

The Director of Food Services' email offered an example of how the defense of the contaminated water theory created an atmosphere at UBC that tolerated a number of unsubstantiated claims.

Is doubtful that the GVRD (Greater Vancouver Regional District) would make *assumptions* regarding water safety. That they would base their assumptions concerning the quality of water "everywhere" on the quality of water at UBC is entirely untenable. The Director of Food Services' assertions, the last in string of claims that did not stand up to scrutiny, persuaded me that there was likely very little substance to the claim of contaminated water.

Petrina expressed a similar opinion in his email to the Building Director, dated November 19th, 2003:

Other buildings on campus built in 1962 still have their water flowing from the fountains. For example, the Lasserre Building, built in 1962 like the Scarfe, has open fountains; however, and this is the kicker, Lasserre does NOT have a massive coke [sic] machine greeting their students and visitors at the entrance. There is no a priori reason to believe that educators are more gullible than architects, so something else...is at work....It would help if the Dean could answer these questions....Instead of sinking more money into bottled drinks and filters, which don't work anyhow, why not sink the students' money into fountain repairs and something sustainable? And, just for the record, does the faculty directly or indirectly profit from the sales of coke [sic] products.

Petrina's comparison of the Scarfe building with the Lasserre building was one more piece of evidence that further undermined the claim that Scarfe's water was not safe for consumption. I therefore determined to test the alternate hypothesis: that the diminished access to drinking fountains was related not to contaminated water, but to the presence of a cold-beverage contract with Coca-Cola.

The surest way to provide conclusive evidence either supporting or refuting the contaminated water hypothesis was to test the water. On Wednesday, November 19th, I drove to the Burnaby office of JR Laboratories Inc. and obtained two sterilized plastic water bottles: one to test for metal contaminants, the other for bacteria. Later, while filling the plastic bottles from a sink in a first-floor Scarfe classroom, a male student looked up from his group-work and warned me to not drink the water, dude. He added that the water in the building was of very poor quality. In so doing, he provided more anecdotal evidence of the extent to which the contaminated water claim, supported by the sight of bagged drinking fountains, had permeated the school culture.

After filling the two water bottles, I returned to Burnaby to submit the samples and pay the \$160.50 fee for testing, a considerable sum for the vast majority of students, myself included.

Coke Enrolls (at) UBC

The next step was to investigate the contract that the University of British Columbia had with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. The confidential nature of the cold-beverage contract, signed by UBC, the Alma Mater Society (AMS), and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company in August of 1995, had been controversial from the start. That same year, Stanley Tromp, then a reporter with *The Ubyyssey*, the UBC student newspaper, began a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests that would, after five years and two Supreme Court hearings, result in the contract being made public and placed on reserve in the UBC Law Library.

According to Steve Clark, Coca-Cola's Western Canada spokesperson, Coke wanted to keep the terms of deal confidential "to protect the business terms and proprietary information that was in the contract from falling into the hands of the competitor" (Choo 2001). It is also these "business terms" that provide a very compelling motivation for taking action to maximize the sale of cold beverages on the UBC campus.

The contract provides UBC with two sources of revenue. First, UBC receives an \$844,260 "annual sponsorship fee" for each of the contract's ten years between August 1995 and August 2005. Furthermore, the university receives a 23% commission "that shall be payable monthly on the fifteenth day of each month in respect of Net Revenues from Vending Machines for the previous month." This payment "shall be accompanied by a monthly report...setting out the volume of Cold Beverage Products [including water] ...dispensed ...for such a previous month" (Agreement Among the University of British Columbia and the Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia and Coca-Cola Bottling Company Ltd., 1995, p. 27).

The most persuasive motivation for selling more beverages is the penalty that UBC faces for failing to meet the volume quota set out in the contract. In the event of a "Commitment Shortfall," where UBC fails to sell the "Minimum Volume Commitment" of 33,600,000 cans or bottles of Coke beverages, including water, by August 2005, the contract is

extended for two years or until the quota is met, at no expense to the Coca-Cola Bottling Company (Agreement Among the University of British Columbia and the Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia and Coca-Cola Bottling Company Ltd., 1995, p. 29). Consequently, beginning in August of 2005, the University and the Alma Mater Society would stand to lose up to \$1.7 million in revenue for failing to sell the contractual volume of Coca-Cola products.

It was widely acknowledged that U.B.C. would not likely to meet this target. In January 2004, Brian Duong, Vice President of Finance for the AMS reported that they "could fill up the Empire Swimming Pool [at UBC] with Coke and we still wouldn't make it [the quota]" (Thomas, 2003). The likelihood of not meeting their quota would have been apparent to whomever was reviewing "the monthly report[s]...setting out the volume of Cold Beverages dispensed...", if not in the contract's first year (1995 to 1996) then certainly in the second (1996-1997). Simply multiplying the volume of beverages dispensed in the first two years by five would have made clear the financial loss on the horizon.

Faced with such a contract, on course to lose the considerable sum of \$1.7 million in revenue, one can reasonably conclude that those responsible for negotiating and/or administering such terms would have cause for concern. It therefore seems logical that some action would have been taken to augment the sale of beverages on campus. To draw such a conclusion is not unreasonable; to the contrary, it would be surprising to discover that the university had *not* attempted to remedy this situation.

One obvious course of action would have been to inform whoever was responsible for the sale of cold beverages of this looming shortfall and to implement a strategy for increasing beverage sales through promotional and/or marketing strategies. Again, reason suggests that the Director of Food Services, Andrew Parr, the person responsible for selling beverages on campus, would have been aware of the need to increase beverage sales. Along with marketing and promotional strategies, another strategy for increasing beverage sales exists:

discourage the consumption of a competing product.

Although distasteful to some, the idea that the free water provided by drinking fountains is undesirable competition is a notion that the Coca-Cola Company takes very seriously. In the documentary *The Cola Conquest* (Angelico, 1998) concerning the history of Coca-Cola, Roberto Goizueta, then Chairman and CEO of the Coca-Cola Company, articulates his intent to conquer the competition that tap water, among other beverages, represents to the sale of Coca-Cola products:

Right now at this point in time in the United States, people consume more soft drinks than any other liquid, including ordinary tap water. If we take full advantage of our opportunities, some day, not too many years into our second century, we will see the same wave catching on in market after market until, eventually the number one beverage on earth will not be tea or coffee or wine or beer, it will be soft drinks, our soft drinks. (Angelico, 1998)

In 1997, the second year of UBC's beverage contract, the Coca-Cola Company, in its annual report, included the following text next to a photo of a drinking fountain:

Because some fountain drinks are still easier to find.[sic] In many places it's still easier to find a water fountain than a Coca-Cola. That's why we continue to strengthen our distribution system. We're working hard to make our products an integral part of any landscape so they are always within reach. (Adbusters, 1999, p. 57)

This "strengthening" of the "distribution system" is exactly what was accomplished in both the Faculty of Education and the Forest Sciences Centre. In both buildings, Coca-Cola products were "always in reach", while public drinking fountains were, as I had discovered that August afternoon, much more difficult, if not impossible, to find. Covering existing fountains with plastic and constructing new buildings with no public fountains were not the only means by which Coca-Cola's distribution systems were strengthened.

In an article written for the *Georgia Straight* in June 1999, journalist Stanley Tromp, the same reporter who fought to make UBC's Coca-Cola contract public, reported that ninety-seven fountains had been "accidentally" removed in seventeen buildings across the university campus:

A UBC study in 1994 found that most of the fountains' water quality was safe but that two fountains in a pre-1960 building had slightly higher than expected lead levels and needed to be removed. They were built with copper pipe using lead solder, which eventually leaches into the water system. UBC plant-operations director Paul Becker issued a work order in 1997 to remove the two fountains and repair others. But former UBC plumbing-shop staffers misinterpreted "repair" as "remove", Becker said, and pulled 97 fountains in 17 buildings. "I think at that time we should have been more proactive at looking at other options and communicating better to campus," he told the *Georgia Straight*. Several reasons were offered by the plumbing shop for the removal: some of the fountains were in washrooms, which building codes no longer allow; they were costly to maintain; they often broke down, with no spare parts available; and the galvanized piping produced a bad taste. (Tromp, 1999)

Again, we see the same inconsistent logic that characterized the bagging of fountains in the Scarfe Building. Paul Becker's relative insouciance for a mistake that removed tens of thousands of dollars worth of fountains, to say nothing of labor costs, seems inappropriate to say the least. (Consider the consequences if ninety-seven toilets, an item of similar monetary value, had been mistakenly removed.) One imagines that such egregious incompetence would certainly have resulted in some measure of disciplinary action, at the very least a warning for those responsible for the mistake. Instead, Mr. Becker suggests that he "should have been more proactive at looking at other options and communicating better to campus."

As for the staff plumbers, they appear to know nothing of their very costly, not to mention time-consuming, blunder. Quite to the

contrary, they offer five different explanations for removing the fountains, not one of which corroborates Mr. Becker's claim that they had misinterpreted "repair" as "remove."

The timeline of the affair also raises a number of important questions. Certainly, over the course of two years, Mr. Becker would have learned that his staff plumbers were in the process of *removing* ninety-five fountains, rather than *repairing* them, as his work order had instructed. For this there are two possible explanations. First, Mr. Becker displayed an extraordinary disregard for what his plumbers were undertaking for two years. This is doubtful given his subsequent promotion to Associate Vice-President of Facilities Management at the University of Saskatchewan. The second explanation is that he had indeed directed the staff plumbers to remove the fountains for the same reasons the plumbing shop had explained to *The Georgia Straight*. The latter seems much more plausible, given that he did not seem particularly bothered by such an extremely costly oversight.

The timeline of these events poses another troubling question: if the tests demonstrating "slightly higher than acceptable lead levels" in two fountains were conducted in 1994, why did Paul Becker, then Director of Plant Operations, wait until 1997 to issue a work order to "remove the two fountains and repair others" (Tromp 1999)? Taken at its word, this demonstrates a half-hearted commitment to public safety similar to that which characterized the apparent concerns for contaminated water in the Scarfe Building. More likely, the delay demonstrated that the UBC fountains did not pose a particularly grave threat.

This timeline lends further support to the correlation between the introduction of corporate sponsorship contract with Coca-Cola, and the loss of 44% of the fountains on the UBC campus. In 1995, one year after the UBC water study, UBC entered into the contractual agreement with the Coca-Cola bottling company. In 1997, the year that the UBC administration had solid numerical evidence that they were not likely to meet their ten-year sales quota, Paul Becker issued a work order resulting in the removal of ninety-seven fountains in fourteen buildings. It is also at this time that

seventeen of eighteen drinking fountains in the Faculty of Education were covered in plastic and a Coca-Cola beverage dispenser was placed at the front entrance. In the first year of the Coca-Cola contract, in the winter of 1995, construction began on the Forest Sciences Centre, built with a \$47 million provincial grant and containing "leading edge technology equipment" and "state-of-the-art value-added manufacturing equipment" (FSC 2004). As stated earlier, there are no public drinking fountains in the building.

During the last week of December 2003, I visited the FoE Building Director to establish the dates the fountains were covered and who had issued the work order. He was unable to tell me the date but did confirm that it was approximately six or seven years previous. He did not know who had covered them. He also informed me that in response to my request he had undertaken to have the water in the Scarfe Building tested. He then showed me a report from Levelton Analytical Services, dated November 21st, 2003, proving the water to be safe to drink. He also reminded me of the filtered water dispenser that was available in the ESA Lounge in the basement of the Scarfe Building.

When asked why the fountains needed to be covered if the water was safe to drink, he suggested that perhaps somebody had complained about the taste. I asked if he thought it suspicious that fountains providing perfectly safe water for over forty years had been covered in the first years of the university's signing a very lucrative contract with a beverage company that sold, among other drinks, bottled water. He responded that he did not believe that such a motivation [to sell more beverages] was behind the covering of the fountains. He had "more faith in his fellow man" than to suspect that anyone would do such a thing. The FoE Building Director provided me with a printout of a UBC media release concerning the details of how the revenue from the Coca-Cola sponsorship was spent. He also suggested people were not interested in using the fountains since tastes in water had changed: he cited his own household use of a Brita Filter as evidence of this change.

On December 3rd, 2003, the results of the \$160.50 water test that I had undertaken were reported. Not surprisingly, the water was perfectly safe.

Changing Tastes:

The explanations offered by university administrators— that the water was contaminated, that a two-year work order was unknowingly misinterpreted, and that they were simply responding to changing tastes— serve only to increase complexity. The first explanation proved to be categorically false; the second is unlikely, given the timeline and conflicting explanations for removing fountains; and the third suggests that the presence of a "tastier" commercial option provides a legitimate rationale for limiting access to a basic necessity such as a clean, safe source of drinking water. Furthermore, none of these explains why this unprecedented phenomenon happened at the same time as the introduction of a very demanding quota for beverage sales. This set of explanations requires an acceptance of falsehoods, inconsistencies, conflicting interpretations, unsubstantiated claims and an extraordinary coincidence. Rather than simplifying our understanding of the phenomenon, these explanations complicate it.

The introduction of an extremely lucrative corporate contract brought with it a greater commitment to a new set of values, corporate values, which have less regard for the benefit of providing free drinking water for public consumption when it can be provided more profitably through private distribution. When senior administrators' commitment to providing this public service waned, a number of rationales appeared to warrant the disabling and/or removal of drinking fountains: rumors of contaminated water, changing tastes, expensive maintenance, and, of course, the capacity of such an action to help generate revenue.

When asked why the fountains were taken out of service, those responsible would quite naturally avoid the most politically contentious reason i.e. they no longer value the fountains, and cite what appeared to be the reason most likely to deflect further questioning: that the water was unsafe. Since other UBC

administrators share this new set of values, the reasoning was accepted.

As the consequences of actions taken in light of these new values became apparent, i.e. fewer fountains and more people drinking bottled water, the UBC community accepted this as evidence supporting the initial rationale for disabling the fountains. The sight of bagged fountains and the absence of fountains altogether further strengthened the view that UBC water was unsafe. (Recall the student who said do not drink the water, dude.) This error in reasoning is called a circular argument: one uses the existence of a phenomenon, such as the belief that the water is unsafe, as a justification for the actions that helped to create the phenomenon in the first place.

One problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that the most objective rationale, that the water is unsafe, is also the easiest to disprove. Another problem is that all of this was taking place at a university, an institution that promotes research, critical thinking and the falsification of hypotheses. It was only a matter of time before somebody applied these skills to understanding what happened to the drinking fountains.

We do not believe that the participants that we met personally intentionally misrepresented themselves. It is reasonable to assume, however, that some of those responsible for selling more beverages understood the positive impact that diminished access to fountains would have on beverage sales, just as a number of students and professors had. Furthermore, the discrepancy between former UBC plant-operations director Paul Becker's explanation for the "accidental" removal of ninety-seven fountains and the plumbers' explanation certainly merits further investigation.

We do not claim that this is part of a conspiracy theory. Conspiracies require a great amount of time and secrecy, both of which are in very short supply in public institutions. Furthermore, the accusation that a group of people has conspired is difficult to prove and easily dismissed as the product of an overly imaginative mind.

Not surprisingly, those defending the university's actions would later claim that our

hypothesis was part of a conspiracy theory (Steffenhagen, 2004). Their use of the term appears to be a rhetorical device aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the concerns that this investigation raises. In any case, a conspiracy is hardly necessary for accomplishing an ethically questionable goal, such as removing fountains, when those with the power to enact steps toward accomplishing it share an understanding of the perceived benefit of the goal.

More likely, and in many ways more troubling, the diminished access to free water on campus is the result of a profound value-shift. The current UBC administration increasingly measures value by the amount of revenue it can generate, and costs it can eliminate, and less by its ability to offer the best possible learning environment for its students in a way that places the least financial burden on them.

The cold-beverage contract and the correlating loss of 44% of drinking fountains are manifestations of how UBC, an institution with \$1.1 billion in yearly revenue (UBC, 2005), has increasingly espoused corporate values. So pervasive among senior administrators are the values that underpin the view that water is now better i.e. more profitably, provided through a private distribution system, that few members of the UBC community publicly questioned the unsubstantiated and inconsistent reasoning offered for diminishing access to fountains.

Other examples of the manifestation of corporate values include the escalating tuition costs, luxury condominium development in lieu of providing affordable housing, numerous corporate sponsorship arrangements, corporate driven research, and a 63% salary increase for President and Vice-Chancellor Martha Piper while teaching assistant wages remained frozen (Good, Smith, Burgess, 2003).

The absence of a conspiracy in many ways accentuates the troubling nature of the events that took place at UBC and the value-shift that is at their root. The parable of the emperor's new clothes reminds us of the all-too-human capacity to overlook or be oblivious to unsubstantiated claims, especially those made by people in positions of authority. To question the claims made by those with authority over us risks creating a difficult dilemma. If the

question leads one to believe that those in power have erred, or worse, acted unethically, we are left with two disagreeable options: we can do nothing and suffer a sense of guilt and powerlessness or we can take action and risk opprobrium and retribution. The least threatening course of action is to avoid the dilemma altogether by not questioning the claims of our superiors. In short, to have more faith in one's fellow man, to borrow an administrator's phrase.

Sadly, the twentieth century is strewn with examples of our willingness to unquestionably accept the actions of those in charge, or worse yet, apply faulty reasoning in their defense. This is especially true during times of a radical and pervasive change.

The diminished commitment to providing free drinking water at UBC is just one example of the extent to which an alarming shift in the values underlying North American educational institutions (and the bodies that fund them) is underway. In his recent book, *Universities in the Marketplace*, Derek Bok (2003), former President of Harvard University and Dean of Harvard Law School argues that the desire for profit is at the heart of this shift:

the profit motive shifts the focus from providing the best learning experience that available resources allow toward raising prices and cutting costs as much as possible with out losing customers. (Bok, 2003, p. 108)

In the case of the water fountains, the *price* of water was raised, as more students felt the need to buy their water, and the *cost* of maintaining the fountains was lowered. The combination of the two very likely augmented the profit both for UBC and Coca-Cola.

Of course the principal advantage of corporate sponsorships for educational institutions is that they generate money that the university can then spend on programs, research, facilities, etc. When UBC was forced to make public the details of their previously confidential contract, their May 2001 media release emphasized the benefit of the additional money:

Thus far, UBC's revenues from the [Coke] agreement have supported a range of student activities, including:

- ❑ 2.4 million to the AMS, student athletics and events
- ❑ sponsorships
- ❑ \$640,000 to improve disability access
- ❑ \$525,000 allocated to the UBC Library last year
- ❑ \$100,000 for UBC's most recent open house (UBC, 2001)

The tangible benefit of the money is of course the central reason for engaging in these contracts in the first place.

Conversely, the cost of these sponsorships is much more difficult to calculate. The impact on the fountains at UBC is just one example of how corporate sponsorship, and the underlying shift in values are manifested. According to Bok, the desire to maximize revenue at universities also threatens to undermine academic standards, to introduce bias to research, to undermine collegiality and trust in the academic community, and to damage the university's standing with the community. (Bok, 2003, pp. 105-115).

Bok draws a similar conclusion when considering the negative effects of increased commercialization in universities:

At a time when cynicism is so prevalent and the need for reliable information is so important, any damage to the reputation of universities, and to the integrity and objectivity of their scholars, weakens not only the academy but the functioning of our democratic, self-governing society. That is quite a price to pay for the limited, often exaggerated gains that commercialization brings to even the best-known institutions. (Bok, 2003, p. 118)

"Let Them Drink Coke":

Given the far-reaching implications of my conclusions, we determined to do that which researchers strive to do: to allow findings to contribute to the general understanding of the subject. With this in mind, on Friday January 23rd, 2003, Cook hand-delivered the following three-page letter the office of Dr. Martha Piper, President and Vice-Chancellor of UBC:

January 21, 2004

Attn: Martha Piper (President, Vice-chancellor, University of British Columbia)

Re: Reimbursement for \$160.50 spent on testing the water at the Faculty of Education

Dear Dr. Piper:

Please accept this request for reimbursement of the \$160.50 (see attached copy of the receipt) that I spent to test the water at the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. This test confirms my suspicion that the faculty's drinking fountains have remained covered in plastic for approximately six years for what appear to be unsubstantiated reasons. As a fellow educator, this has compelled me to pose some very troubling questions about the conditions that allowed this to happen.

When I arrived on campus in August of 2003, I discovered 17 of the 18 fountains at the Faculty of Education were covered in plastic. I was told by U.B.C. staff that there were "concerns about the quality of the water" and "that the quality of the water on campus is the worst in the city." It was suggested that there were "possible contaminants such as lead in the water."

These explanations were unsatisfactory for the following reasons: the Faculty of Education cafeteria served the same water in their coffee and tea, one fountain remained open with no warning whatsoever, and no warnings were placed on washroom faucets. Furthermore, when I contacted the City of Vancouver, who is responsible for regularly testing the water at U.B.C., and who by law must be informed of any unsafe water in a public distribution system, they knew nothing of the allegedly unsafe water.

I therefore took a water sample from the Faculty of Education and paid JR Laboratories Inc. in Burnaby \$160.50 to analyze it. The analysis proved the water to be entirely safe for consumption.

Although I have asked plant management repeatedly, they have not been able to tell me exactly when the fountains were covered or who made the decision to cover them. From what I have been able to gather, it appears they were covered sometime around 1997. Given that the water is entirely drinkable, an important question remains: why were students and staff denied access to free drinking water? A number of people at the university have suggested the likelihood of a correlation between the fountains being covered and the very lucrative cold-beverage contract that U.B.C. has with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. Here is some of the evidence that supports this hypothesis:

1. U.B.C. receives an \$844,260 "annual sponsorship fee" for each of the ten years between August 1995 and August 2005, as well as 23% of net revenue from selling exclusively Coca-Cola beverages, including bottled water.
2. If U.B.C. does not sell 33,600,000 cans or bottles of Coke beverages by August 2005, the contract is extended for two years or until the quota is met, at no expense to the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. It has been reported that U.B.C. is not likely to meet this target. This means that starting in 2005, the University stands to lose \$1.7 million for not selling enough cold beverages, including bottled water.
3. Between 1995 and 1997, the first two years of the beverage contract and roughly the same time the fountains were covered in plastic, U.B.C. plumbers "misinterpreted repair as remove" and mistakenly tore out 97 fountains in 17 buildings. They claimed the water did not taste good and that the fountains were too costly to maintain.
4. Many new buildings, such as the Forest Sciences Centre, have no fountains whatsoever.
5. The idea that drinking fountains represent competition and therefore detract from the sale of Coke beverages was circulated in the Coca-Cola Company's Annual Report in 1997. It stated that "(I)n many places, it's easier to find a water fountain than a Coca-Cola. That's why we

continue to strengthen our distribution system. We're working hard to make our products an integral part of any landscape so they are always within easy reach."

6. 1997 was about the time that a Coke vending machine, that also sells water, appeared at the entrance of the Faculty of Education.

This information suggests a strong co-relation between the signing of a very lucrative exclusive beverage contract and the restricting of access to free water for unsubstantiated reasons. It is very unlikely that 17 of 18 fountains would have remained out of service for approximately six years had not water been for sale at that time. It would appear more than coincidental that, after almost a century of the institution's existence, the fountains at U.B.C. became problematic in the second year of a lucrative beverage contract. It seems reasonable to conclude that U.B.C.'s diminished commitment to providing free water through fountains was influenced by the fact that the university profits immensely from the sale of water.

It now appears that the university measures its success more by the amount of revenue it can generate and less by its ability to offer the best possible learning environment in a way that places the least financial burden on students. For those who care deeply about the quality of Canadian post-secondary education, this is a most troubling development.

For many of us, it is heartbreaking to see U.B.C. behaving more and more like the corporations that are sponsoring it: giving a nod to the public good, while its true goal appears to be maximizing revenue. More often than not, the victims are students who feel compelled to pay \$1.50 each time they need a drink of water.

For the last six years, U.B.C. has seen their revenues increase as a result of covering perfectly good fountains in plastic. That is a fact. Regardless of the reasons, this is a very problematic situation. Perhaps most egregiously, students and staff at one of our country's most respected universities were made to believe the entirely false notion that U.B.C. tap water is undrinkable.

It is my sincere belief that the time and money I have spent on this has been in the University's best interest. It is with this in mind that I am asking to be reimbursed by the University of British Columbia for \$160.50. Furthermore, I would ask that you have the plastic removed from the fountains in the Faculty of Education and ensure that students have easy access to free drinking water.

I would be my pleasure to discuss this with you further.

Most sincerely,

Sean Cook

A rapidly expanding volume of research (Bakan, 2004; Bok, 2003; Klein, 2000; Korten, 1996; Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Saul, 1998; Ungerleider, 2003) suggests that the public institutions on which democracies rest are threatened by a rising tide of corporate values (see also Petrina & Weir, this issue of *Workplace*). It is vital that this debate involve the public whose institutions are at stake. With this in mind, on Sunday, January 25th, Cook faxed a press release to a number of media institutions throughout the Lower Mainland. The considerable media response underscores the public concern.

On Monday, January 26th, Radio-Canada Television, CTV, Global TV, and CBC Radio sent reporters to investigate the correlation between the diminished access to

water fountains and UBC's contract with Coca-Cola. Two newspapers, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Ubyyssey* were also interested in the story.

All three television networks ran their stories on that evening's news. CBC Radio broadcast the story the following morning. On Tuesday, January 27, *The Vancouver Sun* ran the story, "Student asks why UBC cut off drinking fountains" (Steffenhagen, 2004, p. B1) on the front of its "West Coast" section. The UBC student newspaper, *The Ubyyssey*, placed the story, "Where's the free water? A UBC student investigates why some campus drinking fountains have gone extinct" (Thomas, 2004) on their front page. Canada's national weekly magazine, *Macleans*, made reference to the events at UBC in their February 9th issue:

Sean Cook: University of B.C. grad student crafts clever hypothesis: claims drastic decrease in working fountains tied to school's lucrative deal with Coca-Cola. UBC brass denies link, but students tired of buying pop and bottled water, thirst for answers. (ScoreCard, 2004, p. 13)

The first week of February 2004, I returned to teaching high school English at Centennial School in Coquitlam, British Columbia. When I attended a course at the Faculty of Education the following Tuesday, the plastic had been removed from all of the fountains in the Scarfe building. The fountains were in perfect working order.

The next week, in response to my letter to Dr. Piper, I received a letter, dated Feb 9th, from the Vice President— Administration and Finance, denying my request for reimbursement of the \$160.50 that I had spent to test the water. There are a number of problems with the response to my letter. The fact that I was informed that the "water on the UBC campus is safe to drink" suggests that the Vice President – Administration and Finance did not fully understand the concerns that I outlined in my letter to the University President, or else his unwillingness to address them. That the water was safe was precisely the point that I had invested considerable time and money to prove, contrary to UBC's previous claims. The claim that the test was "unnecessary", given that I was "aware that the Scarfe building was tested by the Faculty administrator and found to be potable in late in 2003", is false. My receipt for the \$160.50 test is dated November 19th, 2003, while the results of the test that the FoE Building Director undertook, a copy of which he gave to me, were not reported until November 21st, 2003. I could not have known the results of a test that were not yet reported.

The Vice President's assertion that my test was "unauthorized" is true. However, the authorities, in this case the Director of Administration for the Scarfe Building and the Director of Food Services, had both publicly supported the unsubstantiated claim that the water was contaminated. It was for the purpose of validating their claims that I was having the water tested. Although it is true that "an

alternative of free bottled water was provided to students in the Scarfe building when the drinking fountains were bagged", it is difficult to imagine that two filtered water dispensers could be considered an adequate replacement for seventeen bagged fountains on six floors.

In the sixth paragraph, the Vice President intimates that the actions of the university were justified given the "changing tastes in water consumption" throughout the region. In support of this argument, he offers the "simple statistic" that "while there are some 165 fountains on campus, there are more than 400 water coolers in our buildings." Again we see the circular argument described earlier. After having removed ninety-seven fountains, covered seventeen, and promoted the false claim that UBC water was contaminated, university officials then offer the relatively few number of fountains and increase in bottled water consumption as justification for their actions.

Most troubling is the belief that *changing tastes* warrant diminishing the accessibility to something as vital as a free source of clean, safe drinking water. As Coca-Cola, UBC's corporate cold-beverage sponsor, demonstrated throughout the twentieth century, taste preference is something that is easily manipulated by savvy branding campaigns. The fact that the cola giants, Coca-Cola and Pepsi, spend hundreds of millions annually promoting products whose tastes have remained the same for the better part of a century is testament to the fact that taste preference can have little to do with objective reality. It is reasonable to conclude that the sophisticated branding campaigns that Coke and Pepsi have undertaken in recent years to promote bottled water have also played a role in "changing tastes in water consumption" on the UBC campus and elsewhere.

A thus far unexamined concern, but one that would warrant future investigation, is the environmental cost of trucking in plastic containers of water while a safe, clean water source already exists on campus. There is an obvious contradiction in UBC undertaking its "Sustainable U" program (UBC, 2004) during the same years that it strives to fulfill ten-year beverage quota of 33, 600, 000 units, of which bottled water is a significant portion. We may

discover that UBC has adapted another element of corporate values: given the choice of minimizing the detrimental impact on the environment or maximizing short-term revenue, the latter will prevail.

Finally, one imagines that the university officials who previously oversaw construction of UBC buildings did not base their decision to purchase, install and maintain fountains on the notion that they provided the tastiest beverage on campus. The decision to make water accessible to this degree was based on the understanding that clean water, given its essential role in maintaining basic health (and health being necessary for learning) was better provided publicly. The provision of water was considered too important, too essential, too sacred to be left to the inherent inequality of the market place. It was, at its root, a question of value. UBC removed and/or disabled 44% of its fountains on campus in the years following the signing of a lucrative cold-beverage contract with Coca-Cola because, for UBC officials, the decreased cost of maintaining fountains and increased revenue from beverage sales were more valuable. Given that UBC's contract with Coca-Cola was "the first of its kind in Canada" (Choo, 2001), the details of its impact are significant. With this in mind, Cook formally requested to see the monthly volume reports as per the contract with Coca-Cola. These reports provide evidence that we believe likely supports the claim that the loss of fountains correlates with an increase in sales of Coca-Cola products. Following a formal request to view these documents, UBC estimated that the fee for finding and photocopying the reports would be \$905.00. UBC refused subsequent requests to have the proposed fees waived due to the public interest in the issue, as per Freedom of Information legislation. Following this, we began a process of bringing the issue before the Information and Privacy Commissioner in Victoria, BC.

Coke Gets the Best Deal in Town:

At the start of the September 2005 school year at UBC, Canadian newspapers reported that as the "43,000 students at the University of British Columbia's Vancouver

campus head to their first day of classes, they'll still have no choice but to drink coke products—but Coca-Cola won't pay a penny for the privilege" (Woodward, 2005, p. S3). It turns out that UBC faculty, students and staff did not consume the 33.6 million cans or bottles of Coca-Cola products over the past decade. After the first five years, 10 million cans and bottles were consumed. And after the past ten years, a total of 17 million was consumed, amounting to six million liters of coke, but this was only 51% of the contractual volume promised to Coca-Cola. Coke's exclusivity contract will continue until August 2007 with no more money flowing back to the university. To date, nearly all Canadian universities have signed exclusivity contracts with either Coca-Cola or Pepsi, but UBC is the first who is feeling the repercussions of commercialization. The *Globe and Mail*, explained the failure in consumption this way: "Student Sean Cook worried that UBC was sealing off water fountains to get students to drink more Coke before the deadline. The university dismissed that as a conspiracy theory" (Woodward, 2005, p. S3).

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