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Mixed messages call for healthy skepticism

A special issue of Time, the nation's biggest newsmagazine, was filled with health information in mid-January, offering plenty of encouragement under the rubric of medical science with an ethereal twist: "How Your Mind Can Heal Your Body." The spread on "The Power of Mood" begins with this teaser: "Lifting your spirits can be potent medicine. How to make it work for you." An article about "Mother Nature's Little Helpers" is a discussion of alternative remedies. Other pieces probe techniques of psychotherapy, investigate high-tech ways of scanning the brain, and ponder "Are Your Genes to Blame?"

Of course, more than altruism is at work here. While the Jan. 20 issue of Time contains page after page of informative journalism, it also includes dozens of lucrative full-color ads pegged to the theme of health. There are elaborate pitches for laxative capsules, a purple pill for heartburn, over-the-counter sinus medication, and prescription drugs for allergies and Alzheimer's. On a preventative note, there's even a full-page ad for an inhaler that "helps you beat cigarette cravings one at a time" and another for a "stop smoking lozenge."

While all this was going on inside Time magazine, the same kind of advertising appeared in Newsweek to harmonize with its cover's keynote: "What Science Tells Us About Food and Health."

We may feel that it's nice of America's largest-circulation news weeklies to print so much healthful information. But if you picked up the previous week's Time and turned past the cover, the first thing you saw was a two-page layout for Camels, with the heading "Pleasure to Burn." Like the multi-entendre slogan, the ad's graphic is inviting; a handsome guy, presumably quite debonaire as he stands next to a liquor shelf, lights up a cigarette as he eyes the camera.

And so it goes. Many big media outlets tell us how to make ourselves healthy while encouraging us to make ourselves sick. They offer us tips and new scientific data on how to maximize longevity. But overall complicity with the lethal cigarette industry – whether through glamorization or silence – is widespread and ongoing.

MEDIABEAT '03 | NORMAN SOLOMON

The media's mixed messages about health are unabashedly self-contradictory, but they're also customary to such an extent that they're integral to a media cycle that never quits. The same news organizations that produce innumerable downbeat stories about obesity in America are beholden to huge quantities of ad revenue from fast food – and usually wink at the most popular artery-clogging chains. If most people are ignorant of the deep-fried dangers posed by McDonald's and Burger King, they can thank the news media for dodging the matter.

With television, radio and print media now devoting plenty of coverage to health concerns, and with aging baby boomers serving as a massive demographic target, the media emphasis is tilted toward high-end health expectations. But we need much more than news about the latest theories and scientific findings on preventative measures, palliatives and cures.

Until news outlets shift their commitments, they will continue to undermine public health as well as promote it. The present-day contradictions are severe: Journalists do not equivocate about cancer; we all understand that there's nothing good about the disease. Yet journalists routinely go easy on proven causes of cancer, such as cigarettes and an array of commercially promoted chemicals with carcinogenic effects.

Air pollution from gas-guzzling vehicles certainly qualifies as cancer-causing. But for every drop of ink that explores such causality, countless gallons are devoted to convincing Americans that they should own air-fouling trucks or SUVs. While the health-oriented front covers of Time and Newsweek now on the stands are similar, the back covers are identical — an advertisement for Chevy's Silverado diesel truck. The headline trumpets the appeal: "A Sledgehammer in a Ballpen World."

In a 1986 essay, the American writer Wallace Stegner wrote: "Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging."

Such outlooks are antithetical to the functional precepts of the media industry. It is largely dedicated to "raiding and running." It perceives quiet as dead air and squandered space. It portrays ownership as the essence of success and human worth. How healthy can such operative values be? ■