

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 16, 2016

LIFE WITHOUT ASTERISKS

What would modern life be like without asterisks? Either one heck of a lot more truthful or one hell of a lot more mendacious - take your pick. Coming from the Greek ἀστερίσκος - *asteriskos*, meaning "little star" - it is used in a multitude of different ways.

- In *sports*, it indicates that a record is somehow tainted; think Roger Maris' 61* homers in 1961 or Barry Bonds' tie-breaking 756th* home run in 2007.
- In *musical notation*, an * indicates where the sustained pedal should be lifted.
- In *linguistics* an * can indicate an omission, a doubtful matter, or that there is a textual comment below.



- In *polite society* * * * are frequently used to blunt an offensive term . . . such as "What the f*uck is he talking about?"

- In *advertising*, an * can serve as a gateway to a series of disclaimers about a product or process - essentially blunting what is being promised or puffed.

- In *politics*, there are Democrats who would love to put an * next to the name "George W. Bush," signifying that his presidential victory in 2000 was illegal, and Republicans who will always insist that

there be an * next to the name "Barack Obama," because being "foreign-born," was never qualified to become POTUS in the first place.

Asterisks don't have to be visual; they can be delivered orally or in microscopic, all but unreadable print. Think about all those TV and radio spots for medicines, herbal supplements, automobiles and "sold only on TV" products where either the announcer goes into verbal overdrive (think ["Motormouth" John Moschitta](#)) telling you the real terms of a deal or the potential adverse events (risks) associated with taking a particular medicine, cream or ointment or, a teeny tiny written disclaimer that is impossible to read, because it only appears on screen for a nanosecond all the while the narrator is talking. While it may live up to the strict letter of the law dealing with "truth in advertising," it more than annihilates its spirit. While in booming tones the announcer promises that *"If you are one of the first 50 to call in the next 6 minutes we will double our offer!"* - the hushed undertone informs us that will need to *"Just pay separate processing and handling."* This is a *verbal* asterisk, plain and simple.

One of my current favorites are the ads for "guaranteed acceptance" life insurance - in which one doesn't need a physical exam, can be approved over the phone, will never see their rates increased or their premiums change . . . *"all for as little as \$9.95 a month . . . a mere 33¢ a day."* Alex Trebek (of "Jeopardy!" fame) is the concerned, avuncular spokesman for one of these companies. Sound too good to be true? Well, the impossible-to-read disclaimer (that pesky *) informs us that the maximum benefit paid by the insurance company's guaranteed life policy for the 33 cents-per-day coverage is \$1,764, and *that's* only if you're a 50-year-old woman. Be male or somewhere up to age 85 and the minimum premium amount gets an even lower benefit . . . all the way down to a mere \$349. And by the way, even those niggardly benefits don't go into effect if you die within the first two years. Ah, those vexatious little asterisks!

Then there are diet supplements. Just take a couple of pills every day and voila! . . . You will go from being as hefty and disgusting as Fatty Arbuckle to as svelte and awesome as Brad Pitt. And a ninety-day supply will only set you back \$10.00 (plus, of course, shipping and handling). Then comes that minuscule * which informs us that these pills won't do *gornisht* without a serious change in diet and a moderate amount of physical exercise on a regular basis. That little * makes all the difference in the world; it saves the advertiser from being charged with false advertising, which would undoubtedly put a serious damper on sales.

As a result of this, there are lots of people (myself included) who simply won't purchase anything advertised on television or radio; there is this near-the-surface sense that anything hawked via mass media is *faux* - and that we are not one of those "suckers born every minute." As the classic commercial line goes:

BUT WAIT . . . THERE'S MORE!!!

As a nation, we are soon going to be waist-deep in sh*t . . . the sh*t known as political advertising. (At this point, we are merely ankle deep; the sh*t won't get truly high until

after the national conventions this summer.) Every candidate, whether running for county commission, state senate, Congress or the Presidency, is going to be spending \$\$\$ on telling us everything that is wrong, sinful - even felonious - about their opponent, while gleefully giving the impression that they themselves are anxiously awaiting a call notifying them that they have just been elevated to sainthood. But unlike advertisements for anti-aging creams, stain removers, and risk-free investments, political spots contain no ***; there is no fine print, no mile-a-minute disclaimer. The only censors against all the half-truths, outright lies and sheer mendacity we are going to be hearing and seeing are knowledge and understanding; knowledge of what candidates have done, said or proposed in the past, and understanding that in politics, truth is just as illusive for the candidates you despise as it is for those you wholeheartedly - or even halfheartedly - support. Politics at just about any level is full-contact, bare-knuckle warfare. For most candidates and their supporters, there is but one rule: win. And if that means disparaging, damning and demeaning in an opponent that which is more than acceptable in your team . . . well, *them's the rules*. As the classic line from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* went: "There *are* no rules in a knife fight."

Of course, this sort of attitude works best when one has a largely un- and misinformed electorate; one that is more than willing to believe that rumor is fact and innuendo is proof. Hells bells, it takes a well informed electorate to withstand all the slickly-produced calumnies that are repeated and repeated and repeated. As the old [Faberge organic shampoo commercial](#) tagline went: "You'll tell two friends . . . and they'll tell two friends . . . and so on and so on . . ." Before you know it, the innuendo has become universal, the attack has gone viral. And all without the aid of a single *.

It never ceases to amaze me that the more civically challenged and low-information the voter, the more obdurately they "know" the ins and outs of candidates and issues. By comparison, those who read, digest and partake in various opinions are frequently less hard-nosed in their positions. I wonder why this is. Perhaps a lack of * * *?

I for one am not looking forward to the barrage of *-less ads we are facing. They are going to be aimed mostly at our emotions, rather than our intellect. Our ability to withstand them and see the fine print - cut through all the b*llsh*t - is going to be sorely tested.

As the late writer/director Garson Kanin (*Born Yesterday*, *Pat and Mike*, *The Great Man Votes*), once noted: "I want everybody to be smart. As smart as they can be. A world of ignorant people is too dangerous to live in."

Indeed, *this* is a truism which needs no *.

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