Waves of Bias: United Fruit Company's Use of Media as a Means to Promote Unethical Practices in the Caribbean Basin

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Media's ability to exert influence is undebatable when reflecting on the rise of the United States (U.S.) as an economic power in the late 19th century. As U.S. influence expanded across seas, it was accompanied by multinational mega-corporations, which shifted the limits of corporate power. One such corporation, United Fruit Company (United), became arguably the most powerful commercial player in the Caribbean Basin. Established through a merger of three dominant banana importers in 1899, the company grew to an unprecedented scale that merged unethical corporate practices with a distorted public image.[1] Throughout the early 20th century, the United Fruit Company promoted an idealistic image of travel in the Caribbean Basin which also supported the company's agenda as it justified imperialistic operations, government interference, and worker exploitation.

To begin, United used changing advertising norms to create a false representation of the Caribbean Basin to generate positive sentiments surrounding imperialistic presence in the region. Early 19th century advertising transitioned from solely selling products to creating loyalty through a strong brand image.[2] Valuing the benefits of this shift, businesses began allocating large budgets, establishing advertising as a valid profession. The science of advertising advanced dramatically throughout World War I as governments used propaganda techniques to rally support for war efforts. In the peace that followed, marketing emphasized growing consumerism, symbolizing the luxuries of a capitalist system, and fueling government economic goals.

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[1] Mark Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic: The United Fruit Company in British Honduras, 1900-1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1996): 357–81.

[2] Daniel Navon, "Truth in advertising: Rationalizing Ads and Knowing Consumers in the Early Twentieth-Century United States," *Theor Soc* 46, no. 2 (2017): 151.

During this time, ethical standards regarding the accuracy of advertising claims led to the U.S. ideology of "Truth in Advertising" which was intended to be enforced by the American Association for Advertising Agencies.[3] Although United had many other business ventures such as cocoa, sugar, courier services, railroads, and radio telegraph communications, its main export, bananas, had severely suffered from wartime inflation and outdated cultivation techniques.[4] To increase its profits, United executives shifted to investment in increased tourism campaigns, specifically encouraging middle class families to partake in leisurely travel.[5] Special attention was given to white collar workers through corporate retreat offerings where business professionals could be exposed to its operations.[6] Advertising tapped into rising individualism through imaginative newspaper ads, flashy showrooms in the U.S., and publishing its own works such as the travel writings of past employee William McFee in *Gates of the Caribbean.* Now, the American tourist could picture themselves in the "Golden Caribbean" with its restorative qualities where one can escape the stresses of urbanized cities and experience a place unspoiled by industrialization.[7]

Beyond the restful qualities of a Caribbean trip, United tapped into growing American awareness of imperialism in its history. In the 1920s, influential political scientists like Paul Reinsch fed into the popular narrative that the dominant nation had a responsibility to improve the lives of inhabitants in new areas of influence.[8] Born in the year after the Spanish-American War,

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[3] Navon, "Truth in advertising: Rationalizing Ads and Knowing Consumers in the Early Twentieth-Century United States," 151.
[4] Victor M. Cutter, "Caribbean Tropics in Commercial Transition," *Economic Geography* 2, no. 4 (1926): 494–507; Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic: The United Fruit Company in British Honduras, 1900-1920," 357–81.
[5] Blaine Branchik, "Staying Afloat,*" Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 6, no. 2 (2014): 234–57; James W. Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business and the Creation of the 'Golden Caribbean', 1899-1940," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 8, no. (2016): 238–62; Navon, "Truth in advertising: Rationalizing Ads and Knowing Consumers in the Early Twentieth-Century United States," 151.
[6] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business and the Creation of the 'Golden Caribbean', 1899-1940," 238–62.
[7] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 239.
[8] Brain C. Schmidt, "Political Science and the American Empire: A Disciplinary History of the 'Politics' Section and the Discourse of Imperialism and Colonialism," *Int Polit* 45, no. 6 (2008): 675–80.

United echoed these sentiments to leverage imperialistic pride through tour marketing and design. The company's first ships were named after war heroes from the Spanish-American War.[9] Visitors could pick tours that featured landmarks of imperial importance from the Spanish-American War to Columbus' supposed first landing on American soil. Attempts to create a positive association of U.S. influence in the region through advertising worked as authors like Frederick Upham Adams praised the company for "peaceful 'conquest' of the tropics."[10]

Secondly, United exerted its power in regions of operations directly with local governments and used careful marketing to ensure that this interference was seen as beneficial. The company developed extensive infrastructure such as railways, roads, hospitals, and ports to secure control of regions.[11] This is visible through its extensive radio systems under the subsidiary The Tropical Radio Telegraph Company established in 1913.[12] It was initially publicized as a public health necessity for severe weather warnings and emergency communication between ships. In some regions, United offered the only source of communication outside of the Caribbean Basin.[13] Infrastructure was a powerful tool for continuous growth as local governments were seeking foreign investment. This created competition between regions through incentives such as tax breaks and land concessions.[14] For example, United based its decision to build a new headquarters in either Belize or Honduras entirely on the countries' proposed railway and land offerings which

[9] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 238–62.
[10] Sarah J. Townsend, "Money Mazes, Media Machines, and Banana Republic Realisms," *American Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2019): 692.
[11] Marcelo Bucheli, "Enforcing Business Contracts in South America: The United Fruit Company and Colombian Banana Planters in the Twentieth Century," *The Business History Review* 78, no. 2 (2004): 181–212.
[12] Cutter, "Caribbean Tropics in Commercial Transition," 494–507.
[13] Cutter, "Caribbean Tropics in Commercial Transition," 494–507; Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic: The United Fruit Company in British Honduras, 1900-1920," 357–81.
[14] Bucheli, "Enforcing Business Contracts in South America: The United Fruit Company and Colombian Banana Planters in the Twentieth Century," 181–212; Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic: The United Fruit Company in British Honduras, 1900-1920," 357–81.

were valuable to the company at the time.[15] After selection, incentives had to be maintained as United was known to stall services or entirely abandon regions that did not abide by its rules. In British Honduras, where United controlled mail and banana shipments, it demanded an annual subsidy for its services. When denied, the company halted all steamship services causing such severe disruption that the country had no choice but to enact the subsidy. This reliance is what encouraged United to further extend infrastructure and secure U.S. influence in the region mainly through the acquisition of international competitors, such as its 1910 purchase of Elders & Fyffes, a prominent British presence in fruit distribution, which included plantations on the Canary Islands and 28 ships.[16]

Despite this established local control, what United was missing to continue its insertion in foreign politics without provoking suspicion was sustained approval by U.S. citizens. The intentional removal, change, and distribution of facts achieved this. An example of removal is not disclosing alcohol consumption on so-called booze cruises.[17] United could not afford to offend the U.S. Government or its residents by openly avoiding prohibition rules. The manipulation of facts was another common tactic to draw tourist intrigue, as seen on trip itineraries that offered romanticized historical narratives. One such popular trip focused on pirates where travellers could enjoy company-issued literature and film in onboard libraries that lacked factual substance.[18] Lastly, the company promoted its public works in the region to the U.S. For example, United advertised its restoration efforts to preserve ancient Mayan Ruins on its lands. What was seen by many as a "paternalistic dedication to its host countries," also, and more likely, served to sell the

[15] Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic: The United Fruit Company in British Honduras, 1900-1920," 357–81.
[16] Cutter, "Caribbean Tropics in Commercial Transition," 494–507.
[17] Branchik, "Staying Afloat," 234–57.
[18] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 238–62.

mysterious attraction of a lost civilization which conveniently ignored the colonial hardships suffered by native peoples.[19] United had already leveraged infrastructure to intervene in governments of the Caribbean Basin. However, to support this power, advertising was used to change perceptions of United from a corporate powerhouse to a necessary proponent for positive change.

Lastly, local farmers were commoditized through advertising. United had a unique approach to its contracts which ensured that farmers could not leave their obligations. Many strategies were used, but most focused on preventing farmers from forming their own export companies.[20] Arguably, the worst aspect of the contracts was the lack of protection from financial risk. If crops failed, supply expired in transit, or any other damages to the goods occurred, the farmers would assume all financial costs. This was in addition to farmers covering tax costs for United and having no reasonable assurance that their crops would be selected for export. No local government protection was available for those who attempted to breach their contract. In British Honduras, the 1917 Fraudulent Labourer's Act punished workers who did not meet United's contract standards.[21] When production was unsuitable on their plantations, United was known to abandon property along with surrounding infrastructure like rail lines leaving workers, many of whom died in the process of this structural development, to bear the costs of maintenance. Worker tensions culminated in the Banana Massacre of 1928, where United and the U.S. Government leveraged local military connections to open fire on a group of peaceful protestors.[22]

[19] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 249.
[20] Bucheli, "Enforcing Business Contracts in South America," 181–212.
[21] Moberg, "Crown Colony as Banana Republic," 357–81.
[22] Bucheli, "Enforcing Business Contracts in South America," 181–212; Townsend, "Money Mazes, Media Machines, and Banana Republic Realisms," 687-714.

The public did not see this side of United as an employer because of its self-promotion. For instance, United's dedication to fighting topical diseases led to a convention in 1924 where the company brought experts to Jamaica to discuss health challenges in the region.[23] The U.S. sent military representatives to support the efforts. United also sent regular annual reports on its findings. On the surface, United was seen to be caring as it established hospitals to distribute modern medicine to the underdeveloped Caribbean Basin. Although the local population benefited from these medical services, underneath an ulterior marketing motive existed. It used advertising to "correct [American] 'habits of thinking,'" by addressing fears of the Caribbean as a dangerous and disease-ridden area, therefore, encouraging travel.[24]

If suppressive contracts were not enough, Caribbean Basin inhabitants began to be marked as tourist attractions themselves as tourists flocked to witness them in their primitive state.[25] This heavily borrowed from the emerging trend of ethno-tourism in New Mexico, where Native American culture and pueblos ceremonies were popular.[26] Increasing desire for an authentic and interactive experience led to tours of United operations at its banana plantations which were staged to hide actual working conditions.[27] The commodification of workers created a product for U.S. consumers, who ultimately supported United through product purchase, as the facts needed to make informed decisions were not conveyed.

In sum, United Fruit Company utilized changes in advertising that appeared during the 1920s to develop a brand image that supported its imperialistic expansion of infrastructure, government control, and worker exploitation. The perception that the U.S. upheld truthful

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[23] Cutter, "Caribbean Tropics in Commercial Transition," 494–507.
[24] Robert Crawford, "'Truth in Advertising': The Impossible Dream?," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 119, no. 1 (2006): 127; Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 238–62.
[25] Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 238–62.
[26] Joan D. Laxson, "How 'we' See 'them' Tourism and Native Americans," *Annals of Tourism Research* 18, no. 3 (1991): 365–91.
[27] Laxson, "How 'we' See 'them,'" 365–91; Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 238–62.

advertising differed from reality as tourists ventured to new regions to be sold propaganda and a rewritten Caribbean Basin history. Unfortunately, United represented one of the many monopolistic corporations to dominate U.S. politics, and although Americans benefited from the economic luxuries United provided, it was the locals in these communities who, after transitioning from the clutches of Spanish colonialism, found themselves once again controlled by a single corporate entity.

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