ADVANCING AN ADAPTIVE STANDARD OF STRICT SCRUTINY FOR CONTENT-BASED COMMERCIAL SPEECH REGULATION

Nat S Stern, Florida State University
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Nat Stern*

INTRODUCTION

In *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, the United States Supreme Court struck down a Vermont law restricting the commercial exploitation by pharmaceutical companies of information acquired about the prescribing practices of individual physicians. That decision marked the most recent step in the gradual elevation of commercial speech from its “subordinate position in the scale of First Amendment values” to its status as a form of expression that routinely enjoys robust protection from the Court. Indeed, the *Sorrell* Court intimated that its long-established framework for reviewing commercial speech regulation, the standard announced in *Central Hudson Gas & Electric Corp. v. Public Service Commission*, embodies a more rigorous review than the intermediate level of scrutiny often ascribed to it.

This Article argues that the Court should continue the progression of its commercial speech jurisprudence by promulgating an adaptive standard of strict scrutiny for content-based commercial speech regulation. The standard would be adaptive in the sense that it would take into account commercial expression’s distinctive aspects. While strict scrutiny has often been called “strict in theory, but fatal in fact,” the Court has repudiated that notion and emphasized that “[c]ontext matters” when applying this level of review. A strict scrutiny standard that accommodates the context of commercial speech would offer a more coherent approach than *Central Hudson*’s oft-criticized multi-pronged test, while retaining the most useful aspects of that standard. It would effectively align formal doctrine with the arc of the Court’s decisions in this area—no longer treating commercial speech as a doctrinal stepchild but rather applying to its regulation broader principles of expression.

Part I of this Article briefly reviews the evolution of commercial speech doctrine from the Court’s initial recognition that this expression is entitled to qualified protection through its increasing willingness to review commercial speech regulation through the exacting lens of core

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* John W. and Ashley E. Frost Professor of Law, Florida State University College of Law. The author gratefully acknowledges the invaluable contributions of Mark Joseph Stern to this Article.
1 131 S.Ct. 2653 (2011)
3 447 U.S. 557 (1980); id. at 566 (setting forth four-part test to examine validity of commercial speech restriction). The *Central Hudson* test is discussed at notes 43-44 infra and accompanying text. The *Sorrell* Court’s application of the test is discussed at text accompanying notes 102-11 infra.
First Amendment tenets. Part II discusses the rationale for an adaptive standard of strict scrutiny and describes the manner in which it could operate. Part III then describes how this standard could be invoked to invalidate Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations requiring tobacco companies to place graphic images on cigarette packages warning of the dangers of smoking.

I. THE RISE OF PROTECTION FOR COMMERCIAL SPEECH

Modern commercial speech doctrine was launched by the Court’s landmark decision in Virginia State Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Council, Inc. For nearly two decades thereafter, the Court frequently invalidated restrictions on the content of commercial speech while sustaining enough regulation to leave unclear its exact position under the First Amendment. Since the end of that ambiguous period, however, the Court’s vigorous enforcement of First Amendment safeguards has overwhelmingly overturned restrictions on commercial speech. Only in the realm of compelled disclosure has the periodic impulse toward modified scrutiny from the earlier era persisted.

A. Virginia Board of Pharmacy and its Dual Progeny: 1976-1995

The Court’s ruling in Virginia Board of Pharmacy formally brought commercial speech within the ambit of First Amendment protection. In the Court’s eyes, Virginia’s ban on advertising prescription drug prices clashed with central values of free expression. Depriving consumers of knowledge about comparative prices, for example, thwarted their capacity for self-fulfillment by preventing “the alleviation of physical pain or the enjoyment of basic necessities.” Shrouding prices in secrecy also interfered with the public’s ability to make informed decision-making on economic policy essential to democratic governance. Most conspicuously at odds with First Amendment assumptions, it appeared, was the statute’s premise that exposure to this information would tempt consumers to act in ways that would ultimately harm their own interests. Rejecting this “highly paternalistic approach,” the Court held that a state may not “completely suppress the dissemination of concededly truthful information about entirely lawful activity, fearful of that information’s effect upon its disseminators and its recipients.”

Virginia Board of Pharmacy and its anti-paternalistic thrust spawned a series of decisions hostile to bans on commercial speech derived from what the Virginia Board disparaged as the

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9 Virginia Board formally overruled the Court’s declaration in Valentine v. Chrestensen, 316 U.S. 52 (1942), that “purely commercial advertising” does not warrant First Amendment protection, id. at 54. Va. Bd. at 748.
10 Va. Bd. 425 U.S. at 763-64; see Thomas I. Emerson, Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment, 72 YALE L.J. 877, 879-80 (1963) (879-80 (asserting that individual self-fulfillment and self-realization is one of fundamental values protected by freedom of expression).
11 See id. at 765 (citing ALEXANDER MEIKLEJOHN, FREE SPEECH AND ITS RELATION TO SELF-GOVERNMENT (1948)).
12 The state had argued that open advertising would lure consumers to patronize cheaper but less professional pharmacists, upset the stability of pharmacist-customer relationships, and dampen the entry of talented individuals into a profession whose practitioners had been reduced to “mere retailer[s].” Id. at 768.
13 Id. at 770.
14 Id. at 773.
advantages of being kept in ignorance.” In the very next term, the Court struck down two such laws. In Linmark Associates, Inc. v. Township of Willingboro, the Court held invalid a township’s ban on the display of signs announcing the sale of residential homes. The ordinance sought to advance the legitimate purpose of “stem[ming] . . . the flight of white homeowners from a racially integrated community” through illegitimate means: suppressing specific messages out of fear that “they will cause those receiving the information to act upon it.” More far-reaching in its practical consequences was the Court’s ruling in Bates v. State Bar of Arizona that a state could not prohibit attorney advertising about the price of routine legal services. As in Virginia Board, the state contended in effect that citizens lacked the sophistication to respond properly to the forbidden advertisements. To the Court, however, such justifications amounted to the discredited case for the “benefits of public ignorance.”

With efforts to limit lawyer advertising persisting in the wake of Bates, the Court’s invalidation of restrictions became a frequent platform for the denial of state power to shield citizens from accurate commercial expression for their own putative good. The Court’s objection to condescending assumptions about clients’ capacity to grasp truthful advertisements disposed of bans on advertising areas of practice other than in officially prescribed language, listing courts in which an attorney was admitted to practice, self-recommendation for employment to persons who had not sought an attorney’s legal advice, inclusion of illustrations in advertising, any targeted direct-mail solicitation, publicizing certification by private organizations, and touting one’s credential as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). Even an attorney’s identification in advertising as a “Certified Financial Planner” (CFP)—while arguably confusing or misleading absent explanation—could not be forbidden where it correctly reflected her status.

15 Id. at 769.
17 Id. at 86, 97.
18 Id. at 86.
19 Id. at 94.
21 Id. at 384.
22 See id. at 372 (state’s assertion that clients could not rely on advertising to make appropriate choice of lawyer because, inter alia, advertisements would “highlight irrelevant factors”).
23 Id. at 375 (citing Virginia Board, 425 U.S. at 769-70).
25 Id. at 198.
27 Id. at 647-49.
29 Peel v. Att’y Registration & Disciplinary Comm’n, 496 U.S. 91, 110 (1990) (Stevens, J., plurality); id. at 111-17 (Marshall, J., concurring).
31 See id. at 150-52 (O’Connor, J., dissenting).
32 Id. at 145-48. The petitioner had been authorized by a well-known private organization to designate herself in this manner. Id. at 138.
In addition to overturning restrictions rooted in paternalism, the Court also rejected prohibitions based on rationales unrelated to distinctive concerns posed by commercial speech. In *Carey v. Population Services International*, the Court struck down a complete ban on the advertisement or display of contraceptives. The state’s justification that advertisements of contraceptive products would prove “offensive and embarrassing” ran afoul of the First Amendment principle that offense to sensibilities does not license suppression of otherwise protected speech. Likewise in *Bolger v. Youngs Drug Products Corp.*, the Court struck down a ban on mailing unsolicited advertisements for contraceptives on the ground that homeowners had the same ability to deal with offensive advertisements as those exposed to such material in public. Perhaps the most explicit statement of the Court’s unwillingness to automatically exempt commercial speech from the ordinary operation of First Amendment principles came in *City of Cincinnati v. Discovery Network, Inc.* There, the Court invalidated an ordinance barring distribution of “commercial” publications through freestanding newsracks located on public property. Noting that news racks holding noncommercial publications produced similar harms to public safety and aesthetics, the Court dismissed the city’s argument that the “low value” of commercial speech justified its targeted ban on commercially-oriented news racks.

Even as the Court frequently struck down restrictions, however, it stopped short of equating commercial speech with fully protected expression; rather, it sought to determine the scope of the “limited measure of protection” to which commercial speech is entitled. *Virginia Board* itself had acknowledged state latitude to take measures designed to assure dissemination of “truthful and legitimate commercial information.” In addition, the *Central Hudson* Court, while invalidating New York’s ban on advertising by electric utilities to promote the use of electricity, relied on reasoning that seemed to reserve significant power to limit even truthful commercial speech. The Court found that the blanket ban violated the fourth—and most stringent—prong of the standard announced in the case: that a regulation not be “more extensive than necessary to serve [the state’s] interest.” Still by faulting the state's failure to demonstrate that “a more limited restriction on the content of promotional advertising” could not achieve its goal, the Court seemed to suggest that the state can sometimes suppress accurate

34 Id. at 701 (citing Cohen v. California, 403 U.S. 15 (1971)).
36 See id. at 72 (“The ‘short, though regular, journey from mail box to trash can . . . is an acceptable burden, at least so far as the Constitution is concerned.’” (alteration in original) (citation omitted)).
38 Id. at 413.
40 Id. at 428.
42 *Virginia Board*, 425 U.S. at 772 n.24.
43 447 U.S. at 569-72.
44 Id. at 566. The first three prongs inquired whether the commercial speech meets the threshold for protection by concerning lawful activity and not being misleading, whether the interest asserted in the state’s justification for the restriction is substantial, and whether the regulation directly advances that interest. *Id.*
information about a legal product in order to dampen demand for it.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, even that level of vigor for the standard’s fourth part was called into question nine years later in \textit{Board of Trustees of the State University of New York v. Fox}.\textsuperscript{46} The Fox Court refused to characterize that criterion as a “least-restrictive-means” test.\textsuperscript{47} Instead, the state need only demonstrate a “‘fit’ between the legislature’s ends and . . . means . . . that is not necessarily perfect, but reasonable; that represents not necessarily the single best disposition but one whose scope is ‘in proportion to the interest served.’”\textsuperscript{48}

On the other hand, most occasions when the Court sustained commercial speech restrictions could be understood as recognizing distinct circumstances rather than indulgence of paternalism. The decisions in \textit{Friedman v. Rogers}\textsuperscript{49} and \textit{San Francisco Arts & Athletics, Inc. v. United States Olympic Committee},\textsuperscript{50} for example, were consistent with the Court’s traditional deference to government’s role as market regulator. In \textit{Friedman}, the Court found a Texas law barring the practice of optometry under a trade name justified by the state’s interest in preventing misleading impressions of the nature of a practice.\textsuperscript{51} \textit{San Francisco Arts} affirmed the Olympic Committee's “legitimate property right” in the exclusive use of the word “Olympic” in the commercial promotion of athletic events.\textsuperscript{52}

Similarly, two decisions upholding restrictions on attorneys’ solicitation reflected concern with the impact of aggressive behavior on vulnerable individuals, not the naivete of clients. In \textit{Ohralik v. Ohio State Bar Ass’n},\textsuperscript{53} the Court upheld enforcement of a prohibition on in-person solicitation of clients “for pecuniary gain, under circumstances likely to pose dangers that the State has a right to prevent.”\textsuperscript{54} The case offered little doubt of the presence of undue influence. Ohralik had approached uninvited two young accident victims to solicit them as clients, one while she lay in traction in a hospital, and had made secret recordings of his conversations with them.\textsuperscript{55} Additionally, the Court’s ruling in \textit{Florida Bar v. Went For It, Inc.},\textsuperscript{56} though more debatable,\textsuperscript{57} did not appreciably dilute the Court’s general resistance to limitations on truthful lawyer advertising. The decision allowed a ban on personal injury lawyers' sending targeted direct-mail solicitations within thirty days of an accident.\textsuperscript{58} Though noting the state’s

\textsuperscript{45} See \textit{id.} at 574 (Blackmun, J., concurring in judgment) (disagreeing with Court “when it says that suppression of speech may be a permissible means” to achieve energy conservation).
\textsuperscript{46} 492 U.S. 469 (1989).
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Id.} at 476-81.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Id.} at 480 (quotations and citations omitted).
\textsuperscript{49} 440 U.S. 1 (1979).
\textsuperscript{50} 483 U.S. 522 (1987).
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Friedman}, 440 U.S. at 12-16.
\textsuperscript{52} 483 U.S. at 535-41. The statutory right was applied to prohibit promotion of an athletic competition called the “Gay Olympic Games.” \textit{Id.} at 525-27, 548.
\textsuperscript{53} 436 U.S. 447 (1978).
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Id.} at 449.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Id.} at 450-51.
\textsuperscript{56} 515 U.S. 618 (1995).
\textsuperscript{57} The Court split 5-4. See Amy Busa & Carl G. Sussman, \textit{Expanding the Market for Justice: Arguments for Extending In-Person Client Solicitation}, 34 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 487, 502 (1999) (asserting that reasoning in \textit{Went For It} contradicted heightened scrutiny of restrictions on commercial speech that Court had applied elsewhere.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Went For It}, 515 U.S. at 635 (1995).
interest in avoiding harm to the legal profession’s image,\(^{59}\) the Court viewed the ban’s principal purpose as keeping “bereaved or injured individuals” from suffering a “willful or knowing affront to or invasion of [their] tranquility,”\(^ {60}\)—thus distinguishing the circumstances presented by the case from those “situations in which the government is motivated primarily by paternalism.”\(^ {61}\) Indeed, the Court emphatically signaled only two months prior to *Went For It* that it did not intend to retreat from its anti-paternalistic stance. In *Rubin v. Coors Brewing Co.*,\(^ {62}\) the Court unanimously rejected as justification for a federal ban on displaying the alcohol content of beer on labels or in advertising the intent to combat “strength wars” among brewers.\(^ {63}\)

Admittedly, two decisions from this period permitting restrictions on commercial speech did smack of overt paternalism; both, however, have been undercut by subsequent rulings. In *Posadas de Puerto Rico Associates v. Tourism Co. of Puerto Rico*,\(^ {64}\) the Court upheld Puerto Rico’s ban on advertising for casino gambling aimed at Puerto Rican residents.\(^ {65}\) While such gambling was legal there, the Court accepted Puerto Rico’s rationale that its residents were “already aware of the risks of casino gambling, yet would nevertheless be induced by widespread advertising to engage in such potentially harmful conduct.”\(^ {66}\) This reasoning was obviously paternalistic, but just as clearly abandoned in later cases.\(^ {67}\) The other decision, *United States v. Edge Broadcasting Co.*,\(^ {68}\) combined the paternalism of *Posadas* with *Fox’s* relaxed approach to the needed congruence between means and end. *Edge* upheld enforcement of a federal ban on lottery advertisements by broadcasters licensed in states that did not conduct lotteries,\(^ {69}\) notwithstanding that the vast majority of *Edge’s* audience resided in a state that sponsored a lottery.\(^ {70}\) Even here, the Court was satisfied that the restriction was reasonably tailored to the federal policy of supporting non-lottery states’ efforts to discourage participation in lotteries.\(^ {71}\) The *Edge* Court’s reliance on *Posadas*,\(^ {72}\) however, gives the decision tenuous precedential force. Furthermore, to the extent that *Edge* and *Posadas* imply special tolerance of speech-restrictive
measures to reduce demand for legal vices, their vitality has been drained by later decisions rejecting such efforts.\textsuperscript{73}

Finally, one aspect of lesser protection for commercial speech spanning the early and later\textsuperscript{74} periods of commercial speech jurisprudence is heightened government power to compel disclosure. Even while disapproving a paternalistic ban on honest advertising, the Virginia Board Court noted that the need to ensure the truthfulness of commercial information could “make it appropriate to require that a commercial message appear in such a form, or include such additional information, warnings, and disclaimers, as are necessary to prevent its being deceptive.”\textsuperscript{75} A later decision clarified that requiring such content might be appropriate to avoid consumer confusion as well as deception.\textsuperscript{76} In \textit{Central Hudson}, the Court suggested that directing advertisers to include information about the efficiency and cost of services offered might serve as a less restrictive alternative to the blanket ban on promotional advertising invalidated in that case.\textsuperscript{77}

The Court’s most thorough discussion of compulsory disclosure of factual information by commercial speakers occurred in \textit{Zauderer v. Office of Disciplinary Counsel}.\textsuperscript{78} There, the Court held valid rules mandating that advertisements of contingent-fee rates disclose where true that calculation of expenses included court costs and expenses, and that clients would be liable for costs whatever the outcome of the suit.\textsuperscript{79} Unlike illegitimate compulsions of speech on matters of opinion, the state here had only required that advertising include “purely factual and uncontroversial information about the terms under which [their] services will be available.”\textsuperscript{80} The Court would condone disclosure requirements “reasonably related to the State's interest in preventing deception of consumers” if they were not “unjustified or unduly burdensome.”\textsuperscript{81} Though the Court later held that commercial speech can gain greater protection from compelled disclosure when intertwined with fully protected speech,\textsuperscript{82} the decision did not purport to alter the application of Zauderer’s approach to ordinary commercial advertising.


\textsuperscript{74} See See supra notes 78-82 & 112-17 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Virginia Board}, 425 U.S. at 772 n.24.

\textsuperscript{76} In re R.M.J., 455 U.S. 191, 201 (1982); see Bates v. State Bar of Arizona, 433 U.S. 350, 384 (1977) (leaving open possibility of requiring warning or disclaimer in kind of advertisement protected from ban in order to avoid misleading consumers).

\textsuperscript{77} See \textit{Central Hudson}, 447 U.S. at 565 (1980). \textit{Central Hudson} is discussed at text accompanying supra notes 43-45.

\textsuperscript{78} 471 U.S. 626 (1985).

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Id.} at 633.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Id} at 651.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Id.}; see also Kathleen M. Sullivan & Robert C. Post, \textit{It’s What’s for Lunch: Nectarines, Mushrooms, and Beef--the First Amendment and Compelled Commercial Speech}, 41 LOY. L.A. L. REV. 359, 374 (2007) (statement of Post) (arguing that principle established by \textit{Zauderer} also permits mandatory disclosure to promote market efficiency).

B. From 44 Liquormart to Sorrell: Ascendancy of Robust Scrutiny

Whatever ambiguity marked the Court’s approach to truthful, nonmisleading commercial speech through 1995, Rubin presaged a more recent regime of steadily vigorous protection. In particular, the Court’s enforcement of a muscular version of Central Hudson’s fourth prong has repeatedly produced invalidation of government attempts to cloak accurate information about legal commercial activities. Any lingering discrepancy between commercial speech and fully protected expression can be found chiefly in government power to compel disclosure.

A trio of decisions involving advertising of legal vices—potentially vulnerable to suppression in light of Posadas and Edge—underscored the Court’s hardening skepticism to restrictions rooted in paternalistic anxiety about consumer’s reaction to truthful speech. Only a year after Rubin, the Court in a virtual sequel unanimously struck down a state law forbidding advertisement of retail liquor prices except at the place of sale. While the Court in 44 Liquormart, Inc. v. Rhode Island spoke in a cacophony of voices, even the mildest of these concluded that the ban failed Central Hudson's requirement that a restriction be “more extensive than necessary to serve the State's interest.” Three years later in Greater New Orleans Broadcasting Ass’n. v. United States, the Court if anything cast an even more critical eye on a federal law forbidding broadcast of promotional advertisements for privately operated, for-profit casinos regardless of a station’s or casino’s location. Noting the extent to which federal law allowed certain forms of gambling and broadcast of some kinds of gambling, the Court chided the government for its “decidedly equivocal” putative interest in discouraging gambling. Even assuming the authenticity of the federal policy, however, the Court found the federal scheme for regulating broadcast of gambling advertisement “so pierced by exemptions and inconsistencies” that it foundered on both the third and fourth parts of the Central Hudson analysis. And thirdly, in Lorillard Tobacco Co. v. Reilly, tobacco joined alcohol and gambling on the roster of legal substances and activities whose dangers could not be combated by unnecessary restrictions on speech. The case involved an elaborate set of state regulations designed largely to curb underage use of tobacco products. One feature, the state’s limitations on locations of outdoor advertising for smokeless tobacco and cigar advertising, failed Central Hudson’s fourth prong because it effectively excluded advertising of these products from large areas without a showing that this “broad sweep” was needed. In addition, the Court struck
down the state’s prohibition of indoor, point-of-sale advertising of smokeless tobacco and cigars lower than five feet from the floor of a retail establishment located within one thousand feet of a school or playground. These regulations satisfied neither the third nor fourth steps of Central Hudson; the proscribed advertising would be visible to both children taller than five feet and those who looked upward.

Even the government’s interest in protecting health has not justified gratuitous encroachment on truthful speech. In Thompson v. Western States Medical Center, the Court overturned a federal law permitting pharmacists to dispense compounded drugs only if they did not advertise or solicit prescriptions for the compounding of a specific drug or type of drug. The condition was attached to small-scale compounding’s exemption from the extensive testing to which mass-produced drugs were subject; advertising was deemed a signal that an operation had attained a scale at which testing was appropriate. Expressing doubt that the condition directly advanced the government’s interest as required by the third prong of the Central Hudson standard, the Court proceeded to invalidate the ban under the standard’s fourth requirement that restrictions on commercial speech be no more extensive than necessary. To the Court, the government failed to show that the ban’s asserted purpose could not be achieved through alternative methods that do not inhibit speech.

And continuing to reject paternalistic rationales, the majority also rebuffed the dissenters’ contention that the restriction furthered the government’s interest in curbing the sale of compounded drugs to “patients who may not clearly need them.” As in Virginia Board, the First Amendment did not countenance “preventing the dissemination of truthful commercial information in order to prevent members of the public from making bad decisions with the information.”

Nearly a decade later, the Court’s decision in Sorrell reaffirmed that the aim of safeguarding health would not sustain first resort to restrictions based on apprehension of recipients’ reaction to truthful speech. Absent express consent by prescribers, Vermont’s law forbade the sale by pharmacies to data-mining companies, and by data-mining companies to pharmaceutical companies, “prescriber-identifiable data . . . for any commercial purpose.” The law was intended to prevent marketing representatives of pharmaceutical manufacturers, known as “detailers,” from exploiting their knowledge of individual prescribing practices when approaching physicians. At the same time, the state afforded opportunity for the information to be “purchased or acquired by other speakers with diverse purposes and viewpoints”: e.g.,

92 See id. at 535-36 (describing restriction).
93 Id. at 566.
95 When compounding, pharmacists combine ingredients to create medication tailored to a particular patient. Id. at 360-61.
96 Id. at 368-70.
97 See id. at 371.
98 Id.
99 Id. at 372-73 (suggesting as alternatives, inter alia, limiting amount of particular compounded drugs that pharmacists could sell in certain period).
100 Id. (citing id. at 379 (Breyer, J., dissenting)).
101 Id. at 374.
102 See supra notes 1-4 and accompanying text.
104 See Sorrell, 131 S. Ct. at 2661.
academic organizations seeking to counter the promotion of brand-name pharmaceutical drugs.\footnote{Id. at 2663.} Indeed, legislative findings accompanying the law showed that its “express purpose and practical effect are to diminish the effectiveness of marketing by manufacturers of brand-name drugs.”\footnote{Id. at 2659.} The law therefore imposed both a “content-based” and “speaker-based” burden on speech.\footnote{Id. at 2667.} Accordingly, the Court reasoned that the restriction warranted “heightened” scrutiny.\footnote{Id. at 2667.} Almost inevitably, the Court concluded that “[t]he law cannot satisfy that standard.”\footnote{Id. at 2670.} In what might serve as a synopsis of its logic, the Court observed: “If pharmaceutical marketing affects treatment decisions, it does so because doctors find it persuasive. Absent circumstances far from those presented here, the fear that speech might persuade provides no lawful basis for quieting it.”\footnote{Id. at 2659.} Thus, whether the Court employed \textit{Central Hudson’s} standard for commercial speech or “a stricter form of judicial scrutiny,” the underlying principles and outcome were the same.\footnote{Id. at 2670.}

Enhanced scrutiny of either sort, however, still did not extend to compelled disclosures in commercial speech. Only a year before \textit{Sorrell}, the Court in \textit{Milavetz, Gallop & Milavetz, P.A. v. United States}\footnote{130 S.Ct. 1324 (2010).} upheld a requirement that attorneys who furnish bankruptcy-assistance services include in advertisements a statement to the effect that: “We are a debt relief agency. We help people file for bankruptcy relief under the Bankruptcy Code.”\footnote{Id. at 1340.} The law was designed to avert the misleading impression created by advertisements that offer debt relief without mention of the costs associated with a possible bankruptcy.\footnote{Id. at 1330 (quoting 11 U.S.C. § 528(a)(4)).} In assessing the law, the Court invoked \textit{Zauderer’s} touchstone that disclosure requirements be “reasonably related to the State’s interest in preventing deception of consumers[” and neither “[u]njustified” nor “burdensome.”\footnote{Id. at 1339-40 (quoting \textit{Zauderer}, 471 U.S. at 651).} Under this “less exacting scrutiny,”\footnote{Id. at 1339.} the government was entitled to require this “an accurate statement identifying the advertiser’s legal status and the character of the assistance provided.”\footnote{Id. at 1340.}

II. ADAPTING STRICT SCRUTINY TO CONTENT-BASED COMMERCIAL SPEECH REGULATION

\textit{Sorrell}’s emphasis on the First Amendment’s aversion to content-based restraints, together with its suggestion that commercial speech restrictions often trigger “heightened”
scrutiny, highlight a central theme of the Court’s commercial speech jurisprudence: the narrowing gap between the principles that govern fully protected speech and those peculiar to commercial expression. This near-convergence can be detected not only in the Court intolerance of restrictions on truthful, nonmisleading commercial speech, but also in pronouncements that accompany these decisions. At the outset of modern doctrine, Virginia Board explained the First Amendment tenet on which the decision rested in expansive terms: “[P]eople will perceive their own best interests if only they are well enough informed, and that the best means to that end is to open the channels of communication rather than to close them.”

A later decision striking down a restriction on solicitation by certified public accountants had echoed this premise: “The general rule is that the speaker and the audience, not the government, assess the value of the information presented.”

Thus, time and again the Court has chastised government for paternalistic efforts to withhold truthful information about legal commercial activities from presumably unwitting consumers. Likewise, Sorrell’s disapproval of government partisanship in the marketplace of ideas drew on reasoning that transcends genres of speech: “Whenever the government creates ‘a regulation of speech because of disagreement with the message it conveys,’ the First Amendment requires heightened scrutiny.” The Court’s antipaternalism and its broad resistance to unnecessary suppression of commercial speech have been implemented by the growing stringency with which Central Hudson’s fourth prong has been enforced. To reject the restrictions in Thompson and Sorrell, for example, it sufficed that the Court could conceive of potentially feasible alternatives for achieving the government’s goal. Moreover, the burden has come to rest on government to demonstrate the negative proposition that such alternatives would not serve the government’s interest.

It would be a logical step in this evolution of doctrine, then, for the Court to announce a formal standard of strict scrutiny for content-based commercial speech regulation. Little strain is required to construe the Court’s more recent invalidations of bans on truthful, nonmisleading commercial speech as government failure to show that the measures were narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling state interest. As Martin Redish and others have long urged, First Amendment values do not point to separate regimes for commercial and noncommercial speech.

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119 Virginia Board, 507 U.S. at 767.
121 See, e.g., Lorillard Tobacco Co. v. Reilly, 533 U.S. 525, 565 (2001); supra notes 9-14 & 94-111 and accompanying text.
122 Sorrell, 131 S. Ct. at 2664 (quoting Ward v. Rock Against Racism, 491 U.S. 781, 791 (1989)).
123 See Sorrell, 131 S. Ct. at 2669-70 (2011) (noting that physicians can decline to meet with detailers or forego detailing altogether); supra note 99 and accompanying text.
124 See, e.g., Thompson, 535 U.S. at 373 (finding that state had “failed to show” that regulations did not restrict speech more than necessary to further state’s interest in preventing underage); Lorillard, 533 U.S. at 565 (noting government’s failure to show insufficiency of suggested alternatives to ban on advertising compound drugs).
Of course this principle would have to be adapted to the “context”\(^\text{127}\) of commercial speech, especially with respect to the problem of false or misleading speech. Here it is important to recognize that strict scrutiny does not inevitably entail an undifferentiated weighty burden on government. Rather, the nature of a subject might make more modest threshold showings appropriate. In the realm of bans on false or deceptive speech, this kind of adjustment applies to two aspects of the analysis.

Finally, adapting strict scrutiny to compelled disclosure in commercial speech entails greater departure from the Court’s doctrine, but not its results. The Zauderer-Milavetz reasonable relationship standard\(^\text{128}\) is adequate for typical requirements for pertinent information, but it does not expressly account for circumstances in which there is a “realistic possibility that official suppression of ideas is afoot.”\(^\text{129}\) Here it is compulsion rather than suppression that is at issue. However, the “constitutional equivalence of compelled speech and compelled silence” for fully protected expression\(^\text{130}\) should apply to mandatory commercial speech that raises the danger of government overreach posed by compelled speech in other contexts.\(^\text{131}\) Moreover, in the commercial setting suppression and compulsion often cannot be neatly distinguished; as a matter of physical space or consumers’ attention, the government’s required content may crowd out or overshadow an advertiser’s own message. Thus, the government’s burden of justification should be heightened when compelled disclosure carries facial indicia of an attempt to substantially exceed the legitimate interest to provide consumers with sufficient information to make informed decisions.

This burden could be triggered by either or a combination of two factors. First, as the Court has already stated, the government cannot impose “unjustified or unduly burdensome” disclosure requirements.\(^\text{132}\) However, since this is a discrete criterion apart from the reasonable relationship test, the government’s difficulty in satisfying it is not clear. A compelled disclosure that is reasonably related to preventing deception can hardly be unjustified, and so scrutiny should be focused on its burden. The scrutiny accorded required content should be commensurate with its relative prominence and the cost of including it. Thus, a requirement that 90% of the advertising space for a certain product be devoted to warning of its danger might well pass the presumably permissive\(^\text{133}\) reasonable relationship criterion, but the burden on the sponsor’s message should evoke a more skeptical review.

The second consideration is arguably implicit in the reasoning of Zauderer and Milavetz, but was not squarely addressed. Zauderer assumed that the rule at issue mandated the inclusion of “purely factual and uncontroversial information” about attorneys’ services;\(^\text{134}\) Milavetz

\(^{127}\) See supra note 6 and accompanying text.

\(^{128}\) See supra notes 78-82 & 112-17 and accompanying text.


\(^{131}\) See generally David B. Gaebler, First Amendment Protection Against Government Compelled Expression and Association, 23 B.C. L. Rev. 995 (1981-82).

\(^{132}\) Zauderer, 471 U.S. at 651.


\(^{134}\) Zauderer, 471 U.S. at 651.
likewise appeared to rest on a similar premise.\textsuperscript{135} Such a premise itself, however, should be subject to careful inspection whenever the compelled disclosure diverges from the communication of obviously objective information. Given the straightforward distinction between legal costs and fees, \textit{Zauderer}’s disclosure requirement did not warrant this concern. Designation of an attorney who provides bankruptcy-assistance services as “a debt relief agency,” though still within the latitude of interpretation afforded commercial information, should have aroused more attention to its potential for conveying an officially chosen viewpoint than it received in \textit{Milavetz}. One need not categorically transplant principles governing compelled disclosure in other settings to commercial speech\textsuperscript{136} in order to recognize potential danger to First Amendment values when government dictates messages whose content is not unquestionably a provably true assertion. The further a compelled disclosure strays from this description, the more searching the scrutiny to which it should be subject.

In support of this approach, it should be noted that the idea of enclaves of strict scrutiny within a broader standard of less demanding review is a familiar one. In equal protection doctrine, the overwhelming majority of government classifications enjoy the rational relationship standard’s presumption of validity,\textsuperscript{137} with heightened scrutiny reserved for suspect classifications like race\textsuperscript{138} and quasi-suspect categories like gender.\textsuperscript{139} Free exercise doctrine is perhaps even more instructive. As its central principle, the Court allows enforcement of valid “generally applicable prohibitions of socially harmful conduct” to religiously motivated instances of that conduct.\textsuperscript{140} In some instances involving “hybrid situation[s],” however, the Court applies strict scrutiny where the Free Exercise Clause operates “in conjunction with other constitutional protections.”\textsuperscript{141}

III. GRAPHIC IMAGES ON CIGARETTE PACKAGES: AN APT OCCASION FOR STRICT SCRUTINY

A provision of the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act\textsuperscript{142} directs the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to develop new disclosures for cigarette packages that take the form of “color graphics depicting the negative health consequences of smoking.”\textsuperscript{143} These labels are to be accompanied by a textual statement warning of the negative health risks of tobacco use.\textsuperscript{144} Together, the illustrations and statements must occupy 50\% of the front and back

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{See} \textit{Milavetz}, 130 S.Ct. at 1340 (“[T]he disclosures entail only an accurate statement identifying the advertiser's legal status and the character of the assistance provided”).

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{See id.} at 1343 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and concurring in the judgment) (“I am skeptical of the premise on which \textit{Zauderer} rests—that, in the commercial-speech context, ‘the First Amendment interests implicated by disclosure requirements are substantially weaker than those at stake when speech is actually suppressed.’” (quoting \textit{Zauderer}, 471 U.S. at 652).


\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Id.} at 881-82.


\textsuperscript{143} 15 U.S.C. § 1333(d).

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Id.} The textual warnings proposed by the FDA were: WARNING: Cigarettes are addictive; WARNING: Tobacco smoke can harm your children; WARNING: Cigarettes cause fatal lung disease; WARNING: Cigarettes
sides of cigarette packages. Though the statute’s requirements may not be inevitably suspect, their implementation by the FDA provides an apt occasion for application of strict scrutiny. The impact of the images deviates too far from objective disclosure of pertinent data to earn the lenient review found in Zauderer and Milavetz. Addressing challenges to these regulations, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals held them valid, while the District of Columbia Court of Appeals ruled them in violation of the First Amendment. The principles supporting an adaptive standard of strict scrutiny explain why the latter court reached the correct result.

A. The Circuit Split

Unsurprisingly, the opposing outcomes in the Sixth and DC Circuits flowed from different understandings of the level of scrutiny required by Zauderer in this instance. Reading Zauderer’s permissive language broadly, the Sixth Circuit signaled the government’s low threshold of proof: “Deciding whether a disclosure requirement is reasonably related to the purpose is all the law requires to assess constitutionality.” Underscoring the strength of the presumption of validity, the court later employed the famously government-friendly parlance of rationality. Under its “rational-basis analysis,” the required textual and graphic warnings need only have “a rational connection between the warnings' purpose and the means used to achieve that purpose.” Predictably, the court determined that the warnings were reasonably related to “promoting greater public understanding” of the risks of tobacco use.

In contrast, the DC Court of Appeals reasoned that the “inflammatory” images fell “outside the ambit of Zauderer” because they did not constitute “pure attempts to convey information to consumers.” Rather, they amounted to “unabashed attempts to evoke emotion (and perhaps embarrassment) and browbeat consumers into quitting.” Nevertheless, unlike the district court below, the court did not rely on strict scrutiny to invalidate the compulsory warnings. Rather, the court decided that the Central Hudson’s “intermediate” standard of review applied. Conducting this review with a critical eye, the court concluded that the graphic cause cancer; WARNING: Cigarettes cause strokes and heart disease; WARNING: Smoking during pregnancy can harm your baby; WARNING: Smoking can kill you; WARNING: Tobacco smoke causes fatal lung disease in nonsmokers; WARNING: Quitting smoking now greatly reduces serious risks to your health..” 76 Fed. Reg. 36,628 (June 22, 2011).

146 Discount Tobacco City & Lottery, Inc. v. United States, 674 F.3d 509 (6th Cir. 2012).
148 See Discount Tobacco City, 674 F.3d at 566-67.
149 Id. at 567.
150 See supra 133 and accompanying text.
151 Id. at 562.
152 Id. at 561.
153 Id. at 564. The extent to which the court’s scrutiny favored the law is indicated by its response to the plaintiffs’ contention that the size of the required warnings was unduly burdensome because they would drown out the companies’ own speech. See id. at 567. Denying that the question of burden involved a separate analysis, the court reaffirmed its conclusion that the warnings were reasonably related to the government's interest in preventing consumer deception. Id. The court also cited the companies’ assertion that the warnings would not reduce demand for tobacco products as evidence that the law did not unduly burden their speech. Id.
155 Id.
warnings had not been shown even to directly advance the government’s interest in reducing smoking, much less that its regulation of speech was not more extensive than necessary to serve that interest. The FDA, the court declared, had “not provided a shred of evidence” that the warnings would directly advance this interest.

B. Application of the Adaptive Standard of Strict Scrutiny

It is understandable that the Sixth and DC Circuits applied divergent levels of scrutiny for the speech at issue here. As discussed in Section I, the Supreme Court’s commercial speech jurisprudence has left this area with a significant amount of uncertainty. Under the approach proposed in Section II, however, the constitutionality of the newly required tobacco labels can be readily resolved. That approach would produce a different result from the facile validation of these requirements by the Sixth Circuit’s reliance on rational basis review. Moreover, though the DC Circuit’s analysis led to the same outcome as would the adaptive standard of strict scrutiny, it left speech vulnerable to later restrictions in a way that the adaptive standard would not. By holding that the government had failed to demonstrate that the required labels directly advanced its interest in curbing smoking, the court left the door open to the efficacy of even more frightening images.

The critical threshold issue, of course, is the standard of review to which the label requirement should be subjected. Under the approach advanced here, the default mild scrutiny of Zauderer should be confined to compelled provision of objectively verifiable information: speech based on fact and impartially conveyed. Nutritional information and ingredient lists fall into this category, as do current tobacco warning labels. Such disclosures significantly further substantial governmental interests in preventing false or deceptive claims and promoting health or safety. Moreover, the current tobacco labels and other such disclosures are not obviously burdensome in conveying vital facts to the consumer.

These new warning labels, however, are a wholly different species of disclosure and thus warrant the adaptive level of strict scrutiny. The images may be animated by factual realities, but the images themselves are subjective and dramatic: e.g., the juxtaposition of pictures of healthy and diseased lungs. Unlike a written statement, an image does not state a fact; it tells a story or conveys an emotion. And in attempting to influence the emotions of consumers by dictating the speech of tobacco companies in this manner, the government has augmented facts with propaganda.

Even an intermediate standard of review--such as that for time, place, and manner regulations of commercial speech--is insufficient under these circumstances. That level could be appropriate to disclosures that are factual but facially onerous to the commercial speaker. This extra burden might take the form of compelled speech that imposes appreciable costs on the speaker or detracts from the speaker’s ability to project its message. Such a level of scrutiny

158 Id. at *9-12.
159 Id. at 10.
161 For a composite of images proposed by the FDA, see http://www.fda.gov/TobaccoProducts/Labeling/ucm259214.htm.
could apply, for example, if the government mandated that liquor companies devote three quarters of their advertisement space explaining the dangers of drinking, or that the current textual warning labels for cigarettes dominate the surface of cigarette packages.

Here, however, because the graphic labels are not exclusively factual or objective, and because they are burdensome, adaptive strict scrutiny should apply. In a sense, the standard amounts to a stringent version of *Central Hudson’s* mandate that the speech regulation not be “more extensive than necessary” to serve the government’s interest in question. Such a standard should be triggered when compelled commercial speech on its face is patently ideological or materially onerous. There can be little question that these labels fit both categories. The images on the labels are designed specifically to discourage consumers from using the product, not just to warn them of its risks. Moreover, in taking up 50% of each package’s space, the labels heavily detract from the tobacco companies’ own speech. In their subjectivity and prominence, these disclaimers are hardly disclaimers at all, but rather governmental compelled editorials against the product to which they are affixed. In *Wooley v. Maynard*, the Court overturned the respondents’ conviction for covering the state’s motto, “Live Free or Die,” on their license plate; the state could not compel the Maynards to act as a “mobile billboard” for conveying an “ideological message” that they found “morally objectionable.” Likewise, the graphic labels heavily interfere with the speech of tobacco companies, forcing them to serve as billboards for the government’s ideology without proof that less speech-intrusive means of reducing smoking rates are available.

Additionally, the graphic images implicate a number of First Amendment symmetries that may be obscured by the distasteful nature of cigarettes and their promotion. Here the adaptive standard of strict scrutiny is crucial in recognizing the distinctiveness of commercial speech while adhering to basic First Amendment principles. Long before affirming the “constitutional equivalence of compelled speech and compelled silence” for fully protected expression, the Court in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* had disavowed the notion that “a Bill of Rights which guards the individual's right to speak his own mind…left it open to public authorities to compel him to utter what is not in his mind.” Zauderer’s permissive standard accounts for government’s authority to prescribe useful factual disclosures for advertisements, and the danger of tobacco products was amply conveyed by the older labels containing statements of fact about the chemicals contained in cigarettes and the diseases they could cause. That latitude, however, does not erode Barnette’s injunction against official attempts to “prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.” As Sorrell’s disapproval of Vermont’s effort to stack the debate over prescription drugs demonstrates, indicia of such attempts in any context deserve close judicial review.

Nor is this concern met by the FDA’s contention that the new labels merely change the medium but not the message, for the Court has long recognized that when form and content are

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164 Id. at 715; see Laurent Sacharoff, *Listener Interests in Compelled Speech Cases*, 44 CAL. W. L. REV. 329, 398 (2008) (describing *Wooley* as holding that government “may not get free advertising through compulsion”).
166 319 U.S. 624 (1943).
167 Id. at 634.
169 *Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 642.
170 *See supra* notes 102-11 and accompanying text.
intertwined a change to one changes the other. In *Cohen v. California*, the Court noted that “words are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force,” and therefore would not “sanction the view that the Constitution, while solicitous of the cognitive content of individual speech, has little or no regard for that emotive function which, practically speaking, may often be the more important element of the overall message sought to be communicated.” In *Texas v. Johnson*, the Court rejected the notion that a flag burner could be punished because he might have made his point in innumerable other ways, ruling that it was the means of his expression that deserved protection. The “particular mode in which one chooses to express an idea,” the Court noted, may be just as vital as the message of the expression itself. Certainly the factual basis behind the old and new disclosure labels—that smoking has adverse health effects—remains the same. Yet when that information is communicated through a gruesome picture instead of a written statement, the message is fundamentally altered. To read that smoking harms one’s health is to learn of the risks of using tobacco. To see a post-autopsy corpse with its lungs removed is to be told: Do not smoke. In effect, then, tobacco companies are being forced to tell their customers, through the traumatic impact of a graphic image, not to buy what they are selling. A disclosure designed to repel customers from a product by provoking their disgust through a dramatic image is one different in kind, not degree, from a disclosure of fact.

The government has tacitly conceded this point, and in so doing highlighted the clash between the labels’ rationale and the antipaternalistic philosophy at the heart of recent commercial speech jurisprudence. The statute and its regulations reflect the belief that the old labels are simply not effective enough to keep people from using tobacco products, and that the new, graphic labels are necessary to reinforce the risks of smoking. Textual warnings, in other

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172 Id. at 26.
174 See id. at 431 (Rehnquist, C.J., dissenting) (“[Johnson’s] act...conveyed nothing that could not have been conveyed and was not conveyed just as forcefully in a dozen different ways.”)
175 Id. at 416.
176 Pac. Gas & Elec. Co. v. Pub. Utils Comm'n of Calif., 475 U.S. 1 (1986), offers analogy. There, the Court barred the state from forcing a company to carry in its billing statements editorials that were hostile to the company’s commercial interests. The FDA’s new labels are, in a very real sense, editorials, even propaganda, and of course they are at complete odds with the interests of tobacco companies. See Pacific Gas, 475 U.S. at 912 (Powell, J., plurality) (“For corporations as for individuals, the choice to speak includes within it the choice of what not to say. … Were the government freely able to compel corporate speakers to propound political messages with which they disagree, [First Amendment] protection would be empty, for the government could require speakers to affirm in one breath that which they deny in the next.”).
177 See Reynolds, 2012 WL 3632003 *15; see also; Commonwealth Brands, Inc. v. United States, 678 F.Supp.2d 512, 530 W.D.Ky. 2010 (noting statement issued by Institute of Medicine that warnings “are unnoticed and stale, and they fail to convey relevant information in an effective way”). The government also claims that its new label requirements are constitutional because the law mandates only that they be illustrated, not that they be horrifying, see Brief for Appellants at 24-27, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. v. FDA, 845 F. Supp. 2d 266 (D.D.C. 2012) (No. 11-5332)—although the majority of the labels already introduced are, indeed, alarming). This argument is jarringly incongruous with the FDA’s stated goal of using the labels to “effectively convey the negative health consequences of smoking on cigarette packages and in advertisements.” (76 Fed. Reg. at 36,697) The government has obviously decided that only traumatic, grotesque, or emotional images will “effectively” convey this alleged goal.
words, are not sufficiently dramatic to curb smoking rates to the FDA’s satisfaction, necessitating the introduction of more disturbing and memorable labels.\textsuperscript{178} Having determined that potential smokers will not respond appropriately to truthful information about a legal product, the government has resorted to shouting down tobacco companies’ message with vivid, frightening images. While the government’s own speech is unconstrained by the First Amendment,\textsuperscript{179} it lacks the same sweeping power to commandeer private channels of communication to advance its viewpoint. Censorship of truthful, nonmisleading commercial speech and injection of official belief into that speech are two sides of the same paternalistic coin.

Nor, of course, is the unpopularity of tobacco companies any gauge of the protection to which it is entitled under the First Amendment. On the contrary, it is a truism of free speech jurisprudence that the courts must safeguard this right for those whose message resonates least in society. Two examples among many serve to illustrate this bedrock principle. As noted above, in \textit{Texas v. Johnson},\textsuperscript{180} the Court overturned a conviction for flag-burning as a means of political protest—a form of expression that reduced the symbol of the nation to ashes. In \textit{Snyder v. Phelps},\textsuperscript{181} the Court overturned the defendants’ liability for picketing the funeral of a soldier killed in the line of duty, though their signs’ contention that deaths of American soldiers reflected God’s wrath for the nation’s tolerance of homosexuality—especially in the military—\textsuperscript{182} was surely regarded with near-universal repugnance. In reviewing the constitutionality of the FDA labels, then, public disdain for tobacco companies must not be considered. The government may decide to ban cigarettes altogether, but in the meantime it cannot warp public opinion by restricting the speech of despised corporations. Protection of “the thought that we hate”\textsuperscript{183} does not exclude purveyors of unhealthy but legal products.

With such core First Amendment principles implicated, only the tautological proposition that commercial speech deserves less protection because it is commercial speech precludes the stringent scrutiny of ideologically tinged compelled expression. Application of an adaptive form of strict scrutiny, on the other hand, would be entirely in line with the First Amendment jurisprudence over the past several decades—a period during which the Court has granted increasing protections to commercial speech. Starting with \textit{Virginia Board} and continuing through \textit{Sorrell}, the distinction between individual expression and commercial speech has become ever more diminished. \textit{Sorrell} leaves little question that the distinction between individual and commercial speech is often thin and artificial, noting that though “the burdened speech results from economic motive, so too does a great deal of vital expression.”\textsuperscript{184} Taking

\textsuperscript{178} It is true that other products—cleaning chemicals, insect poisons—are required to display disquieting warning labels (e.g., a skull and crossbones) to notify consumers of their toxic nature. The difference between insect poison and cigarettes, of course, is that ingestion of insect poison can be immediately fatal, while the negative effects of smoking occur over years and decades. A person who drinks a gallon of insect poison is in clear and present danger of dying immediately; a person who smokes a pack of cigarettes still has years to quit before experiencing any lethal effects. And while the smoker may be dissuaded through more speech—through, for instance, a public health campaign to curb smoking rates—the drinker of rat poison cannot be persuaded to make a different choice before experiencing the fatal effects of her decision.


\textsuperscript{180} 491 U.S. 397.

\textsuperscript{181} 131 S.Ct. 1207 (2011).

\textsuperscript{182} Id. at 1213-14.

\textsuperscript{183} United States v. Schwimmer, 279 U.S. 644, 655 (1929) (Holmes, J., dissenting).

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Sorrell}, 131 S.Ct. at 2665.
this refinement of its commercial speech doctrine a step further, the Court also recognized that often, “the outcome is the same whether a special commercial speech inquiry or a stricter form of judicial scrutiny is applied.” To bring Sorrell to its logical conclusion, the Court should now acknowledge that general First Amendment principles should apply to commercial speech as they do to noncommercial speech.

The theory that corporate and economic speech is less important to the marketplace of ideas than individual speech has always been a deeply flawed one. The marketplace of ideas includes ideas about commerce; as the Virginia Board Court observed, “society...may have a strong interest in the free flow of commercial information,” one which may at times be “keener by far than [its] interest in the day’s most urgent political debate.” Perhaps those citizens who are more interested in cigarettes than in elections number few. But our judicial system has never allowed legislatures to dictate what speech is most valued by censoring speech that is least desired. The First Amendment simply does not support the “commonsense distinction” made between personal and commercial speech. Such a distinction is “commonsense” only if our sense leads to abridgement of expression of speakers we find worthless.

Perhaps the danger of compelling unwanted speech in order to manipulate the public’s beliefs and actions seems, in this case, rather insignificant--no more than a “trifling and annoying instance.” But the dangers posed by a government free to “force speakers to alter their speech to conform with an agenda they do not set” do not end with cigarettes. The burden of unwanted expression, once condoned by courts, would undoubtedly extend far beyond tobacco companies. If the government is permitted to “prescribe what shall be orthodox” by means of commercial speech censorship, it may use its power to filter the free flow of information in accordance with its own wishes. The immediate effects for commercial speech are easy to imagine: a liquor company could be forced to have three-quarters of its label bear upsetting pictures of drunk-driving fatalities; a fast-food restaurant employee could be required to warn patrons, in language designed to make them squeamish, of the adverse effects of high-fat meals.

Moreover, the perils of power to compel this type of speech extend well beyond such relatively mundane scenarios. Once government is given power to control the public discourse through regulation of speech, it may easily distort the discourse to fit its own agenda. A government politically reliant on oil interests could mandate that all electric cars bear stickers conspicuously warning of their limitations compared to oil-fueled cars; its opponents, once in power, could mandate that all non-electric cars come with stickers depicting images of the environmental degradation of oil drilling. A political message may masquerade as a benign public service announcement, and an attempt to manipulate conduct may be disguised as a neutral and considerate suggestion. Once government is authorized to leap beyond fact-based warnings into compelled propaganda through private instruments, its power will not end with the objective goal of conveying facts to consumers. The marketplace of ideas will be manipulated to suit the government’s own ends, and free choice of thoughts and action will be distorted to fit the government’s ideology. Though the process may begin with the tempting goal of disparaging the noxious product of callous companies, these larger perils loom. As Justice Brandeis warned:

185 131 S.Ct. at 2667.
186 Virginia Bd., 425 U.S. at 765.
187 Id. at 772 n.24.
Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the Government’s purposes are beneficent. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasion of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding.\footnote{Olmstead v. United States, 277 U.S. 438, 479 (1928) (Brandeis, J., dissenting).}

Cigarettes may be dangerous, tobacco companies obnoxious—even odious. There is no question that the government’s goal of curbing smoking rates is a worthy one. The Court, however, has affirmed that in commercial speech as with other expression, freedom of speech may not be infringed because the choices it inspires are sometimes unwise. Government may deploy the formidable means at its disposal to discourage smoking, including loud and pervasive official campaigns and prohibitive taxes. But if ever the state may foist its tendentious message onto private speakers, including commercial ones, strict scrutiny demands that this compulsion be government’s last resort—not its first.

CONCLUSION

An adaptive standard of strict scrutiny for content-based commercial speech regulation would remove the uncertainty produced by formal adherence to \textit{Central Hudson}’s ambiguous framework. The standard accounts for the Supreme Court’s now consistent disapproval of suppression of truthful, nonmisleading commercial speech. Nor would adoption of this standard contradict the Court’s tolerant review of compelled disclosures that are factual, objective, and not unduly burdensome; rather, it would clarify that compulsions failing to meet these criteria are subject to a more demanding level of justification. As the recent requirement of graphic images on cigarette packages illustrates, fundamental First Amendment principles—and the danger of government overreach against which they guard—are relevant to this realm as well.