CHAPTER ELEVEN

Television Advertising as Textual and Economic Systems

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When I was a young child, my mother routinely took me with her while grocery shopping, as most mothers would. She was amazed when, as we strolled up each aisle, my two-year-old self would see different products on the shelf and begin singing the commercial jingles that I had heard on television associated with those products (e.g. “Snap, Crackle, Pop, Rice Krispies!”). She tells this story as one of the first times that she saw me as a being who was developing an identity and intellect separate from her: in this case, a commercial identity.

Now it is not like I was some sort of freakish advertising savant; in the United States as early as 1955 five-year-olds were reported singing beer commercial jingles (Samuel, 2001, p. 72). Many adults, too, express their fondness for the occasional commercial. The percentage of US viewers who claim to watch the Super Bowl only for the commercials has gradually risen over the years (McAllister, 2003). People watch 30-minute-long commercials (infomercials) or TV channels that are essentially nothing but commercials, like home-shopping channels (Cook, 2000). On the other hand, most of us do not watch TV for the commercials. The obnoxiousness of much of television advertising is a major pain for millions of viewers, often prompting them to channel surf or mute the television. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter, the proclivity of viewers to escape ads, and technological advances that facilitate this escape, may greatly influence the future role of promotional messages on television.

The television commercial is perhaps the most consistent and pervasive genre of television content – maybe even of all modern culture. The influence of the TV ad goes way beyond sticking a stupid song in our head, irritating us, or even the selling of specific products. Television advertising’s power comes from its presence and visibility both as a textual, symbolic system and as an economic system. As a textual system, commercials pervade television and therefore our lives as viewers. Although designed to sell products, television commercials have a high degree of symbolic complexity and have unintended effects beyond the
-selling goal. However, the ads themselves may be not be the most significant aspect of advertising. Economically, American television from the very beginning was driven by dollars from advertising. Television advertisers are the source for television’s funding. This is especially true of broadcast television, but also significantly so for most cable and satellite television networks. As the main funding source for television, advertising influences the nature of television programming in profound ways.

This chapter will review many of the key ideas of advertising as textual/symbolic and economic systems of television, focusing especially on points raised by the extensive critical literature on television commercials. Although examples from many countries will be discussed, the focus in this chapter will be on research about US television advertising, in many ways the “archetype” broadcast advertising model that set the bar—a gaudily decorated and corrosive bar, admittedly—for the rest of the world’s commercial television systems. As Magder (2004, p. 142) writes, “TV almost everywhere relies heavily on advertising dollars. Even so, the US TV system stands out—not any longer because it is commercial but because of the scale of the money in the system.”

Beginnings of Television Advertising

American television was, as Samuel (2001, p. xiv) notes, the “first exclusively commercial medium in history.” By this he means that other media—radio, newspapers, magazines—had some roots in non-advertising revenue streams, most commonly where audience members would foot at least part of the bill. TV in the United States, though, was designed from the very beginning to be advertising-supported.

Adopting the sponsorship system from radio, advertisers and their agencies had a greater degree of operational control over US television programming than in later years. Advertising agencies often served as program producers as one sponsor funded the production of a program and comprise the majority of commercial time. One implication of this was that in addition to the then-typical 60-second spot advertisements between program segments, early television was dominated by product selling during the programming. Such techniques as “integrated commercials” (promotional messages integrated into variety skits) and “host selling” would blur the distinctions between programming and advertisement (Alexander, Benjamin, Hoerrner, and Roe, 1998; Samuel, 2001). When factoring in host selling, product placement, on-set sponsor signage, and the spot advertisements themselves, some early programs may have been as much as 70 percent promotional (Samuel, 2001).

Eventually, sponsorship left television for the more “magazine-style” spot advertisement system, with many advertisers buying commercial time during a program, rather than one exclusive sponsor. There are several reasons for the decline of exclusive sponsorship in television, including the high cost of pro-
duc ing an entire program, the increased revenue potential to the networks of the magazine system, and the increased control over programming decisions and scheduling desired by the networks. In addition, as Barnouw notes, television was sufficiently commercialized by the 1960s, with commercial logic completely dominating the medium, that the direct control offered by sponsorship was no longer needed. Barnouw (1978, p. 4) argues that “A vast industry has grown up around the needs and wishes of sponsors. Its program formulas, business practices, ratings, demographic surveys have all evolved in ways to satisfy sponsor requirements.”

Television’s embrace of advertising may be seen in the amount of time devoted to commercials. In the United States, roughly one-fourth of all time on advertising-supported broadcast and cable television is devoted to commercial and promotional messages, a figure that is rising (Chunovic, 2003). According to data from the 1990s (and, therefore, likely to be conservative), the typical child viewer is exposed to 40,000 television commercials a year, nearly double the figure from 20 years earlier (cited in Kunkel and McIlrath, 2003). Such “clutter” may be even more prominent on television systems in developing countries (Mueller, 1996). From a fiscal point of view, by 2003 spending on US television advertising across all categories (broadcast network, local, cable, and syndicated programming) reached over $57 billion, comprising approximately 23 percent of all advertising revenues generated in the United States and making television by far the biggest advertising medium (Coen, 2003). The dominance of television as an advertising medium is more pronounced in many other countries. In the top 20 countries in terms of advertising growth from 2002 to 2003 (a list which includes Russia, China, India, and Brazil), television accounts for over 50 percent of all advertising revenues (Global Advertising, 2003).

Given their obvious and pervasive roles as symbols, what are a few of the key points that critical scholars make about television commercials as cultural messages? Given their economic import, how might the commercial nature of television affect its programming? The next two sections consider these questions.

**Television Commercials as Cultural Texts: Commodity Fetishism and Representation**

Television commercials are designed, first and foremost, to sell a product. Yet commercials often have effects beyond the purchase of a product. With often little material difference between products to promote, commercials must grab our attention and enhance the image of the product. They use a variety of sounds, dialog, visuals, and motion and editing techniques to communicate. They must appeal to particular demographic groups and not others. As a form of storytelling, they represent people, institutions, and practices in particularly self-serving ways. And they have a short time frame in which to communicate (typically 15 or 30 seconds). For these reasons, television commercials often
cultivate effects beyond their immediate purpose that may have profound implications. In this section, two themes raised by television advertising critics will be explored: the degree to which television commercials fetishize the commodity form, and the ideological implications of representation in ads.

Television commercials as commodity fetishism

Macintosh’s “1984” commercial, aired during the (appropriately enough) 1984 Super Bowl, is an important text in the history of television commercialism (Berger, 2004; McAllister, 1999; Stein, 2002). This ad, which announced the debut of the Macintosh personal computer, is credited with being the first ever “event commercial,” legitimizing advertising campaigns as newsworthy and as forms of entertainment in and of themselves, and establishing the Super Bowl as a vehicle for high visibility campaigns. Stein (2002) also argues that this advertisement was especially ideological; it presents persuasive images in a way that is embedded in social power. By constructing IBM as an oppressive, “Big-Brotherish” force in our lives, the ad positions the Macintosh, and the consumer’s decision to buy Macintosh, as an emancipatory solution to the industrialized alienation. Through a complex use of cinematic techniques (composed by the film director Ridley Scott) and cultural symbolism, the ad constitutes – creates – the consumer as someone who can act upon their frustratingly limited social environment simply by buying the product. To not buy Macintosh (itself, of course, a product of industrialization), the ad implies, is to be a powerless lemming with no social agency.

The 1984 ad is an archetypal example of one important textual characteristic of most television commercials. TV ads routinely “fetishize commodities” and the act of purchasing commodities (for a discussion of this Marxian concept as applied to advertising, see Jhally, 1987). Raymond Williams noted about advertising that the reason modern advertising is effective is not because humans in a modern society are hyper-materialistic. If we were purely materialistic, then ads themselves would not even be necessary or, at most, would just need to show the product, perhaps in especially flattering camera angles. We would simply want the product for the product’s sake. The reason ads look the way they do, though, is that “our society quite evidently is not materialistic enough” (Williams, 1980, p. 185). Because humans have other needs besides the material, in order to be persuaded to purchase products, advertisers have to symbolically link other personal, social, and cultural values to the product. In the ads, the material product must be elevated beyond the material.

Advertising in all media can do this, but television advertising seems especially suited to the linkage of products to social values. Print advertising has more space for words, so factual information and logical argument about the product is easier to incorporate in a one-page ad than in a 30-second commercial. Besides using sound in creative ways, television has an image advantage over radio in that it can use visual symbolism to link products to desirable images and
emotions. Samuel (2001) argues that television commercials are so effective at linking products to happiness that this form may have revitalized the “American Dream” and the imperative of consumer culture in the United States in the 1950s, an era that followed times of economic scarcity (the Depression) and material scarcity (World War II).

Butler (2002) argues that at least eight different “meaning categories,” or social values, are found in modern US television commercials. Depending upon the specific product positioning, different visual techniques link products to one or more of these meaning categories: luxury & leisure; individualism; nature; folk culture; progress & novelty; romance & sexuality; easing/elimination of pain, fear & guilt; and utopia & freedom from dystopia (p. 289). SUV commercials, for example, link those vehicles to the idea of entering nature and gaining security over other drivers (Andersen, 2000); Cascade dishwashing detergent becomes a way to keep peace in a marriage and make men more domestically competent (Budd, Craig, and Steinman, 1999); Saturn ads connect the car to warm community-based images of the past (Goldman and Papson, 1996); and children’s commercials present toys and cereals as a gateway to a utopian world where “kids rule” and adults are clueless (Seiter, 1993). Such symbolic linkages of product to social value imbue products with a “magical” quality (Williams, 1980), elevating the status beyond the material. The commodity is thus “fetishized” in a way that increases its cultural value beyond its purely material function.

What are some implications of how advertising, especially television advertising, fetishizes its commodities? Advertising’s celebration of consumption may mask troublesome production practices. The Nike corporation airs TV campaigns celebrating consumer choice and empowerment in the ads while simultaneously promoting exploitative industrial practices in underdeveloped countries (Andersen, 1995, ch. 2; Stabile, 2000). Nor can advertisements deliver what they promise. As Andersen points out, alienation and dissolution may result when consumers realize that buying a particular product does not lead to magical solutions that improve their lives (1995, p. 89). Television advertising may also be one factor that leads to the over-consumption of commodity goods, encouraging overwork, a decrease in true leisure time, and an increase in consumer debt and ultimately life dissatisfaction for many (Schor, 1999). Scholars have noted the destructive impact upon the environment that overconsumption encourages (Budd, Craig and Steinman, 1999; Schor, 1999), so much so that Jhally (2000) wonders about the role of “advertising at the edge of the apocalypse” (p. 27). If true, such problems become more globally salient as television commercials in Eastern countries such as Hong Kong (Wong, 2000), China (Zhang and Harwood, 2004) and Malaysia (Holden, 2001), although perhaps still reflecting indigenous value systems, increasingly incorporate Western consumerist values and the celebration of acquiring goods. Indonesia banned television advertising for many years in large part because of concerns over consumerism in the form (Mueller, 1996, p. 147).
Representation in television commercials

Another central issue of television commercials as textual systems is representation: to what extent are certain social groups systematically portrayed in ways that may enhance or undermine their social authority and agency? Gender in television advertisements, for example, has been much studied by scholars (for reviews, see Furnham and Mak, 1999; Shields, 1997). There are several incentives for the use of sexism in television commercials: sex as a way to grab attention; the fit of advertising stereotypes in gender-based demographic segmentation (such as male-oriented programming); the use of stereotypes to shortcut the storytelling process (i.e. the “dumb blonde type”); the linkage of sexual success to the product as a way to (appropriately enough) fetishize it; and, again, the representational tools for enhancing emotional communication – including eroticism – that television provides such as film-style visuals (i.e. slow motion, camera angles), editing and music.

Shields with Heineck (2002, p. 19) argues that although portrayals of women in ads have become more diverse, the stereotypical representations found in earlier television still exist. Research from a variety of countries highlights that although the overall ratio of male to female actors in commercials may be fairly equal, there are still consistent trends in presenting women in sexualized ways, in domestic settings, and in less authoritarian roles (such as voice-over narrators) than males (Bresnahan, Inoue, Liu, and Nishida, 2001; Furnham and Mak, 1999). Television commercials also tend to use thin models at least as often as standard-sized women and much more than heavier-than-average women, often linking physical attractiveness to slenderness (Peterson and Byus, 1999).

In children’s advertising, studies indicate that, similar to adult ads, the percentage of portrayals of boys and girls in television commercials have evened out, but boys tend to be portrayed as more active and aggressive (Kunkel and McIlrath, 2003). Even the language in children’s advertising tends to reinforce gender stereotypes, as commercials for girl-oriented products tend to use more passive and “feeling-based” verbs, whereas ads centered on boys use more action- and control-oriented words (Johnson and Young, 2002). Men also do not escape gender stereotyping in television commercials, as in, for example, the linkage of masculine initiation and control with alcohol in television beer commercials (Strate, 2000).

How may gendered portrayals affect viewers? There is evidence that viewing television commercials with excessively thin models may encourage adolescent girls to be dissatisfied with their own bodies (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2003), and that gender stereotyping of such notions as women’s aversion to math in commercials may reinforce that stereotype in some women viewers’ attitudes and behaviors (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, and Gerhardt, 2002).

Racial representation has also been studied extensively by advertising critics and researchers (for a review, see Wilson and Gutiérrez, 2003), with the majority of work focusing on portrayals of African Americans. Although African
Americans appear in about one-third of all prime-time television commercials (cited in Entman and Book, 2000), the specific nature of these representations are often racially biased. In commercials during children’s television, for example, African Americans are essentialized as musicians and athletic (Seiter, 1993). Similarly, others have noted the still-circumscribed roles that African Americans play in prime-time ads, such as athletes and low-wage workers (Bristor, Lee, and Hunt, 1995).

In terms of behavior and lifestyle, African-American males tend to be portrayed as aggressive and African-American females are often excluded from affect-oriented roles where romantic or domestic life is shown as pleasurable (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000). Shades of skin color may also be ideologically slanted in commercials, with more light-skinned actors appearing in commercials than dark skinned, especially among females, and with dark-skinned performers associated with athleticism (Entman and Book, 2000). When African Americans are presented prominently and sympathetically, the context of this portrayal in a television commercial may introduce problematic elements. In a study of the Budweiser “Whassup!” ad campaign, Watts and Orbe (2002) argue that although the ad portrayed African-American male friendship in a positive way, much of the humor and popularity of the commercial series, at least for white audiences, is the “otherness” of black male culture and the clownish “hyperbolic black acting” that characterizes the ads (p. 10).

Even though commercials are something we see every day and the symbols they employ are formidable and calculatively refined by market research, perhaps a greater influence of television advertising upon our lives is less obvious: the influences advertisers and the advertising system exert upon other elements of television beyond the 30-second spot. Besides their symbolic import, commercials are also the main revenue source for television. The next section reviews many of the critical claims made about advertising’s economic impact upon television programming.

Television Commercials as Economic Source: Seven Effects

The economic logic of a simple financial transaction like buying a glass of lemonade from a child’s stand is easy to see: you are the buyer, the child is the seller, and the lemonade is the product. Television is a bit more complicated to map in this way, and this complication is due in large part to the role of advertising. As Smythe (1977) noted, because US commercial television generates virtually 100 percent of its revenues from advertising, in this system the advertisers are the “buyers,” the television networks (for national advertising) and stations/cable systems (for local) are the sellers, and we, the viewers, are the product. The cost of placing a 30-second ad during a program, after all, depends upon the ratings for that program, the measure of the size and demographics of
the viewership. Advertisers will purchase time on a program when this audience measure promises a sufficient audience, both in terms of size and kind. Ideally, advertisers would also like this product—the viewership—to be in an appropriate mental/emotional state to view ads.

If advertisers purchase audiences from television organizations, then what economic function do the programs serve? They are a "bribe" or "free lunch" or bait to grab the audience (Smythe, 1977, p. 5). In the United States, given this subordinate economic role that programming plays, the dominance of advertising as the main revenue generator for commercial television, and the 50-plus-year entrenchment of this system, it should not be surprising that its television programming is affected by all of these factors. As other countries adopt a more privatized and "Americanized" television system, it is logical to assume that the economic logic of advertising will continue to shape programming worldwide as well. In fact, the advertising industry in many countries is more dependent upon television than in the United States. As noted earlier, other countries, such as Brazil, Greece, Hong Kong, Mexico and Spain, spend more than 50 percent of their advertising expenditures on television (Mueller, 1996).

Television advertising's economic role has many effects upon society generally, including its role in decreasing competition (Bagdikian, 2000, ch. 8), and its financial marginalization of print media (Frith and Mueller, 2003). It also has many effects upon television programming, both blatant and subtle. This section will focus on seven of the more significant programming effects. Of course, these effects are not absolute: exceptions are often found as creative personnel bend rules and contradictory industrial factors collide (for example, the need to attract young, hip audiences through "edgy" programming versus the need to avoid alienating audiences). But, given the structural incentives built into television's economic logic, it is difficult for television personnel to continually and fundamentally counter the effects discussed below.

The "don't bite the hand" effect

Simply put, for content creators it is easier to avoid fundamental criticism of advertising on television than it is to include such criticism given the potential economic fallout. Advertisers feel, logically enough, that programming critical of them will not put audiences in the mood to buy their product. All advertising-supported media feel such pressure. But given that some forms of television are completely supported by advertising and that there is a very high level of competition for television advertising dollars at both the national and local level (the latter unlike US newspapers, which typically have a monopoly in their market), television is especially vulnerable to advertising pressures (Soley, 2002).

The removal or avoidance of advertising criticism can be seen throughout the history of television. Sometimes this can reach absurd levels: during the single-sponsorship days of TV, Miles Labs, a drug company and the sponsor of The Flintstones during its original prime-time manifestation, forbade any character on
the show from having a stomachache or headache (Samuel, 2001, p. 139). Sometimes the issue is not so trivial: consumer reporter David Horowitz was fired from WCBS in New York, perhaps due to the repeated complaints from car advertisers about his stories on auto safety (Soley, 2002, pp. 12–13). More systematically, one local TV station executive noted that "you never see an investigative report on [local] car dealers. It's an unspoken rule" (quoted in Andersen, 1995, p. 23; for other examples, see Baker, 1994). In one survey of local television reporters and editors, nearly 75 percent reported that advertisers had attempted in the previous three years to influence a story, 40 percent stated that advertisers had succeeded at their station (Soley, 2002). One survey of US network news correspondents, though, found significantly less pressure from advertisers, although CNN correspondents reported more pressure than other networks (Price, 2003). At least at the local level, self-censorship becomes a concern as media personnel anticipate advertiser response and reporters learn to avoid altogether the kind of stories that cause organizational headaches.

The "plugola" effect

The flip side to the suppression of ideas critical to specific advertisers is the insertion of ideas that favor specific advertisers. Compared to other media, television seems somewhat more willing to offer such promotional incentives. It is commonplace on American television, for example, to have "co-sponsored" segments of a program: "This ABC Sports exclusive presentation brought to you by . . . Tostitos Gold . . . and Circuit City." Television often goes beyond this. In news, for example, local television reporters are sometimes pressured to do stories that feature advertisers (Soley, 2002). News organizations routinely receive public relations materials from corporations, including their advertisers, that make it easy to use such stories. On the morning I wrote this sentence, for example, there was a story on the local NBC affiliate about the new lime flavor of Diet Coke, a story that was no doubt PR-originated and advertiser-flattering in effect. One also sees news stories that feature or mention advertisers on national news. The night of the final episode of Seinfeld on NBC also saw on that network a news segment on the NBC Nightly News about Garden Burger, an advertiser during the program (McAllister, 2002).

Product placement and sponsorship are increasingly commonplace on television. In some countries product placement has been a standard practice for many years. In Brazil, for example, corporations may sign annual contracts to integrate products in popular telenovelas (Frith and Mueller, 2003). With American television, product placement has not always been the easiest fit. While marketers spend $360 million a year to place products in film (James, 2003), the practice was problematic for US television due to the medium's need to meet FCC rules of revenue disclosure and to avoid treating certain advertisers more favorably than others. Competition for advertising dollars sparked by cable and the Internet and the looming threat of the digital personal recorder have changed this. Some
forms, such as sports, daytime television, and reality-based shows, have been more accepting of product placement than prime-time “scripted” shows. In reality-based programs, for example, advertisers will provide visible, even heroic, products for abused contestants, such as the stranded players of Survivor (Deery, 2004). However, deals like the Volkswagen Bug in Smallville and Ragu in Everybody Loves Raymond may signal a wider pervasiveness, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter (Steinberg and Vranica, 2004).

Sometimes entire programs will be built around one advertiser, especially in sponsorship deals reminiscent of early television. Besides the end-of-season US college football games (like the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl), sponsored specials include MTV-Japan’s Super Dry Live (sponsored by the beer company Asahi) and CBS’s Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. The 2003 installment of this latter program aired several commercials for the lingerie retailer – between segments of the program that were also essentially commercials for the store – and both the national and local news aired promotions for tie-in news stories about the program during the program. Regular series such as EA Sports NFL Matchup on ESPN used images from the EA Sports videogame “Madden NFL Football” to illustrate strategy, blurring the program with intertwined commercials for EA videogames with similar images.

As with product placement in film, the intrusion of specific advertiser images in television programming raises issues of programming autonomy and creative integrity. It also raises concerns about the degree to which television creators can air non-consumption-friendly programming ideas given the increasingly close relationship of advertising to production, a concern raised by the following section.

The “don’t rock the boat” effect

Another related effect of advertising upon media content is the “blanding” of television programming (Bagdikian, 2000; Baker, 1994). All things being equal, advertising discourages controversy. As one marketing professional who screens controversial media content for advertisers explained, “Basically, we look for the Big Six: sex, violence, profanity, drugs, alcohol and religion” (quoted in Richards and Murphy, 1996, p. 22). Controversy, it is believed, will cause some audience members to be in a non-buying mood and others to leave altogether, thereby eroding ratings. This effect is true of all advertising-supported media, but especially true of television. In a newspaper, if a story angers a reader, that reader may very well just turn the page. In this case, the reader stays with the same economic entity (the newspaper). With television, though, if viewers are angered, they will turn the channel, eroding its ratings. And with sound and visuals being a part of the medium, television is more intrusive than print, since again the latter just requires looking at another part of the page to selectively ignore something offensive. The intrusiveness of television, in addition to the total reliance upon advertising by television, may also make the medium more vulnerable to
advertising boycotts by upset protesters of television. These factors indicate that television advertisers may be especially touchy about airing a commercial during controversial content.

Richards and Murphy (1996, p. 24) provides a long list of national and local programming that felt heat from advertisers before or after airing controversial ideas. An example from 2003 may be telling as well. Although CBS president Leslie Moonves denied that threats from conservative groups to engage in an advertising boycott was a factor, the television film *The Reagans* was moved from the advertising-supported CBS to the advertising-free (and much less accessible) pay-cable network Showtime amidst such threats (for a review of this incident, see Carter, 2003). This decision was made before advertisers even had a chance to screen the film. Regardless of CBS’s intention, the image of such apparent public acquiescence to a possible advertiser boycott may send a chilling message to future creative personnel in TV.

On the other hand, other industrial factors may occasionally encourage controversy on television, with advertisers accepting, even welcoming, it. To preview a latter effect, controversy seems more welcome on certain narrowly targeted cable networks that can deliver the right audience. Thus, controversial animated programs such as *Beavis and Butthead* in the early 1990s on MTV and *South Park* on Comedy Central bring in young, hip viewers to advertisers attempting to sell products—like movies and soft drinks—with a similar lifestyle image.

The “conspicuous consumption” effect

If one cannot have controversial or potentially disturbing programming, then what may take its place? In fact, another effect that advertising may have upon television programming is a greater emphasis upon consumer values in the programming itself, even beyond individual advertiser influence. Advertisers desire television to put viewers in a “buying mood” (Baker, 1994, pp. 62–6). As television has matured, this advertiser-friendly orientation has seeped into the medium to such a degree that consumerist values are implemented without the influence of individual advertising pressure. So even beyond the touting of individual advertisers and the removal of criticism of individual advertisers, television is consumption oriented both in some of the prominent genres found on television and in the portrayal of lifestyles in other genres that are not inherently consumerist.

Consumption-oriented programming is found throughout the television schedule. During the daytime, for example, US game shows test consumer knowledge—such as the Pax network’s *Shop ’Til You Drop* and *Supermarket Sweep* and CBS’s *The Price Is Right* (the latter a hit among college students) – or blatantly celebrate consumer overspending, such as the now-defunct *Debt* (Merskin, 1998). Some specialized cable channels are “niched” with consumption-oriented lifestyles in mind, such as Home and Garden Television and the Food Network in the United States, creating very conducive programming environments for
advertisements. On the Food Network, although the network does air programs about how to cook frugally without brand names prominently shilled, it also includes programs like Unwrapped, which celebrates mass-produced (and mass-marketed) foods such as branded candies and pastries.

Similarly, while most press discussions of the Bravo/NBC program Queer Eye for the Straight Guy focused on its risky advancement of gay visibility on television, in another sense the consumption orientation of the program was perfectly conventional for commercially supported television. The morale of this program is the same as most commercials: "consumption will make your life better." Episodes prominently feature/tout particular brands of skin care products, wines, fashions, and furnishings; these specific products are then also found listed on the program's website. The program's hosts were not shy about voicing the transformational power of such commodities. "We're taking you to a relationship counselor," the fashion guru Carson says in one episode to one commodity-challenged couple, "I mean, no, we're taking you to Crate and Barrel."

Other programs may not center around commodity competence or knowledge, but, rather, assume levels of "normal" class and lifestyle that raise expectations about the quality and quantity of personal possessions. As television looks to attract affluent audiences and create the proper upscale environment for advertisers, characters on television tend to display well-to-do lifestyles much more commonly than in real life. Friends and Frasier live in spacious urban dwellings, and soap operas feature the lifestyles of the rich and powerful. Schor (1999) argues that, more than commercials, the display of conspicuous consumption on television programs may promote overspending and indebtedness among television viewers. The rich may hide from us in gated mansions in real life, but they are on display on television. Indeed, the more one watches television, the more that one associates possessions/products with affluence, although this relationship is mitigated by income and education level (O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997). In terms of young audiences, there is evidence that exposure to television generally (and television advertising specifically) leads to an acceptance of more materialist values (Smith and Atkin, 2003).

The "that's entertainment" effect

Television is an entertainment-oriented medium; it often is fun to watch. Funny sitcoms, absorbing dramas, and perversely fascinating reality-based shows dominate the broadcast schedule. And everyone likes to be entertained. But can there be too much of a good thing, and, if so, is television advertising responsible for this in some way? Postman argues that television's entertainment orientation is largely due to its characteristics as a communication medium: the audio and visual nature of television delivers information in such a way that is non-linear and stimulating to the senses. The content of the medium, then, has increasingly exploited the characteristics of this image and sound delivery system as television has matured.
However, advertising's dominance as a funding system and the resulting emphasis on ratings also play a significant role in television's entertainment orientation. Just as advertisers abhor controversial ideas that may offend viewers and cause them to leave the channel, they also do not embrace ideas that are too complex or even boring for some viewers that may trigger channel surfing or perhaps even critical thinking not conducive to the reception of often-stupid advertising messages.

We see this effect not just in the dominance of certain titillating genres like sitcoms and reality-based shows, but also in trends in television news. For example, in terms of audiovisual elements, the "pace" of television news is significantly faster now than in the early days of television, with increasingly heavier editing and elements such as the incredibly shrinking video-quote soundbite (Hallin, 1992). In a trend that also illustrated the influence of the Internet on television news, the cluttered screens of cable and broadcast news coverage of the 2003 Iraq War shows the pressure to keep interest high. Split screens, multiple scrolls, and labels placed throughout the screen do not just mimic websites, but also attempt to hold viewer attention to the screen through over-stimulation. Perhaps more disturbing are news topic trends that may be influenced by ratings pressure. While television news coverage of celebrity and scandal increases, coverage of less exciting topics such as international news decreases (McChesney, 1999; McAllister, 2002, 2003).

The "pardon the interruption" effect

This next effect is painfully obvious: commercials interrupt the TV programs we are watching. Although the US model of constant interruptions is normalized for those viewers, such a model does not necessarily follow the implementation of a commercial television system. In the United Kingdom, commercials were circumscribed to the start and finish of programs or during "natural breaks" (Samuel, 2001, p. 69). Even more confining, early in Italy's commercial system ads were compartmentalized into three pre-established time periods (Samuel, 2001, p. 185). When interrupting programs, as is now the norm in most countries, television also has a qualitatively different interruption effect than print, since in that medium ads can be easily ignored while reading a story.

In the United States, there are no legal limits on the amount of time that television commercials may take up or the interruption pattern that commercials may use, except with regard to children's television programming (Kunkel and McIlrath, 2003). Indeed, if such limits existed then some types of commercial forms, such as the infomercial or home-shopping channels, may be illegal. Even with regular programming, the amount of time devoted to intrusive spot advertising is significant. One concern is that the amount of promotional time that viewers are exposed to – sometimes called "clutter" – is increasing. In 1991, for example, ABC averaged 12 minutes, 50 seconds per hour of non-programming content in prime time (mostly commercials and program promos); in 2002, the
same network averaged 15 minutes, 16 seconds (Fleming, 1997; Chunovic, 2003).

The growth and interruptability of commercial messages on television have several implications. One such implication is that, if programs are the bait or reward for viewers, then we are now receiving less and less reward from television. Television programs have gotten shorter as commercial and promotional clutter has increased. This is frustrating not just for the audience, but also for the creative personnel: “It’s getting worse and worse,” said one executive producer about the decrease in creative time, “we have less time to tell a story, and it’s brutal for the writers” (Flint, 1996/1997, p. 32).

Postman (1986) wonders if commercials, along with the increased pace of television (that is also commercially triggered), decrease attention spans and make us less tolerant of extended argument. A similar effect is the trivialization that may occur when important ideas are interrupted by often-silly and certainly irrelevant-to-the-program selling messages. As Postman and Powers argue, the implicit message given when commercials interrupt serious content is “You needn’t grieve or worry about what you are seeing. In a minute or so, we will make you happy with some good news about how to make your teeth whiter” (1992, p. 126). Thus, when the United States began the Persian Gulf War by launching missiles on Iraq on the evening of January 17, 1991, during the same time as the Evening News in the Eastern United States, Tom Brokaw on the NBC Nightly News announced that, “It does appear that an attack of some kind, what dimensions we cannot say, is underway tonight on Baghdad itself and perhaps other military targets in Iraq. As soon as we can learn more, we’ll be to you with additional details.” Fade to black. Then, a Brokaw-esque man informs us, “One day there was just too much gray. And I thought, should I or shouldn’t I? . . . I wanted natural looking color . . . I figured, if it was from Clairol, I could trust it.” This was followed by another message for prunes, another for Vaseline Intensive Care lotion, and then Brokaw returning by saying, “We’re back, we want to tell you that there’s an attack underway on Iraq . . .” Of course, television executives know that advertising may delegitimize or trivialize serious discussion, hence their promotion of especially prestigious programming (NBC’s 1997 broadcast of Schindler’s List, for example) as “commercial free” or “with limited interruption.” Normal programming, clearly, is not so lucky.

The “youth (and other advertising-friendly groups) will be served” effect

The seventh effect upon programming is the fragmentation of audiences into different target markets, a fragmentation that takes many forms, but often privileges youth. Advertisers do not want just large audiences, they want audiences that are most likely to purchase their products. This means, then, that advertisers are looking to target their marketing efforts for the best possible efficiency: niche audiences that match in demographics, lifestyle and interests the profile of
a niche market. Following other advertising-supported media that have segmented audiences (such as radio and magazines), the technology of cable and satellites allow the creation of hundreds of channels which are created to cultivate the complex demographic combinations for efficient delivery of specialized audience product to potential advertisers (Turow, 1997). So while the Discovery Channel, with its straight-up nature and science emphasis, is the most “generic” of Discovery Communications Inc. holdings, Discovery Kids delivers a younger demographic with the same interests. Other cable channel holdings like Discovery Wings, Discovery Times, and Discovery Health similarly drill down to deeper demographic layers.

One implication of the segmentation of television is that society may be “broken up” with commercial criteria as marketers define social groupings according to market imperatives. Less commonalities may be evident to society-at-large as cable stations (and other advertising-driven media) look to subdivide people into demographically defined markets. Marketers do not just react to existing consumer groups; they help define and solidify such groups in their selective advertising purchasing and subsequent formations by media outlets (Turow, 1997).

Another implication of this is that some audiences are more desirable as products than others. Young people, for example, have disposable income and a propensity to spend it, are key markets for leisure activities (like movies), and are willing to try new brands. Older people, who may have as much potential spending power but not as likely to be persuaded to switch brands by advertising, are less desirable as audience-product. This means fewer television choices for these less advertiser-coveted audiences. One television executive used this criterion in justifying the cancellation of the well-viewed but older-skewing CBS program Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman: “Unfortunately we get paid zero – not a nickel, but zero – for anybody over 55. Despite the show’s very loyal and devoted audience, the amount of money we were getting per advertising spot was disastrous” (quoted in Budd, Clay, and Steinman, 1999, p. 74).

**Conclusion: Three Future Trends**

This chapter explored some of the major themes about advertising as a symbolic and economic system. In the critical scholarship on television commercialism there is often a separation between these two commercial elements. Rhetorical critics, cultural studies scholars, and content analysts concentrate on the messages in television commercials, while political economists focus on advertising’s economic impact. When one looks at the future of television advertising, one sees trends that will affect both arenas. Advertisers have been frustrated with the viewers’ ability to avoid television commercials since at least the 1980s, when remote controls, VCRs, and advertising clutter became more prevalent (Andersen, 1995). With newer concerns over the ease with which personal digital recorders
allow viewers to skip commercials, advertisers’ anxiety—and attempts at further control—are heightened. Recent trends in fact may further combine the symbolic machinations of a television commercial with the financial impact of the “ad dollar” that infuses the television industry.

Digital manipulation

One trend that may become increasingly salient in commercials is the use of digitally created imagery to enhance the effectiveness of selling symbols in both commercials and programs. We of course see this now. Digital manipulation makes products shimmer more brightly, models sexier, and production values more spectacular. Digital technology, as it does in film, creates very realistic-looking phenomena that do not exist but that may enhance branding strategies, such as long-dead celebrities interacting with the latest products (DeSalvo, 1998). We have only begun to see the potential for symbolic persuasion and manipulation that visual-digital technology will bring to advertisements. But such technology also enhances the commercial presence in television programs. “Virtual advertising” includes the increasingly accepted practice of digitally inserting product signage into televised events, such as rotating ads behind the home plate of a baseball game that only the television viewers can see and targeting virtual billboards for different regions of the viewership. Such technology would also allow “retroactive product placement” in which new products can be inserted into the syndicated or DVD versions of older programs and movies; such insertion occurred on a limited basis in 2003 (Kafka, 2003).

Advertiser-controlled television programs

Another way to counter such factors as clutter and personal recording technology is for advertisers to demand more operational control of program production. This would return TV to the days of early sponsorship by creating and shaping programs to make them more conducive to the seamless insertion of commercial messages into programs. For example, in December 2003 ABC and a subsidiary of the mega-advertising conglomerate the WPP Group announced plans for a project to develop programs together. An ABC executive said, “This gives us a chance to have a collaborative relationship with our major clients [advertisers] early in the process” (Reuters, 2003, p. C2). In describing the blurring effect between commercial interests and programming that such a “collaboration” may have, an executive for Coca-Cola noted, “We’re headed to ideas... Ideas that bring entertainment value to our brands and ideas that integrate our brand into entertainment” (Lewis, 2003, p. 20). In late 2003, the Nielsen Company announced that it would begin charting product placements and calculating audience exposure, perhaps signaling the further institutionalization of the practice (James, 2003). Clearly, this direction would enhance not just the visibility of products in programs, but also the degree to which programs
should be commercially slanted. The "branded program" *Nike Training Camp*, shown on the cable station College Sports Television, typically "will feature only teams that have endorsement deals with Nike" (Ives, 2003, p. C8).

Database marketing and interactive television

A final trend that advertisers are increasingly embracing is to co-opt interactive, digital systems like TiVO rather than seeing it as the enemy. One advantage of such interactive systems is the collection of viewing information that such systems may offer. If interactive systems record, even predict, our preferences, there is concern that this data may be collected by marketers to enhance their consumer profiles about viewers, and create hyper-targeted marketing campaigns based upon this information. Further, the integration of increased home shopping opportunities on television, even in routine programming (i.e. "Pause here to buy a tie like Regis's!"), may enable highly targeted selling messages to be placed near these buying moments. Such techniques would not only enhance the degree to which these selling messages may fetishize commodities – creating an especially targeted way of celebrating the product – but would also make it easier for viewers to acquiesce to the buying impulse the targeted ads encourage. The "moment of pause" between seeing an ad and buying the product, a characteristic of the physical distance between home televisions and retail outlets, would disappear. Scholars have noted that viewers may disregard the privacy concerns of such systems given their promise of viewing flexibility (Andrejevic, 2002; Campbell and Carlson, 2002).

A Final Word: Commercials and Resistance

Commercials are fully integrated into television and much of our everyday culture. As argued above, this integration may increase in the new digital television era. Although commercials may give us product information and entertain us, there are associated costs. The symbols in commercials are often problematic in terms of their portrayal of social groups and their framing of commodities as a solution to various social and personal problems. Economically, commercials shape the media messages we receive, or don't receive, in ways that may be unintended, but that are nevertheless troublesome for a democratic society that thrives on a diversity of ideas.

But the integration will not take place without the protests of those who resist the further commercialization of television as well as the larger society. As writers such as Naomi Klein (1999) have argued, not everyone is willing to be an obsessed-with-buying consumer or even to buy into the messages of commercials. Organizations like Adbusters (www.adbusters.com) provide alternatives to consumer culture and Media Watch (www.mediamwatch.com) highlight racism and sexism in advertisements. Many of these resistant activities target television
specifically. In 2003, the group Commercial Alert (www.commercialalert.org) filed complaints to both the Federal Communication Commission and the Federal Trade Commission about the increased but unlabeled practice of product placement on US television, a practice that this group argues violates some of the earliest policies about the full disclosure of commercial influences in broadcasting (Bauder, 2003). Such groups and the resistance strategies they advocate, although standing against a massive commercial force that knows how to publicize and promote self-serving ideas, can nevertheless keep vibrant ideas that may go against the televised commercial grain.

References


Television Advertising


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