

ADVERTISING AS COMMUNICATION

Gillian Dyer



STUDIES IN CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION
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AS
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For my parents, Bertram and Gwen Dyer

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This series of books on different aspects of communication is designed to meet the needs of the growing number of students coming to study this subject for the first time. The authors are experienced teachers or lecturers who are committed to bridging the gap between the huge body of research available to the more advanced student, and what the new student actually needs to get him started on his studies.

Probably the most characteristic feature of communication is its diversity: it ranges from the mass media and popular culture, through language to individual and social behaviour. But it identifies links and a coherence within this diversity. The series will reflect the structure of its subject. Some books will be general, basic works that seek to establish theories and methods of study applicable to a wide range of material; others will apply these theories and methods to the study of one particular topic. But even these topic-centred books will relate to each other, as well as to the more general ones. One particular topic, such as advertising or news or language, can only be understood as an example of communication when it is related to, and differentiated from, all the other topics that go to make up this diverse subject.

The series, then, has two main aims, both closely connected. The first is to introduce readers to the most important results of contemporary research into communication together with the theories that seek to explain it. The second is to equip them with appropriate methods of study and investigation which they will be able to apply directly to their everyday experience of communication.

If readers can write better essays, produce better projects and pass more exams as a result of reading these books I shall be very satisfied; but if they gain a new insight into how communication shapes and informs our social life, how it articulates and creates our experience of industrial society, then I shall be delighted. Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces.

John Fiske

PREFACE

This book is meant to provide some basic ideas, concepts and material for the study of advertising. It draws on work from a number of fields but revolves around the core concept of communication. Much of the book is in the form of a survey of existing material, and the second half in particular deals with questions of method and how to study advertisements rather than with extended examples of analysis. I hope that this provides enough groundwork for readers to pursue some of the issues raised in more depth, and especially to 'decode' one of the most ubiquitous and tenacious forms of communication and ideology in society. Advertising influences our thoughts, feelings and lives; we need to be aware of how it operates and equip ourselves with information and ideas on how far we think it a necessary and useful form of social communication. I hope this book contributes in some way to that project and will help people become more aware of the images and values perpetuated by advertising, and the forms and structures which carry and determine what they mean.

I would like to thank Julie Staniforth and Christine Barker for their excellent typing, a number of friends and colleagues who have helped with suggestions and ideas for this book, in particular Helen Baehr and David Child for their involvement and support. Clare Richardson kindly lent the newspapers from which the announcements in chapter 1 were taken. Tim Bell of D'Arcy MacManus and Masius, and George Harrison of the History of Advertising Trust, also provided help with historical material and went to a great deal of trouble on my behalf. Special thanks should go to John Fiske, the general editor of this series, for his helpful advice and patience. I would also like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my parents for their general encouragement and interest in my work.

Gillian Dyer
1982

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INTRODUCTION

Every day and for most of our lives we see and hear many advertisements. Even if you don't read a newspaper or watch television, and walk around the streets with your eyes down, you will find it impossible to avoid some form of publicity, even if it's only a trade display at a local store, uninvited handbills pushed through the letter box or cards displayed in the window of the corner newsagent. We usually take advertisements for granted because they are so pervasive, but many people, not least among them the advertisers themselves, claim that they are one of the most important influences in our lives. Not only do advertisements sell goods and services, they are commodities themselves, 'the most ubiquitous form in which we encounter commercial photography', according to a critic of advertising, Judith Williamson (1978, p. 57). In a sense advertising is the 'official art' of the advanced industrial nations of the west. It fills our newspapers and is plastered all over the urban environment; it is a highly organized institution, involving many artists, writers and film directors, and comprises a large proportion of the output of the mass media. It also influences the policies and the appearance of the media and makes them of central importance to the economy. Advertisements advance and perpetuate the ideas and values which are indispensable to a particular economy system. Advertisers want us to buy things, use them, throw them away and buy replacements in a cycle of continuous and conspicuous consumption.

Some advertisements are silly, inaccurate, misleading, or just plain irritating. On the other hand, we have probably all had occasion to say 'That's a good advertisement'. They can be skilfully designed and produced, very attractive, entertaining and funny. But we should not lose sight of their ideological function, which is linked to their economic function, nor of the real messages that lie behind their superficial gloss.

The primary function of advertising is, we are told, to introduce a wide range of consumer goods to the public and thus to support the free market economy, but this is clearly not its only role; over the years it has become more and more involved in the manipulation of social values and attitudes, and less concerned with the communication of essential information about goods and services. In this respect it could be argued that advertising nowadays fulfils a function traditionally met by art or religion. Some critics of advertising have even suggested that it operates in the same way as myths in primitive societies, providing people with simple stories and explanations in which values and ideals are conveyed and through which people can organize their thoughts and experiences and come to make sense of the world they live in. Varda Langholz Leymore, in her book *The Hidden Myth* (1975) argues that like myth, advertising reinforces accepted modes of behaviour and acts as an anxiety-reducing mechanism resolving contradictions in a complex or confusing society. She remarks, 'To the constant nagging dilemmas of the human condition, advertising gives a simple solution... [It] simultaneously provokes anxiety and resolves it' (p. 156). In a similar vein Raymond Williams (1980) has called advertising 'the magic system,...a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies but rather strangely

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co-existent with highly developed scientific technology' (p. 185). And the critic Fred Inglis (1972) describes the advertiser as a modern-day shaman whose 'anonymous vantage in society permits him to articulate a novel magic which offers to meet the familiar pains of a particular society and history, to soften or sharpen ambition, bitterness, solitude, lust, failure and rapacity' (p. 78).

What is advertising?

In its simplest sense the word 'advertising' means 'drawing attention to something', or notifying or informing somebody of something. You can advertise by word of mouth, quite informally and locally, and without incurring great expense. But if you want to inform a large number of people about something, you might need to advertise in the more familiar sense of the word, by public announcement. If you put up a notice in a local newsagent's shop (preferably near a bus stop), design a poster or buy some space in a local newspaper, you are likely to attract the attention of more people to the information you wish to communicate than if you simply pass the word around friends and neighbours. You could go further and distribute leaflets as well, get someone to carry a placard around, even broadcast on local radio or organize a publicity stunt. However, you might not be content simply to convey certain facts, such as, for example:

For sale: four 6-week-old kittens
Contact M.James Tel. 324810

and leave it at that. You might wish to add a bit of emphasis to your message by proclaiming:

Adorable, fluffy kittens (house-trained) need a good
home. Black and white. An opportunity not to be
missed. Phone 342810. Hurry, only a few left!

There is a certain temptation, if we have anything to say or something to sell, to draw attention to our notice by exaggerating the facts or appealing to people's emotions:

Troubles at home? Marriage under strain?
These kittens will change your life, and will
bring joy and peace to your family.

And this is of course where all the controversy about advertising arises.

People who criticise advertising in its current form argue that advertisements create false wants and encourage the production and consumption of things that are incompatible with the fulfilment of genuine and urgent human needs. Advertising, it is claimed, is an irrational system which appeals to our emotions and to anti-social feelings which have nothing to do with the goods on offer. Advertisements usually suggest that private acquisition is the only avenue to social success and happiness—they define private acquisition and competitiveness as a primary goal in life, at the expense of less tangible rewards like better health care and social services. The consumer economy is said to divert funds from socially useful and human needs and make us greedy, materialistic and wasteful.

On the other hand, those who defend advertising say that it is economically necessary and has brought many benefits to society. It contributes to society's wellbeing and raises people's standard of living by encouraging the sales of mass-produced goods, thus stimulating production and creating employment and prosperity. Those people who would do away with advertising are accused of trying to deny cheaper goods and services to the majority, and of being puritanical, élitist and economically shortsighted. Furthermore, the champions of advertising say that people are perfectly free to ignore advertisements and that ads do not brainwash people because a number of advertising campaigns fail to attract customers.

Indeed it is perfectly true to say that consumer goods have brought comfort and pleasure to a large number of people and have alleviated want and hardship. I would not wish to argue that this is morally bad. In a complex society such as our own, consumer goods are necessary and important and on the whole have been a welcome development of the modern world. But along with commodities we need information about them: about their price, function, durability, quality, etc. This kind of information will help us make wise and rational consumer choices.

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether consumer advertising gives us enough, or indeed *any* accurate information, and whether the economic function of advertising is so vital that we cannot afford to do without it whatever the cultural, social and personal drawbacks. We also need to ask who is ultimately benefiting from the advertising of consumer goods—society as a whole (as it is claimed), or a few powerful commodity manufacturers and business corporations.

Commercial consumer advertising

There are many kinds of advertising: commercial consumer advertising is perhaps the kind most visible in our society. It commands more expenditure, space and professional skill than any other type and is directed towards a mass audience. It therefore provides the focus of this book. However, the other types are worth mentioning briefly:

Trade and technical advertisements are usually confined to special interest magazines like *Hi-Fi News*, *Amateur Gardener* or *Engineering Today*. They are aimed at the expert, professional or hobbyist. Most trade advertising is informative and useful—the customers are usually well able to evaluate the claims of cost, value, use and so on. The advertiser/supplier probably regards the customer as a 'user' and not a 'consumer'—a crucial distinction first proposed by Raymond Williams (1980) in his authoritative critique of advertising.

Prestige, business and financial advertising is a growing sector of the advertising industry. Ads for large companies or the publishing of yearly financial results in newspapers are usually designed to promote public confidence and favourable business images. Such advertising is not usually intended to influence sales directly. You will often see ads on television for such enterprises as the giant petrochemical firms or the large clearing banks which present themselves as disinterested pieces of public information and which are designed to make us think of these private corporations as benevolent, public-spirited and socially responsible. The inherent message in this type of campaign is the promotion of the capitalist enterprise and the values of the acquisitive society.

Small ads are usually straightforward and informative and have long since been relegated to the small print of the classified sections of newspapers or to such journals as *Exchange and Mart*.

Government and charity advertising is usually non-profit making, but often uses the persuasive techniques of commercial advertising. However, we should remember that an organization like the Health Education Council has a very small amount of money to promote anti-smoking in comparison with the giant tobacco firms who spend a great deal on encouraging us to smoke and thereby, by all accounts, to damage our health.

How then is advertising related to the economic systems of modern society? The sheer volume of goods or commodities which flow from modern factories would cause serious problems for the manufacturers unless they were quickly consumed and unless the general ideology of society was in tune with acquisitiveness and the 'way of life' associated with the consumer society. Advertising is one of the means used by manufacturing and service industries to ensure the distribution of commodities to people in society at large and is designed to create demands for such goods and services. It helps the manufacturer or business to secure a section of the market by organizing and controlling people's tastes and behaviour in the interests of company profit and capital growth. Advertising works not only on behalf of specific goods and services, it also assumes certain characteristics which are less directly connected to selling. It tries to manipulate people into buying a way of life as well as goods. In the words of the economist J.K. Galbraith (1970), advertising keeps the atmosphere 'suitably consumptive'.

The more abundant goods become and the more removed they are from basic physical and social needs, the more open we are to appeals which are psychologically grounded argues Galbraith. Although the goods on display in shops and supermarkets do not usually relate to our urgent needs, we nonetheless desire them. Advertising's central function is to create desires that previously did not exist. Thus advertising arouses our interests and emotions in favour of goods and more goods, and thereby actually creates the desires it seeks to satisfy. Our desires are aroused and shaped by the demands of the system of production, not by the needs of society or of the individual. It is thus the advertiser's task to try to persuade rather than inform.

It is not really surprising that advertisements are unreliable as sources of information when one considers that they come from biased or interested quarters, namely the producers of the advertised products. The producers are hardly likely to provide us with neutral information. An analogous situation would be if the authors of books or the directors of films wrote their own reviews in the newspaper columns, instead of 'disinterested' journalist-critics. And because the advertisers ('reviewers') subsidize the press this probably has the effect of restraining proper professional commodity 'reviews'. Information about commodities is valuable if it is impartial and objective, and this can only be achieved if the writers of advertisements which convey that information are financially independent of the product advertiser; but this is not the case with our present press and commercial TV systems. It could be argued that if the subsidy of the media by advertising had not developed in the way that it has, then newspapers and possibly television would have devoted more space and time to giving consumer information in the same way that they provide reviews of cultural events, and information on horse races or the Stock Exchange. In fact, advertising not only provides deficient and suspect information; in addition its development in the media

has indirectly led to the suppression of other channels of information about commodities. In a famous essay on the economics of advertising, Nicholas Kaldor drew an important distinction between the informative and the persuasive element in advertising. His description is worth quoting here in full:

We must sharply distinguish here, of course, between the purely informative element in advertising and the persuasive element (which belongs to another branch of the argument). If, to take an example, XX Ltd spend large sums annually on advertisements, saying 'XX is good for you', this may be an effective method of increasing the sales of XX beer, but the informative content of the advertisement is merely this: 'XX Ltd believe that the consumption of XX is beneficial to health'. Whether this is a valuable piece of information or not, its information value is exhausted as soon as the public are first told of it. Any further repetition of the message, and its display in prominent form, does not serve the purpose of information but of persuasion, it serves the purpose of inducing the public to believe it as well, and to keep it in the foreground of consciousness. While as a means of persuasion it may be very effective, its information value is zero. (Moreover assuming the message to be true, it might reach the public in many other ways—through the recommendation of doctors, for instance—it does not necessarily follow that without the advertisement the public would have remained ignorant of it.) (1950/1, p. 111)

One of the major criticisms of advertising is that it makes us too materialistic by persuading us, for instance, that we can achieve certain desirable goals in life through possessing things in a cycle of continuous and conspicuous consumption. But, paradoxically, modern advertising shows that we are not materialistic *enough*. If we were, presentation of the objects being sold would be enough in itself. But consumer advertising presents its goods along with other personal and social aspirations, and as Raymond Williams argues:

We have a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated in fantasy by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available. (1980, p. 185)

If we were sensibly materialistic, then, as Williams points out,

beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be more manly, young in heart or neighbourly. A washing machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward looking or an object of envy to our neighbours. (1980, p. 185)

The reason that we have to be 'magically' induced to buy things through fantasy situations and satisfactions is because advertisers cannot rely on rational argument to sell their goods in sufficient quantity.

The roots of this situation can be traced back to the coming of large-scale industrial production which, since the end of the last century, has been capable not only of supplying us with essential goods but also of swamping us. These goods have to be smoothly and effectively distributed or else the production system would clog up and collapse beneath the weight of surplus and unwanted products. Markets have to be found and created in order to absorb the perpetual flow of goods coming from factories. The producers have to be able to predict demand for goods, so that expensive capital equipment and plant is not risked, factories do not lie idle, and profits fall. Advertising is one of the mechanisms used by modern industrial capitalism to organize and ensure markets for its goods. This has the overall effect of taking decision-making about goods away from customers where it is not subject to control and of shifting it to the producers where it is under their control. Despite the fact that there is an enormous number and range of goods available, the real decisions about products—what should be produced, in what quantity and quality and at what price—lie not with us, the consumers, but with a small and powerful minority of businessmen, industrialists and entrepreneurs—a group which the sociologist C.W.Mills (1956) has aptly called ‘the power élite’ in his book of that name.

However, advertisers will argue that the great quantity and range of goods produced in a competitive free-market economy guarantees the consumer ‘freedom of choice’ and that choice is a basic human freedom. But perhaps advertisers are using the words ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ in a rather restricted sense, referring mainly to commodities and meaning no more than a mechanistic reaction to them. Of course on the face of it there are any number of choices to be made in the marketplace. But does the choice that we have to make between ten brands of similar toothpaste really constitute choice and guarantee freedom? And are not the differences between the toothpastes, shampoos, televisions and so on, often trivial and unnecessary? And when it comes down to it, are we, the consumers, ever consulted whether we want toothpaste with blue stripes or green stripes of ‘added ingredient X’ in the first place? We are offered a ‘choice’ once all the real decisions about a product have been made. In addition, most commodity manufacturers are organized into conglomerates or monopolies who divide up the market between them and are more interested in profits than in genuine consumer choice. So what looks like a choice between different brands of a commodity on a supermarket shelf is not really what it seems, because the different brands are probably produced by one or two manufacturers (who, incidentally, are also possibly involved in a price-fixing cartel which makes prices uncompetitive).

Now of course manufacturers want to produce successful products and do indeed spend a lot of money on market research in order to test consumer preferences and the possible market reaction. In this sense they are influenced by what members of society claim to want and need. But it is more likely that decisions about what goods to produce and market will be influenced more by questions of industrial viability and profit than by questions of longer-term economic stability and social need. If we, the public, were offered a genuine choice of goods and services, then most of us would be perfectly capable of judging private consumption against other pressing priorities, like better health services and schools or more recreational facilities. But our economy is not really geared towards the social services, and our real freedom of choice is by and large sacrificed to the flow of chocolate, shampoos, breakfast cereals and dog foods which gushes out of the factories. Our needs as human beings, our aspirations and weaknesses, can indeed be met by consumer goods