

Conclusion

As a defining site of twentieth-century American culture, the first era of television advertising is a vital piece of our history that has been largely neglected. Retracing the steps of postwar television advertising addresses this historical oversight and, in the process, sheds new light on our understanding of our national ethos to consume, both then and now. The American Dream — stalled during the Depression and World War II — blossomed as never before, nourished by the most powerful advertising medium in history. Unlike other media, television was intended to be a medium of advertising from the get-go, specifically designed to grease the wheels of consumerism. Also contrary to print or radio, television advertising carried with it a unique purpose, to raise our national “consumer consciousness” by promoting an ideology grounded in the values of consumption, materialism, and upward mobility. This purpose was achieved beyond anyone’s expectations, as television advertising entered the national psyche and became part and parcel of everyday life.

We cannot, then, overestimate the impact television advertising had in shaping our values during this key juncture of American history, values which remain the foundation for who we are as a people. Our social and economic grounding in consumer capitalism, shared by much of the world, is strongly linked to the ideology embedded in commercial television’s first two decades. American television and its core ideology of consumption can be seen as Cold War artillery, a form of corporate propaganda that proclaimed the rewards of free enterprise and drew upon nationalistic sentiment. Just as government propaganda instructed Americans to save money during the Depression and told those on the home front to make sacrifices to achieve victory, television advertising in the postwar era linked consuming to the ideological corner-

stones of capitalism and democracy. Television advertising thus helped re-establish the American Dream by equating citizenship with consumption, that is, by reinscribing a consumer ethic into the idea of American citizenship. The masses of mass media impelled Americans to spend money, selling the message that doing so was beneficial not only for the individual but also for the nation.

The amazing story of television advertising, however, has been overshadowed by its host medium, television, with the latter credited and blamed for a large share of the cultural dynamics of postwar America. Even after the demise of the single-sponsor system, it was advertisers who brought television to us, using the medium to shape consumer behavior in their favor. The golden age of television was thus in many ways actually the golden age of television advertising, as it was advertisers who brought the shows to viewers. The tremendous impact of television advertising was a function of its being in precisely the right place at precisely the right time, in sync with a number of key social, economic, and demographic trends. Television advertisers' relentless pursuit of a mass audience, homogeneous in nature and middle class in tastes, resonated with the social norms of conformity and consensus. Piped into the landscape of domestic life, television advertising catered to Americans' desire to fill their new homes with symbols of success and happiness. Television advertising not only helped drive the postwar economy, but also shaped and reflected a growing standardization of American culture, beaming the same images and language into homes across the country. By means of its national reach, television advertising was thus instrumental in turning America into a much more homogeneous country. Commercials helped to spread the suburban and, more specifically, the Southern Californian lifestyle across the country, promoting the values of an egalitarian consumer paradise. Cultural standards originating in New York City and Hollywood were disseminated coast-to-coast, impacting local community life. Television advertising was also in synch with the nation's love affair with automobiles and mobility in general, advancing our desire for private transportation and satisfying our perpetual wanderlust.

Although television advertising was designed for a mass audience and delivered on a mass scale, it would be wrong to assume that it was simply a vehicle of consensus or agent of conformity. While it did indeed act on a macro level as a force of homogeneity and standardization, television advertising also functioned on the local level as a force of individualization as consumers constructed their identities through the marketplace. As the loudest voice of

capitalism, commercial television thus did indeed exploit the freedom and liberties to be found within consumerism, that each purchase is a form of democracy in action. Rather than being purely a “top-down” form of propaganda, then, television advertising was quite accommodating of diversity, making it clear that each individual was free to choose from the huge array of products and services available in the marketplace. Consumption may have been the common denominator, but how one consumed was up to the individual, deflating the idea that the postwar era, and specifically postwar consumerism, allowed little or no personal expression. When government officials and business leaders promoted (or defended) television advertising as a voice of the American Dream, they cleverly and consistently emphasized the individualistic dimensions of the medium. Without this claim — steeped in the founding principals of the nation — the industry would have likely been subject to even more criticism and regulation.

Outside of its role within the larger culture, commercial television caused a sea change in the history of advertising, leaping beyond print and radio to redefine the terms of the exchange between seller and buyer. With both the risks and rewards of television advertising significantly higher than those of radio, television advertisers exploited the promotional possibilities of a medium created specifically to sell products and services. By integrating commercials into the shows, sponsors also exploited the trust viewers had in stars in the attempt to keep folks from leaving their cushy sofas. Sponsors’ initial ability to control program content, a legacy of radio days, represented an exponential leap in the packaging of commerce as entertainment. Television shows were conceived not as entertainment during which to advertise, but rather as advertising vehicles offering entertainment. Driven by this fluid interchange between entertainment and consumerism, postwar America became a place in which it was difficult to say where leisure ended and consumption began. For the first time in the nation’s history, perhaps, leisure became articulated as a form of consumerism rather than as what people did when they were not working. Advertising on television was instrumental in forging this new and improved American Dream, serving as the principal voice of a domestic paradigm of pleasure.

One also finds many interesting paradoxes and dichotomies within postwar television advertising, a fair reflection of an era whose complexities have been largely underestimated. Television was initially a medium of the wealthy, with a set considered a luxury item until the early 1950s. This was rather ironic, as television’s most vocal critics tended to be the intellectual elite of

academics, journalists, and professionals. As the cost of a set dropped, however, television evolved into the massiest of mass media, a voice of populist or even “lowest common denominator” thought. The average American owning a television set in the 1950s watched about five hours a day, willing to endure the barrage of commercial messages which were a part of every program. Study after study showed, however, that the man or woman on the street generally held advertisements on television in low regard, believing most to be too long, loud, or irritating. Equally contradictory, most studies also showed that viewers consistently rewarded advertisers by buying their products. Television advertising achieved its objectives despite (or because of) its overly aggressive techniques.

Most symbolic of the aggression of postwar television advertising, however, was the emergence of children as a viable audience and legitimate target market. Television advertising had a symbiotic relationship with the baby boom, as marketers used the medium to turn a generation of children into a generation of consumers. Weaned on television commercials, the products sold by television commercials, and the shows created expressly as advertising vehicles, baby boomers did not become the most consumer-oriented generation in history by chance. The legacy of television advertising during the postwar years lives on not only in the notoriously consumptive habits of forty- and fiftysomethings, but in those of their children, the “echo boom.” Today’s teenagers (Generation Y) are making their parents look like ascetics, as the former benefit from a booming economy and eagerly embrace the symbolic trappings of the good life. This ripple effect of postwar television advertising will have implications well into the twenty-first century.

The long-term effects of postwar television advertising can be traced directly back to the tremendous power held by those in the industry. Postwar advertising culture almost immediately achieved iconic status, driven in large part by the new, exciting medium of television. There were plenty of men in advertising before 1946, after all, but no men in gray flannel suits. Never before did, and perhaps never again will, the universe of advertising attract so much attention, both positive and negative. Advertising people became seen as heroes or villains, depending on your view, labeled as either leaders of a noble democratic cause or hucksters and hidden persuaders. Stealing and giving back to other artistic forms, television advertising emerged as a new, legitimate avenue of creative expression. The big money to be had in television commercials swayed creative talent from other fields to apply their trade in the art of persuasion, while entertainers’ role as brand spokespeople

expanded dramatically, redefining the very nature of what it meant to be a star. With a televisual testimonial or plug, entertainers' fame and ubiquity grew in scope and speed as never before, but at the expense of a certain mystique or sense of glamour. The celebrity of today is viewed more than ever as a spokesperson for a cluster of brands (think Michael Jordan), a status set in motion by postwar television advertising. The tentacles of television advertising reached into a plethora of institutions in postwar America, as related fields adapted to the demands of the new medium. Leading social scientists worked their research magic into new theories and techniques devoted to the psychology of the marketplace. The new research blood injected into the business arena gave Corporate America a different set of tools to work with, tools required to satisfy increasingly savvy consumers. Today's "professional" consumer can be traced back to some of the consumerism survival skills developed by Americans during the postwar years, when television advertising emerged as the atomic bomb of marketing weapons.

As the back end of the marketing process, the retail arena too reacted to what was going on in the front end. Television advertising's ability to "pre-sell" consumers shifted the responsibilities of the retailer away from direct selling toward inventory management, with market coverage of commercials dictating what goods the retailer should carry. Professional and collegiate sports also adapted, with game clocks reset to suit the temporal constraints of television advertising where time literally meant money. Perhaps even more important was the effect television advertising—an agent of the private sector—had on public life. The unique vocabulary of television advertising, expressed through sight and sound, became an alternative form of public discourse, a cultural Esperanto equipping Americans with a new language of consumerism. Events previously considered within the civic arena—from the Rose Bowl to space launches—became literally commercialized, brought to us by private corporations. Public affairs were eagerly co-opted by television advertising, no longer just news but opportunities for companies to shape public opinion, gain consumer goodwill, or lobby for a particular cause. Public service announcements were at the crossroads of the private and public sectors, television advertising's rather modest effort to fulfill the medium's mission to serve the greater community. Although not a particularly powerful force in the postwar years, PSAs would make a major mark on the television landscape of the much more socially aware counterculture that lay ahead.

Television advertising's intersection with politics too blurred the lines between the private and public interests, as election committees looked to Madi-

son Avenue to sell their candidates to Americans. The parallel universe of election campaigns used the familiar model of commercial television, creating a democracy of the political marketplace where consumers expressed their choice not with dollars but with votes. It's almost unthinkable today that even a local congressperson or state representative could get elected without the help of television advertising. The clearest exchange between private and public sectors within television advertising, however, was the intervention by various governmental arms when it became readily apparent that sponsors, agencies, and broadcasters could not regulate themselves. The quiz show scandals were almost inevitable, as the pressures and profit motive of commercial television pushed advertisers to bend the rules until they broke. Trained in the art of presenting a version of reality that was "more real than reality," advertisers created a fictionalized account of what was supposed to or believed to be truth. To sponsors, quiz shows and program content in general were not just entertainment but also advertisement, and thus a plastic art that could be manipulated for advantage. This gap between sponsors' and the government's vision was too wide, causing the system to crash and leading to the development of a new, more balanced paradigm of commercial television.

The quiz show scandals were just the most sensational of the abuses or crimes committed by commercial television in the postwar years. Brash, abrasive, and loud, many commercials were derived from the George Washington Hill school of advertising, in which getting noticed took precedence over everything else. To many viewers abroad, American-style advertising was the Ugly American, kin to the overweight tourist in Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt or worse, an imperialistic invader with hegemonic intent. In reality, postwar television advertising was not much worse than prewar advertising; because of its amazing reach, however, and because it was delivered directly into viewers' homes, it was nearly impossible to ignore the frequently offensive nature of television advertising. Carnival barkers had hawked medicine tonic a half-century before the first commercial ever aired (also drawing the wrath of government officials), but such salespeople did not have the ability to pitch their product to 25 million people at once sitting in their living rooms or at their kitchen tables.

Concentration of power is a dangerous thing, history has shown over and over, a tenet which proved to be true in the case of postwar commercial television. At both an industry level and as a media vehicle, the power of television advertising during its first era was highly concentrated, accounting for some of its various sins and the negative social consequences it caused.

Critics of free market capitalism would look to television advertising not as a mostly democratic institution capable of empowering consumers through the freedom of the marketplace but rather as a force that furthered economic inequalities and promoted a shallow interpretation of status. Critics of consumer culture would argue that television advertising helped create our disposable society, where replacing things that are still perfectly functional has become the norm. One cannot argue that television advertising spread the harmful effects of the automobile (more Americans died in car accidents during the 1950s than during World War II) and smoking, each a major component of the advertising business and everyday life in postwar and contemporary America. Television advertising can thus be held partly responsible for damaging the health and well-being of both individuals and the environment, a fact only recently reflected by legal action today. Puffery to enhance the attributes of a product is one thing, but outright deception, lying, and covering up of research to promote the sale of harmful products is unforgivable.

Also unforgivable is television advertising's tacit endorsement of racism. Like most institutions of postwar America, television advertising did not live up to its guiding principles of democracy, freedom, and equality. Television advertising became less racist only when blacks demanded their right to be a part of it. Television, in fact, has yet to fully live up to America's pluralistic mission, with African Americans and other minorities often pushed to the margins of commercial television. Although inexcusable, it should not be surprising that television advertising reflected and helped spread social norms regarding race in the postwar era. Commercial television's aim for the direct center of the national bull's-eye was an overt attempt to attract as large an audience as possible. As its chief method of measurement and pricing—cost per thousand—implied, television advertising was a pure instrument of mass culture, designed to appeal first and foremost to white, middle class viewers.

As a product of consensus ideology, television advertising reflected many other central themes of postwar America. Narrow gender roles and contained sexual mores were embedded in television advertising narratives, reinforcing the male-as-breadwinner and female-as-housewife cultural stereotypes. Leveraging Americans' trust in experts, advertisers often used demonstration techniques or quoted statistics, which served as scientific, quantifiable "proof" that their claims of efficacy or competitive superiority were true. Many advertisers also positioned their products around the theme of progress, capitalizing on our vision of America as a place of perpetual social and

economic improvement. New models of cars were always better than last year's models, and breakthrough medical technologies seemed to occur with unusual frequency. Underlying this theme was a belief that endless prosperity and unlimited abundance lay just around the corner, the postwar expression of America's eternal optimism. Although these were certainly important themes, it was, of course, Americans' penchant to consume that advertisers tapped into most clearly and compellingly. With the American Dream grounded in a patriotic form of consumerism, television advertising shamelessly promoted an endless cycle of consumption and leisure. Between its beginnings as a precocious prodigy and its emergence as some of the psychic air we breathed, television advertising became an integral piece of the American experience. Although long gone from the airwaves, the television advertising of postwar America lives on, a powerful and enduring part of our individual and national identities.