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L E C T U R E N O T E S J 3 9 7

ADVERTISING *ethics*

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM & COMMUNICATION • UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.
_ Mark Twain

Definitions

An **advertisement** is any public form of announcement, usually a commodity, aimed to promote the acceptance or purchase of or a preference for the commodity. The "commodity" can be a product, service, idea, entity, or person.

The **advertising agency** is the organization that solicits, creates, and places advertisements and, frequently, measures their effects.

The **advertiser** is the client of the agency and pays the bills.

- Usually a corporate seller of commodities, the advertiser can also be a political party, a government, a public utility, a religion, a social movement, a charity.
- Any entity that chooses a public medium to reach large numbers of the public with a message and is willing and able to pay for it.

Principal Ideas

The vast bulk of advertisements are simply price and availability announcements about basic commodities.

- A much smaller but culturally significant portion of advertisements promote political parties, candidates for office, public policy positions, favorable acceptance of various industries, unions, or other entities, particularly if they are unpopular for some reason.
- A very visible fraction of all types of advertisements compete for attention by adding emotional appeal and differentiating information in an attractive form.

The social issues raised by advertising are not based on the number of advertisements placed...

- They are based on the cultural and social impact of the influential advertisements that go far beyond the mere announcement of price and availability of commodities.

In the United States, explicit advertising constitutes:

- sixty percent of newspaper copy,
- fifty-two percent of magazine pages,
- eighteen percent of radio time and
- an average of twenty-seven percent of television time.

More importantly, most influential media are dependent on advertising income.

- Advertisers naturally seek to reach audiences
- The media, seeking to deliver audiences to advertisers, have to shape their content to attract audiences of the size and demographic composition the advertisers seek.
- This economic dependency of media and the power it confers upon advertisers carries with it serious responsibilities for both.

Benefits of Advertising

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF ADVERTISING

- Advertising is a necessary part of the functioning of modern market economies.
- In such a system, advertising can be a useful tool for sustaining honest and ethically responsible competition that contributes to economic growth.
- Advertising does this by informing people about the availability of new products and services and improvements in existing ones, helping them to make informed, prudent consumer decisions, contributing to efficiency and the lowering of prices, and stimulating economic progress through the expansion of business and trade.
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- and stimulating economic progress through the expansion of business and trade.
- All of this can contribute to the creation of new jobs, higher incomes and a more decent and humane way of life for all.
- It also helps pay for publications and programming that bring information, entertainment and inspiration to people around the world.

Because of the impact advertising has on media that depend on it for revenue, advertisers have an opportunity to exert a positive influence on decisions about media content.

- By supporting material of excellent intellectual, aesthetic, and moral quality presented with the public interest in view.
- By encouraging and making possible media presentations that are oriented to minorities whose needs might otherwise go unserved.
- By contributing to the betterment of society by uplifting and inspiring people and motivating them to act in ways that benefit themselves and others.
- Advertising can brighten lives simply by being witty, tasteful and entertaining.

The Harm Done by Advertising

There is nothing intrinsically good or intrinsically evil about advertising.

- It is a tool: it can be used well, and it can be used badly.
- It can have, and sometimes does have, beneficial results.
- It also can, and often does, have a negative, harmful impact on individuals and society.

Like media in general, advertising is a mirror that helps shape the reality it reflects, and sometimes it presents a distorted image of reality.

- Advertisers are selective about the values and attitudes to be fostered and encouraged, promoting some while ignoring others.

For example, the absence of certain racial and ethnic groups in advertising can help to create problems of image and identity, especially among those neglected.

Advertising also can be, and often is, a tool of the "phenomenon of consumerism."

- Sometimes advertisers speak of it as part of their task to "create" needs for products and services — that is, to cause people to feel and act upon cravings for items and services they do not need.

More often, advertising is used not simply to inform but to persuade and motivate — to convince people to act in certain ways, buy certain products or services, patronize certain institutions, etc.

This is where particular abuses can occur.

Special issues in advertising ethics

Advertising has a number of flashpoint issues that seem to recur as areas of concern and subsequent investigation.

- We will take the position that, in itself, advertising is neither morally good nor bad.
- Thus, the ethics of advertising has to do with an evaluation of the content and techniques deployed in given bits of advertising, or the prestige value of material things.

Many ethical issues have to do with content and techniques.

- Others are broader and deal with larger societal issues, such as consumption being equated with happiness.

We must accept that advertising is required by its very nature to paint such a picture—consumption leads to pleasure, which leads to happiness.

- Whether this is literally true or not, we must also accept that advertising is an otherwise valuable element and a mainstay of a free-market economy.
- It is also capable of doing so without disrespecting those to whom it appeals—consumers.

A SHORT LIST OF SOME THE MOST COMMON ETHICAL CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH ADVERTISING.

Advertising often attempts to bypass rational thinking and, in so doing, sometimes creates a sort of fiction by avoiding the literal truth.

- Much of advertising is aimed at peripheral processors, especially for those products that are difficult to distinguish among, thus requiring the creation of images in order to sell them (perfume, soap, colas, etc.).
- Because of this, advertising uses all the techniques of entertainment at its disposal to both attract the consumer to products and distract the consumer from consideration of the rational and definable differences among products
  - which creates grey areas that truth-in-advertising laws don't cover, and which are vague enough to be ethically troubling.

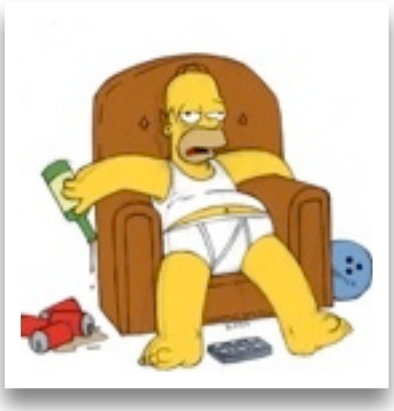
1. One problem is the creation of images or a kind of symbolic ambience in order to sell products, services, or ideas when comparing actual product attributes doesn't seem to suffice.

- Symbolic ambience can be defined as the use of emotional images and cultural symbols to create a context for a product, essentially void of actual product attributes.
- For example, scenes of crowded, upscale bars full of young, good looking people is a time-honored technique for selling certain types of beer.
- Or snowy landscapes symbolizing "pure" products. Or a fun day at the beach means that you're obviously enjoying the right brand of cola.
- These, and hundreds of other similar ambience-creating methods, all avoid the more difficult chore of a straightforward comparison of products.

2. Advertising tends to classify audiences by type, sometimes leading to stereotyping.

- Because audiences are typically classified by a generic typing (typically using demographics), there is a tendency to ignore the subtleties of human character in favor of the most obvious characteristics of a group.
- The result is that often advertising paints too simplistic a picture of some people, which can be misleading and, sometimes, even offensive.
- For example, in recent years television has created a genre of men on numerous sitcoms who could only be classified as "the bumbling husband" type.
- Examples range from Homer Simpson to the title character on Everybody Loves Raymond.

Advertising, in turn, has mimicked this stereotype by picturing both boys and men as incapable of understanding the mysteries of laundry, or cooking a family meal without purchasing it in a bucket, or keeping themselves clean more than a few minutes at a time.

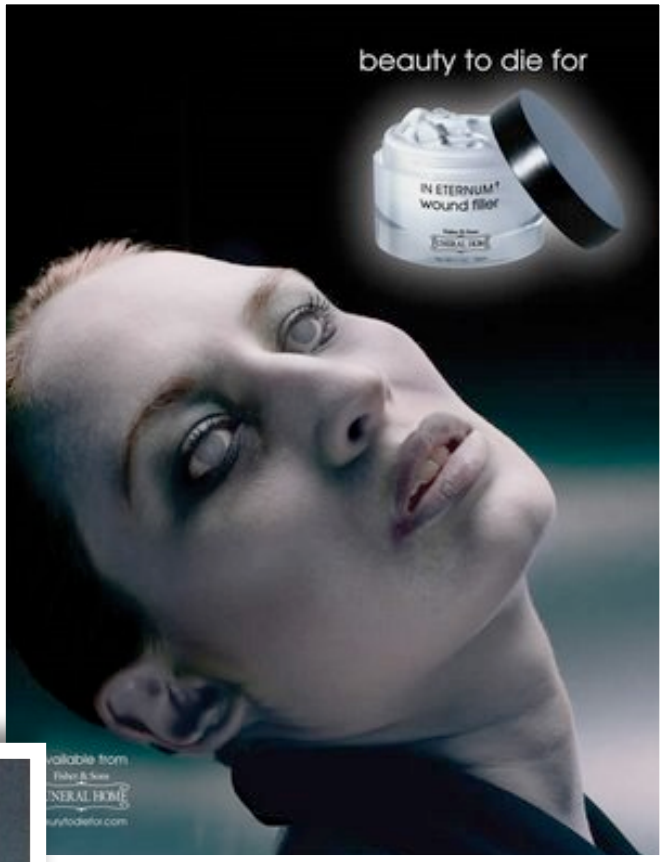


The converse of this is that advertising often ignores certain audiences because they don't fit the demographic.

- Because advertising, and marketing in general, rely on demographic information (age, education, income, habits of buying and consuming, etc.) to determine their audience, there is a temptation to ignore certain segments simply because they don't fit into the required demographic—the very young, the very old, the poor, for example.

3. Advertising can be offensive and tasteless.

- Because of the need to get the attention of audiences, advertisers often resort to techniques designed to "cut through the clutter."
- This generally means ads designed to get your attention, and nothing gets attention like shocking visuals or copy.



•In addition, sometimes advertising that we may find offensive has been deliberately designed to "push the creative envelope"—often a euphemism for "you're not hip if you think this ad is offensive."

In order to deal with these issues, many involved in advertising take an approach best described as moral subjectivism—everything is a matter of personal opinion or taste, thus it really isn't legitimate to say an advertisement is tasteless or immoral... especially if it's in the name of a "good cause."

Some Ethical and Moral Principles

A fundamental principle for people engaged in advertising is this:

- Advertisers (those who commission, prepare or disseminate advertising) are morally responsible for what they seek to move people to do;
- This responsibility is also shared by publishers, broadcasting executives, and others in the communications world, as well as by those who give commercial or political endorsements, to the extent that they are involved in the advertising process.
- If advertising seeks to move people to choose and act rationally in morally good ways that are of true benefit to themselves and others, persons involved in it do what is morally good.
- If it seeks to move people to do things that are self-destructive and destructive of authentic community, they do evil.
- This applies also to both the means and the techniques of advertising:
- it is morally wrong to use manipulative, exploitative, corrupt and corrupting methods of persuasion and motivation.

Within this very general framework, we can identify at least two moral principles that are particularly relevant to advertising.

Truthfulness in Advertising

Even today, some advertising is simply and deliberately untrue. Generally speaking, though, the problem of truth in advertising is somewhat more subtle:

- it is not that advertising says what is overtly false, but that it can distort the truth by implying things that are not so or withholding relevant facts.

Advertising, like other forms of expression, has its own conventions and forms of stylization, and these must be taken into account when discussing truthfulness.

- People take for granted some rhetorical and symbolic exaggeration in advertising; within the limits of recognized and accepted practice, this can be allowable. (Think QER)
- But it is a fundamental principle that advertising may not deliberately seek to deceive, whether it does that by what it says, by what it implies, or by what it fails to say

The Dignity of the Human Person

Kant might say there is an "imperative requirement" that advertising respect the human person — our right to make an autonomous, responsible choice.

- This "right" would be violated if our lower inclinations were to be exploited, or our capacity to reflect and decide compromised.
- These abuses are not merely hypothetical possibilities but realities in much advertising today.
- Advertising can violate the dignity of the human person both through its content(what is advertised, the manner in which it is advertised) and through the impact it seeks to make upon its audience.
- This problem is especially acute where particularly vulnerable groups or classes of persons are concerned: children and young people, the elderly, the poor, the culturally disadvantaged.

Some Steps to Take

The most important guarantors of ethically correct behavior by the advertising industry are the well formed and responsible consciences of advertising professionals themselves:

- consciences sensitive to their duty not merely to serve the interests of those who commission and finance their work but also to respect and uphold the rights and interests of their audiences and to serve the common good.

Many advertising professionals do have sensitive consciences, high ethical standards and a strong sense of responsibility.

- But even for them external pressures can create powerful inducements to unethical behavior.
- This pressure often comes from the clients who commission their work as well as from the competitive internal dynamics of their profession.
- This underlines the need for external structures and systems to support and encourage responsible practice in advertising and to discourage the irresponsible.

Voluntary ethical codes are one such source of support.

- These already exist in a number of places.
- However, they are only as effective as the willingness of advertisers to comply strictly with them.

Public involvement.

- Representatives of the public should participate in the formulation, application and periodic updating of ethical codes.
- The public representatives might include ethicists and religious representatives, as well as representatives of consumer groups.
- Individuals should organize themselves into such groups in order to protect their interests in relation to commercial interests.

Public authorities also have a role to play.

- On the one hand, government should not seek to control and dictate policy to the advertising industry, any more than to other sectors of the communications media.
- On the other hand, the regulation of advertising content and practice, already existing in many places, could extend beyond banning false advertising, narrowly defined.

For example, government regulations could address such questions as the quantity of advertising, especially in broadcast media, as well as the content of advertising directed at groups particularly vulnerable to exploitation, such as children and old people.

- Political advertising also seems an appropriate area for regulation: how much may be spent, how and from whom may money for advertising be raised, etc.

The media of news and information should make it a point to keep the public informed about the world of advertising.

- Considering advertising's social impact, it is appropriate that media regularly review and critique the performance of advertisers, just as they do other groups whose activities have a significant influence on society.

In the final analysis, where freedom of speech and communication exists, it is largely up to advertisers themselves to ensure ethically responsible practices in their profession.