

Raymond Williams

Advertising: the Magic System

Williams, Raymond. 1980. Advertising: The magic system. In *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso, 170–195.

1. History

It is customary to begin even the shortest account of the history of advertising by recalling the three thousand year old papyrus from Thebes, offering a reward for a runaway slave, and to go on to such recollections as the crier in the streets of Athens, the paintings of gladiators, with sentences urging attendance at their combats, in ruined Pompeii, and the fly-bills on the pillars of the Forum in Rome. This pleasant little ritual can be quickly performed, and as quickly forgotten: it is, of course, altogether too modest. If by advertising we mean what was meant by Shakespeare and the translators of the Authorized Version — the process of taking or giving notice of something — it is as old as human society, and some pleasant recollections from the Stone Age could be quite easily devised.

The real business of the historian of advertising is more difficult: to trace the development from processes of specific attention and information to an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion; to relate this to changes in society and in the economy: and to trace changes in method in the context of changing organizations and intentions.

The spreading of information, by the crier or by handwritten and printed broadsheets, is known from all periods of English society. The first signs of anything more organized come in the seventeenth century, with the development of newsbooks, mercuries, and newspapers. Already certain places, such as St. Paul's in London, were recognized as centres for the posting of specific bills, and the extension of such posting to the new printed publications was a natural development. The material of

such advertisements ranged from offers and wants in personal service, notices of the publications of books, and details of runaway servants, apprentices, horses and dogs, to announcements of new commodities available at particular shops, enthusiastic announcements of remedies and specifics, and notices of the public showing of monsters, prodigies, and freaks. While the majority were the simple, basically factual and specific notices we now call ‘classified’, there were also direct recommendations, as here, from 1658:

That Excellent, and by all Physicians, approved China drink, called by the Chineans Tcha, by other nations *Tay* alias *Tee*, is sold at the Sultanness Head Cophee-House in Sweeting’s Rents, by the Royal Exchange, London.

Mention of the physicians begins that process of extension from the conventional recommendations of books as ‘excellent’ or ‘advmirable’ and the conventional adjectives which soon became part of the noun, in a given context (as in my native village, every dance is a Grand Dance). The most extravagant early extensions were in the field of medicines, and it was noted in 1652, of the writers of copy in new-books:

There is never a moutebank who, either by professing of chymistry or any other art drains money from the people of the nation but these arch-cheats have a share in the booty — because the fellow cannot lye sufficiently himself he gets one of these to do’t for him.

Looking up, in the 1950’s, from the British Dental Association’s complaints of misleading television advertising of toothpastes, we can recognize the advertisement, in 1660, of a ‘most Excellent and Approved Dentrifice’, which not only makes the teeth ‘white as Ivory’, but

being constantly used, the Parties using it are never troubled with the Tooth-ache. It fastens the Teeth, sweetens the Breath, and preserves the Gums and Mouth from Cankers and Imposthumes.

Moreover the right are onely to be had at Thomas Rookes, Stationer, at the Holy Lamb at the east end of St. Paul's Church, near the School, in sealed papers at 12d the paper.

In the year of the Plague, London was full of SOVEREIGN Cordials against the Corruption of the Air.

These did not exactly succeed, but a long and profitable trade, and certain means of promoting it, were now firmly established.

With the major growth of newspapers, from the 1690s, the volume of advertisements notably increased. The great majority of them were still of the specific 'classified' kind, and were grouped in regular sections of the paper or magazine. Ordinary household goods were rarely advertised; people knew where to get these. But, apart from the wants and the runaways, new things, from the latest book or play to new kinds of luxury or 'cosmatick' made their way through these columns. By and large, it was still only in the pseudo-medical and toilet advertisements that persuasion methods were evident. The announcements were conventionally printed, and there was hardly any illustration. Devices of emphasis — the hand, the asterisk, the NB — can be found, and sailing announcements had small woodcuts of a ship, runaway notices similar cuts of a man looking back over his shoulder. But, in the early eighteenth century, these conventional figures became too numerous, and most newspapers banned them. The manufacturer of a 'Spring Truss' who illustrated his device, had few early imitators.

A more general tendency was noted by Johnson in 1758:

Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention **by magnificence of promises and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetick. Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement.** I remember a washball that had a quality truly wonderful — it gave *an exquisite edge to the razor!* The trade of advertising is now so near to perfection that it is not easy to propose any improvement.

This is one of the earliest ‘gone about as far as they can go’ conclusions on advertisers, but Johnson, after all, was sane. Within the situation he knew, of newspapers directed to a small public largely centred on the coffee-houses, the natural range was from private notices (of services wanted and offered, of things lost, found, offered and needed) through shopkeepers’ information (of actual goods in their establishment) to puffs for occasional and marginal products. In this last kind, and within the techniques open to them, the puffment had indeed used, intensively, all the traditional forms of persuasion, and of cheating and lying. The mountebank and huckster had got into print, and, while the majority of advertisements remained straightforward, the influence of this particular group was on its way to giving ‘advertising’ a more specialized meaning.

2. Development

There is no doubt that the Industrial Revolution, and the associated revolution in communications, fundamentally changed the nature of advertising. But the change was not simple, and must be understood in specific relation to particular developments. It is not true, for example, that with the coming of factory production large-scale advertising became economically necessary. By the 1850s, a century after Johnson’s comment, and with Britain already an industrial nation, the advertising pages of the newspapers, whether *The Times* or the *News of the World*, were still basically similar to those in eighteenth-century journals, except that there were more of them, that they were more closely printed, and that there were certain exclusions (list of whores, for example, were no longer advertised in the *Morning Post*.)

The general increase was mainly due to the general growth in trade, but was aided by the reduction and then abolition of a long-standing Advertisement Tax. First imposed in 1712, at one shilling an announcement, this had been a means, with the Stamp Duty, of hampering the growth of newspapers, which successive Governments had good reason to fear. By the time of the worst repression, after the Napoleonic Wars, Stamp Duty was at 4d a sheet, and Advertisement Tax at 3s 6d. In 1833, Stamp Duty was reduced to 1d, and Advertisement Tax to 1s 6d. A comparison of figures for 1830 and 1838 shows the effect of this reduction: the number of advertisements in papers on the British mainland in the former year was 877,972; by the later date it stood at

1,491,991. Then in 1853 the Advertisement Tax was abolished, and in 1855 the Stamp Duty. The rise in circulation of newspapers, and in the number of advertisements, was then rapid.

Yet still in the 1850s advertising was mainly of a classified kind, in specified parts of the publication. It was still widely felt, in many kinds of trade, that (as a local newspaper summarized the argument in 1859) it is not *respectable*. Advertising is resorted to for the purposes of introducing inferior articles into the market.

Rejecting this argument, the newspaper (*The Eastbourne Gazette and Fashionable Intelligencer*) continued:

Competition is the soul of business, and what fairer or more legitimate means of competition can be adopted than the availing oneself of a channel to recommend goods to public notice which is open to all? Advertising is an open, fair, legitimate and respectable means of competition; bearing upon its face the impress of free-trade, and of as much advantage to the consumer as the producer.

The interesting thing is not so much the nature of this argument, but that, in 1859, it still had to be put this way. Of course, the article concluded by drawing attention to the paper's own advertising rates, but even then, to get the feel of the whole situation, we have to look at the actual advertisements flanking the article. Not only are they all from local tradesmen, but their town is still eighteenth-century, as for example:

To all who pay cash and can appreciate

GOOD AND FINE TEAS

CHARLES LEA

Begs more respectfully to solicit a trial of his present stock which has been selected with the greatest care, and paid for before being cleared from the Bonded warehouses in London...

In all the papers, this was still the usual tone, but, as in the eighteenth century, one class of product attracted different methods. Probably the first nationally advertised product was Warren's Shoe Blacking, closely followed by Rowland's Macassar Oil (which produced the counter-offensive of antimacassar), Spencer's Chinese Liquid

Hair Dye, and Morison's Universal Pill. In this familiar field, as in the eighteenth century, the new advertising was effectively shaped, while for selling cheap books the practice of including puffs in announcements was widely extended. Warren's Shoe Blacking had a drawing of a cat spitting at its own reflection, and hack verses were widely used:

The goose that on our Ock's green shore
Thrives to the size of Albatross
Is twice the goose it was before
When washed with Neighbour Goodman's sauce.

Commercial purple was another writing style, especially for pills:

The spring and fall of the leaf has been always remarked as the periods when disease, if it be lurking in the system, is sure to show itself.

(Parr's Life Pills, 1843).

The manner runs back to that of the eighteenth -century hucksters and moutebanks, but what is new is its scale. The crowned heads of Europe were being signed up for testimonials (the Tsar of all the Russias took and recommended Revalenta Arabica, while the Blam of Syriacum, a 'sovereign remedy for both bodily and mental decay', was advertised as used in Queen Victoria's household. Holloway, of course a 'Professor', spent £5,000 a year, in the 1840s, spreading his Universal Ointment, and in 1855 exceeded £30,000.

Moreover, with the newspaper public still limited, the puffmen were going on the streets. Fly-posting, on every available space, was now a large and organized trade, though made hazardous by rival gangs (paste for your own, blacking for the others). It was necessary in 1837 to pass a London act prohibiting posting without the owner's consent (it proved extremely difficult to enforce). In 1862 came the United Kingdom Billposters Association, with an organized system of special boardings, which had become steadily more necessary as the flood of past swelled. Handbills ('throwaways') were distributed in the streets of Victorian London with extraordinary intensity of coverage; in some areas a walk down one street would collect as many as two hundred

different leaflets. Advertising vans and vehicles of all sorts, such as the seven-foot lath-and-plaster Hat in the Strand, on which Carlyle commented, crowded the streets until 1853, when they were forbidden. Hundreds of casual labourers were sent out with placards and sandwich boards, and again in 1853 had to be officially removed from pavement to gutter. Thus the streets of Victorian London bore increasingly upon their face 'the impress of free trade', yet still, which such methods largely reserved to the seller of pills, adornments and sensational literature, the basic relation between advertising and production had only partially changed. Carlyle said of the hatter, whose 'hole industry is turned to *persuade* us that he has made' better hats, that 'the quack as become God'. But as yet, on the whole, it was only the quack.

The period between the 1850s and the end of the century saw a further expansion in advertising, but still mainly along the lines already established. After the 1855 abolition of Stamp Duty, the circulation of newspapers rapidly increased, and many new ones were successfully founded. But the attitude of the Press to advertising, throughout the second half of the century, remained cautious. In particular, editors were extremely resistant to any break-up in the column layout of their pages, and hence to any increase in size of display type. Advertisers tried in many ways to get round this, but with little success.

As for products mainly advertised, the way was still led by the makers of pills, soaps and similar articles. Beecham's and Pears are important by reason of their introduction of the catch-phrase on a really large scale: 'Worth a Guinea a Box' and 'Good morning! Have you used Pears' Soap?' passed into everyday language. Behind this familiar vanguard came two heavily advertised classes: the patent food, which belongs technically to this period, and which by the end of the century had made Bovril, Hovis, Nestlé, Cadbury, Fry and Kellogg, into 'household names': and new inventions of a more serious kind, such as the sewing machine, the camera, the bicycle and the typewriter. If we add the new department-stores, towards the end of the century, we have the effective range of general advertising in the period, and new only note that in method the patent foods followed the patent medicines, while the new appliances varied between genuine information and the now familiar technique of slogan and association.

The pressure on newspapers to adapt to techniques drawn from the poster began to be successful from the 1880s. The change came first in the illustrated magazines, with a crop of purity nudes and similar figures; the Borax nude, for example, dispelling Disease and Decay; girls delighted by cigarettes or soap or shampoos. The poster industry, with its organized hoardings, was able from 1867 to use large lithographs, and Pears introduced the 'Bubbles' poster in 1887. A mail-order catalogue used the first colour advertisement, of a rug. Slowly, a familiar world was forming, and in the first years of the new century came the coloured electric sign. The newspapers, with Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* in the lead, dropped their columns rule and allowed large type and illustrations. It was noted in 1897 that '*The Times* itself' was permitted 'advertisements in type which three years ago would have been considered fit only for the street hoardings', while the front page of the *Daily Mail* already held rows of drawings of rather bashful women in combinations. Courtesy, Service and Integrity, as part of the same process, acquired the dignity of large-type abstractions. The draper, the grocer and their suppliers had followed the quack.

To many people, yet again, it seemed that the advertisers had 'gone about as far as they can go'. For many people, it was much too far. A society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA) had been formed in 1898, and of course had been described by the United Bill Posters Association as 'super-sensitive faddists'. SCAPA had local successes, in removing or checking some outdoor signs, and the 1890s saw other legislation: prohibiting uniform for sandwich-men (casual labourers, dressed as the Royal Marine Light Infantry or some other regiment, had been advertising soaps and pills); regulating skyline and balloon advertisements; restricting flashing electric signs, which had been blamed for street accidents. It is a familiar situation, this running fight between traditional standards (whether the familiar layout of newspapers or respect for building and landscape) and the vigorous inventiveness of advertisers (whether turning hoardings into 'art-galleries of the people', or putting an eight-ton patent food sign halfway up the cliffs of Dover). Indeed ordinary public argument about advertising has stuck at this point, first clarified in the 1980s with 'taste' and 'the needs of commerce' as adversaries. In fact, however, even as this battle was raging, the whole situation was being transformed, by deep changes in the economy.

3. Transformation

The strange fact is, looking back, that the great bulk of products of the early stages of the factory system had been sold without extensive advertising, which had grown up mainly in relation to fringe products and novelties. Such advertising as there was, of basic articles, was mainly by shopkeepers, drawing attention to the quality and competitive pricing of the goods they stocked. In this comparatively simple phase of competition, large-scale advertising and the brand-naming of goods were necessary only at the margin, or in genuinely new things. **The real signs of change began to appear in the 1880s and 1890s, though they can only be correctly interpreted when seen in the light of the fully developed 'new advertising' of the period between the wars.**

The formation of modern advertising has to be traced, essentially, to certain characteristics of the new 'monopoly' (corporate) capitalism, first clearly evident in this same period of the end and turn of the nineteenth century. The Great Depression which in general dominated the period from 1875 to the middle 1890s (though broken by occasional recoveries and local strengths) marked the turning point between two modes of industrial organization and two basically different approaches to distribution. **After the Depression, and its big falls in prices, there was a more general and growing fear of productive capacity, a marked tendency to reorganize industrial ownership into larger units and combines, and a growing desire, by different methods, to organize and where possible control the market. Among the means of achieving the latter purposes, advertising on a new scale, and applied to an increasing range of products, took an important place.** După depresiune și după scăderea mare a prețurilor, a existat o teamă mai generală și tot mai mare de capacitate productivă, o tendință accentuată de reorganizare a proprietății industriale în unități mai mari și de combinații și o dorință în creștere, prin diferite metode, de organizare și acolo unde este posibil. controlează piața. Printre mijloacele de realizare a ultimelor scopuri, publicitatea la o nouă scară și aplicată unei game din ce în ce mai mari de produse au ocupat un loc important.

Modern advertising, that is to say, belongs to the system of market-control which, at its full development, includes the growth of tariffs and privileged areas, cartel-quotas, trade campaigns, price-fixing by manufacturers, and that form of economic imperialism which assured certain markets overseas by political control of their territories. There was a concerted expansion of export advertising, and at home the biggest advertising campaign yet seen accompanied the merger of several tobacco firms into the Imperial Tobacco Company, to resist American competition. In 1901, a 'fabulous sum' was offered for the entire eight pages of *The Star*, by a British tobacco advertiser, and when this was refused four pages were taken, a 'world's record', to print 'the most costly, colossal and convincing advertisement ever used in an evening newspaper the wild world o'er'. Since American firms retaliated, with larger advertisements of their own, the campaign was both heavy and prolonged. This can be taken as the first major example of a new advertising situation.

That this period of fundamental change in the economy is the key to the emergence of full-scale modern advertising is shown also by radical changes within the organization of advertising itself. From the eighteenth century, certain shops had been recognized as collecting agencies for advertisements, on behalf of newspapers. In the nineteenth century, this system (which still holds today for some classified advertisements) was extended to the buying of space by individual agents, who then sold it to advertisers. With the growth in the volume of advertising, this kind of space-selling, and then a more developed system of space-brokerage, led to a growth of importance in the agencies, which still, however, were virtually agents of the Press, or at most intermediaries. Gradually, and with increasing emphasis from the 1880s, the agencies began to change their functions, offering advice and service to manufacturers, though still having space to sell from the newspapers. By the turn of the century, the modern system had emerged: newspapers had their own advertising managers, who advanced quite rapidly in status from junior employees to important executives, while the agencies stopped selling space, and went over to serving advising manufacturers, and booking space after a campaign had been agreed. In 1990 the Advertisers Protection Society, later the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers, was formed: partly to defend advertising against such attacks as those of SCAPA, partly to bring pressure on newspapers to publish their sales figures, so that campaigns might be properly planned. Northcliffe, after initial hesitations about

advertising (he had wanted to run *Answers* without it), came to realize its possibilities as a new basis for financing newspapers. He published his sales figures, challenged his rivals to do the same, and in effect **created the modern structure of the Press as an industry, in close relation to the new advertising.** In 1917 the Association of British Advertising Agents was founded, and in 1931, with the founding of the Audit Bureau of Circulations, publishing audited net sales, the basic structure was complete.

It is in this same period that we hear first, with any emphasis, of advertising as a profession, a public service, and a necessary part of the economy. **A further aspect of the reorganization was a more conscious and more serious attention to the ‘psychology of advertising’.** As it neared the centre of the economy, it began staking its claims to be not only a profession, but an art and science.

The half-century between 1880 and 1930, then, saw the full development of an organized system of commercial information and persuasion, as part of the modern distributive system in conditions of large-scale capitalism. Although extended to new kinds of product, advertising drew, in its methods, on its own history and experience. There is an obvious continuity between the methods used to sell pills and washballs in the eighteenth century (‘promise, large promise, a quality truly wonderful’) and the methods used in the twentieth century to sell anything from a drink to a political party. In this sense, it is true to say that all commerce has followed the quack. But if we look at advertising before, say 1914, its comparative crudeness is immediately evident. The ‘most costly, colossal and convincing advertisement’ of 1901 shows two badly-drawn men in talks, clinking port-glasses between announcements that the cigarettes are five a penny, and the slogan (‘The Englishman’s Toast — Don’t be gulled by Yankee bluff, support John Bull with every puff’) is in minute type by comparison with ‘Most costly’ and ‘Advertisement’. Play on fear of illness was of course normal, as it had been throughout quack advertising, and there were simple promises of attractiveness and reputation if particular products were used. But true ‘psychological’ advertising is very little in evidence before the First War, and where it is its techniques, both in appeal and in draughtsmanship and layout, are crude. Appropriately enough, perhaps, it was in the war itself, when now not a market but a nation had to be controlled and organized, yet in democratic conditions and without

some of the older compulsions, that new kinds of persuasion were developed and applied. Where the badly-drawn men with their port and gaspers belong to an old world, such a poster as 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War' belongs to the new. The drawing is careful and detailed: the curtains, the armchair, the grim numb face of the father, the little girl on his knee pointing to her open picture-book, the boy at his feet intent on his toy-soldiers. Alongside the traditional appeals to patriotism lay this kind of entry into basic personal relationships and anxieties. Another poster managed to suggest that a man who would let down his country would also let down his sweetheart or his wife.

The pressures, of course, were immense: the needs of the war, the needs of the economic system. We shall not understand advertising if we keep the argument at the level of appeals to taste and decency, which advertisers should respect. The need to control nominally free men, like the need to control nominally free customers, lay very deep in the new kind of society. Kitcheners, demanding an Army, was as startled by the new methods as many a traditional manufacturer by the whole idea of advertising, which he associated with dubious products. In both cases, the needs of the system dictated the methods, and traditional standards and reticences were steadily abandoned when ruin seemed the only alternative.

Slowly, after the war, advertising was turned from the simple proclamation and reiteration, with simple associations, of the earlier respectable trade, and prepared to develop, for all kinds of product, the old methods of the quack and the new methods of psychological warfare. The turn was not even yet complete, but the tendencies, from the twenties, were evident. Another method of organizing the market, though consumer credit, had to be popularized, and in the process changed from the 'never-never', which was not at all respectable, to the primly respectable 'hire-purchase' and the positively respectable 'consumer credit'. By 1933, a husband had lost his wife because he had failed to take this 'easy way' of providing a home for her. Meanwhile Boyd Odour, Iron Starvation, Night Starvation, Listlessness and similar disabilities menaced not only personal healthy, but jobs, marriages and social success.

These developments, of course, produced a renewed wave of criticism of advertising, and in particular, ridicule of its confident absurdities. In part this was met by a now

standard formula: 'one still hears criticism of advertising, but it is not realized how much has been done, with the profession, to improve it' (for example, a code of ethics, in 1924, pledging the industry, *inter alia* 'to tell the advertising story simply and without exaggeration and to void even a tendency to mislead'. If advertisers write such pledges, who then writes the advertisements?). The 'super-sensitive faddists' were rediscovered, and the 'enemies of free enterprise'. Proposals by Huxley, Russell, Leavis, Thompson and others, that children should be trained to study advertisements critically, were described, in a book called *The Ethics of Advertising*, as amounting to 'cynical manipulation of the infant mind.'

But the most significant reply to the mood of critical scepticism was in the advertisements themselves: the development of a knowing, sophisticated, humorous advertising, which acknowledged the scepticism and made claims either casual and offhand or so ludicrously exaggerated as to include the critical response (for example, the Guinness advertisements, written by Dorothy Sayers, later a critic of advertising). Thus it became possible to 'know all the arguments' against advertising, and yet accept or write pieces of charming or amusing copy.

One sustained special attack, on an obviously vulnerable point, was in the field of patent medicines. A vast amount of misleading and dangerous advertising of this kind had been repeatedly exposed, and eventually, by Act of 1939 and 1941, and by a Code of Standards in 1950, the advertisement of cures for certain specified diseases, and a range of misleading devices, was banned. This was a considerable step forward, in a limited field, and the Advertising Association was among its sponsors. If we remember the history of advertising, and how the sellers of ordinary products learned from quack methods that are still used in less obviously dangerous fields, the change is significant. It is like nothing so much as the newly-crowned Henry the Fifth dismissing Falstaff with contempt. Advertising had come to power, at the centre of the economy, and it had to get rid of the disreputable friends of its youth: it now both wanted and needed to be respectable.

4. Advertising as Power

Of the coming to power there was now no question. Estimates of expenditure in the inter-war years vary considerably, but the lowest figure, for direct advertising in a

single year, is £85,000,000 and the highest £200,000,000. Newspapers derived half their income from advertising, and almost every industry and service, outside the old professions, advertised extensively. With this kind of weight behind it, advertising was and knew itself to be a solid sector of the establishment.

Some figures from 1935 are interesting, showing advertising expenditure as a proportion of sales:

Proprietary medicines	29.4%
Toilet goods	21.3%
Soaps, polishes etc	14.1%
Tobacco	9.3%
Petrol and oil	8.2%
Cereal, jams, biscuits	5.9%
Sweets	3.2%
Beer	1.8%
Boots and Shoes	1.0%
Flour	0.5%

The industry's connections with its origins are evident: the three leading categories are those which pioneered advertising of the modern kind. But more significant, perhaps, is that such ordinary things as boots, shoes and flour should be in the table at all. This, indeed, is the new economy, deriving not so much from the **factory system** and **the growth of communications**, as **from an advanced system of capitalist production, distribution, and market control**.

Alongside the development of new kinds of appeal came new media. Apart from such frills as sky-writing, there was commercial radio, not yet established in Britain (though the pressure was there) but begun elsewhere in the **1920s and beamed to Britain in the 1930s**. **Commercial television, in the 1950s, got through fairly easily**. Among new methods, in this growth, are the product jingle, begun in commercial radio and now reaching class status, and the open alliance between advertisers and apparently independent journalists and broadcasters. To build a reputation as an

honest reporter, and then to use it either openly to recommend a product or to write or speak about it alongside an advertisement for it, as in the evening paper 'special supplements', became commonplace. And what was wrong? After all, the crowned heads of Europe, and many of our own Ladies, had been selling pills and soaps for years. **The extension to political advertising, either direct or by pressure groups, also belongs, in its extensive phase, to this period of establishment; in the 1950s it has been running at a very high rate indeed.**

The only check, in fact, to this rapidly expanding industry was during the last war, though this was only partial and temporary, and the years since the war, and especially the 1950s, have brought a further spectacular extension. It is ironic to look back at a book published in wartime, by one of the best writers on advertising, Denys Thompson, and read this:

The second reason for these extensive extracts is that advertising as we know it may be dispense with, after the war. We are getting on very well with a greatly diminished volume of commercial advertising in wartime, and it is difficult to envisage a return to the 1919–1939 conditions in which publicity proliferated.

Mr. Thompson, like Dr. Johnson two centuries earlier, is a sane man, but it is never safe to conclude that puffing has reached its maximum distension. The history, rightly read, points to a further major growth, and to more new methods. The highly organized field of market study, motivational research, and retained sociologists and psychologists, is extremely formidable, and no doubt has many surprises in store for us. Talent of quite new kinds is hired with increasing ease. And there is one significant development which must be noted in conclusion: the extension of organized publicity.

'Public Relations'

Advertising was developed to sell goods, in a particular kind of economy. **Publicity has been developed to sell persons, in a particular kind of culture.** The methods are often basically similar: the arrangement of incident, the 'mention', the advice on branding, packaging and a good 'selling line'. I remember being told by man I knew at university (he had previously explained how useful, to his profession as an advertiser,

had been his training in the practical criticism of advertisements) that advertisements you booked and paid for were really old stuff; the real thing was what got through as ordinary news. This seems to happen now with goods: 'product centenaries', for example. But with persons it is even more extensive. It began in entertainment, particularly with film actors, and it is still in this field that it does most of its work. It is very difficult to pin down, because the borderline between the item or photograph picked up in the ordinary course of journalism and broadcasting, and the similar item or photograph that has been arranged for and paid for, either directly or through special hospitality by a publicity agent, is obviously difficult to draw. Enough stories get through, and are even boasted about, to indicate that the paid practice is extensive, though payment, except to the agent, is usually in hospitality (if that word can be used) or in kind. Certainly, readers of newspapers should be aware that the 'personality' items, presented as ordinary news stories or gossip, will often have been paid for, in one way or another, in a system that makes straightforward advertising, by comparison, look respectable. Nor is this confined to what is called 'show business'; it has certainly entered literature, and it has probably entered politics.

The extension is natural, in a society where selling, by any effective means, has become a primary ethic. The spectacular growth of advertising, and then its extension to apparently independent reporting, has behind it not a mere pressure-group, as in the days of the quacks, but the whole impetus of a society. It can then be agreed that we have come a long way from the papyrus of the runaway slave and the shouts of the town-crier: that what we have to look at is an organized extending system, at the centre of our national life.

5. The System

In the last hundred years, then, advertising has developed from the simple announcements of shopkeepers and the persuasive arts of a few marginal dealers into a major part of capitalist business organization. This is important enough, but the place of advertising in society goes far beyond this commercial context. It is increasingly the source of finance for a whole range of general communication, to the extent that in 1960 our majority television service and almost all our newspapers and periodicals could not exist without it. Further, in the last forty years and now at an

increasing rate, it has passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services and has become involved with the **teaching of social and personal values**; it is also rapidly **entering the world of politics**. Advertising is also, in a sense, **the official art of modern capitalist society**: it is what 'we' put up in 'our' streets and use to fill up half of 'our' newspapers and magazines: and it commands the services of perhaps the largest organized body of writers and artists, with their attendant managers and advisers, in the whole society. Since this is the actual social status of advertising, we shall only understand it with any adequacy if we can develop a kind of total analysis in which the economic, social and cultural facts are visibly related. We may then also find, taking advertising as a **major form of modern social communication**, that we can understand our society itself in new ways.

It is often said that our society is too materialist, and that advertising reflects this. We are in the phase of a relatively rapid distribution of what are called 'consumer goods', and advertising, with its emphasis on 'bringing the good things to life', is taken as central for this reason. But it seems to me that in this respect our society is quite evidently not materialist enough, and that this, paradoxically, is the result of a failure in social meanings, values, and ideals.

It is impossible to look at modern advertising without realising that the material object being sold is never enough: this indeed is the crucial cultural quality of its modern forms. If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart, or neighborly. A washing-machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than in indication that we are forward-looking or an object of envy to our neighbors. But if these associations sell beer and washing-machines, as some of the evidence suggests, **it is clear that we have a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available.** The short description of the pattern we have is **magic**: a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology.

This contradiction is of the greatest importance in any analysis of modern capitalist society. The coming of large-scale industrial production necessarily raised critical problems of social organization, which in many fields we are still only struggling to solve. In the production of goods for personal use, the critical problem posed by the factory of advanced machines was that of the organization of the market. The modern factory requires not only smooth and steady distributive channels (without which it would suffocate under its own product) but also definite indications of demand without which the expensive processes of capitalization and equipment would be too great a risk. The historical choice posed by the development of industrial production is between different forms of organization and planning in the society to which it is central. **In our own century, the choice has been and remains between some form of socialism and a new form of capitalism.** In Britain, since the 1890s and with rapidly continuing emphasis, we have had the new capitalism, based on a series of devices for organizing and ensuring the market. Modern advertising, taking on its distinctive features in just this economic phase, is one of the most important of these devices, and it is perfectly true to say that modern capitalism could not function without it.

Yet the essence of capitalism is that the basic means of production are not socially but privately owned, and that decisions about production are therefore in the hands of a group occupying a minority position in the society and in no direct way responsible to it. Obviously, since the capitalist wishes to be successful, he is influenced in his decisions about production by what other members of the society need. But he is influenced also by considerations of industrial convenience and likely profit, and his decisions tend to be a balance of these varying factors. The challenge of socialism, still very powerful elsewhere but in Britain deeply confused by political immaturities and errors, is essentially that decisions about production should be in the hands of the society as a whole, in the sense that control of the means of production is made part of the general system of decision which the society as a whole creates. **The conflict between capitalism and socialism is now commonly seen in terms of a competition in productive efficiency, and we need not doubt that much of our future history, on a world scale, will be determined by the results of this competition.** Yet the conflict is really much deeper than this, and is also a conflict between different approaches to and forms of socialism. The fundamental choice that emerges, in the problems set to us by modern industrial production, is between man as consumer and man as user.

The system of organized magic which is modern advertising is primarily important as a functional obscuring of this choice.

‘Consumers’

The popularity of ‘consumer’, as a way of describing the ordinary member of modern capitalist society in a main part of his economic capacity, is very significant. The description is spreading very rapidly, and is now habitually used by people to who it ought, logically, to be repugnant. It is not only that, at a simple level, ‘consumption’ is a very strange description of our ordinary use of goods and services. This metaphor drawn from the stomach or the furnace is only partially relevant even to our use of things. Yet we say ‘consumer’, rather than ‘user’, because in the form of society we now have, and in the forms of thinking which it almost imperceptibly fosters, it is as consumers that the majority of people are seen . We are the market, which the system of industrial production has organized. We are the channels along with the product flows and disappears. In every aspect of social communication, and in every version of what we are as a community, the pressure of a system of industrial production is towards these impersonal forms.

Yet it is by no means necessary that these versions should prevail, just because we use advanced productive techniques. It is simply that once these have entered a society, new questions of structure and purpose in social organization are inevitably posed. One set of answers is the development of genuine democracy, in which the human needs of all the people in the society are taken as the central purpose of all social activity, so that politics is not a system of government but of self-government, and the **systems of production and communication are rooted in the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human capacities**. Another set of answers, of which we have had more experience, retains, often in very subtle forms, a more limited social purpose. In the first place, loyal subjects, as they were previously seen, because the labour market of industrial ‘hands’. Later, as the ‘hands’ reject this version of themselves, and claim a higher human status, the emphasis is changed. Any real concession of higher status would mean the end of class-society and the coming of socialist democracy. But intermediate concessions are possible, including material

concessions. The 'subjects' become the 'electorate', and 'the mob' becomes 'public opinion'.

Decision is still a function of the minority, but a new system of decision, in which the majority can be organized to this end, has to be devised. The majority are seen as 'the masses', whose opinion, as masses but not as real individuals or groups, is a factor in the business of governing. In practical terms, this version can succeed for a long time, but it then becomes increasingly difficult to state the nature of the society, since there is a real gap between profession and fact. Moreover, as the governing minority changes in character, and increasingly rests for real power on a modern economic system, older social purposes become vestigial, and whether expressed or implied, the maintenance of the economic system becomes the main factual purpose of all social activity. Politics and culture become deeply affected by this dominant pattern, and ways of thinking derived from the economic market — political parties considering how to sell themselves to the electorate, to create a favourable brand image; education being primarily organized in terms of a graded supply of labour; culture being organized and even evaluated in terms of commercial profit — become increasingly evident.

Still, however, the purposes of the society have to be declared in terms that will command the effort of a majority of its people. It is here that the idea of the 'consumer' has proved so useful. Since consumption is within its limits a satisfactory activity, it can be plausibly offered as a commanding social purpose. At the same time, its ambiguity is such that it ratifies the subjection of society to the operations of the existing economic system. An irresponsible economic system can supply the 'consumption' market, whereas it could only meet the criterion of human use by becoming genuinely responsible: that is to say, shaped in its use of human labour and resources by general social decisions. The consumer asks for an adequate supply of personal 'consumer goods' at a tolerable price: over the last ten years, this has been the primary aim of the British government. But users ask for more than this, necessarily. They ask for the satisfaction of human needs which consumption, as such, can never really supply. Since many of these needs are social — roads, hospitals, schools, quiet — they are not only not covered by the consumer ideal: they are even denied by it, because consumption tends always to materialize as an individual

activity. And to satisfy this range of needs would involve questioning the autonomy of the economic system, in its actual setting of priorities. This is where the consumption ideal is not only misleading, as a form of defence of the system, but ultimately destructive to the broad general purposes of the society.

Advertising, in its modern forms, then operates to preserve the consumption ideal from the criticism inexorably made of it by experience. If the consumption of individual goods leaves that whole area of human need unsatisfied, the attempt is made, by magic, to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference. You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment. The magic obscures the real sources of general satisfaction because their discovery would involve radical change in the whole common way of life.

Of course, when a magical pattern has become established in a society, it is capable of some real if limited success. Many people will indeed look twice at you, upgrade you, upmarket you, respond to your displayed signals, if you have made the right purchases within a system of meanings to which you are all trained. Thus the fantasy seems to be validated, at a personal level, but only at the cost of preserving the general unreality which it obscures: the real failures of the society which however are not easily traced to this pattern.

It must not be assumed that magicians — in this case, advertising agents — disbelieve their own magic. They may have a limited professional cynicism about it, from knowing how some of the tricks are done. But fundamentally they are involved, with the rest of society, in the confusion to which the magical gestures are a response. Magic is always an unsuccessful attempt to provide meanings and values, but it is often very difficult to distinguish magic from genuine knowledge and from art. The belief that high consumption is a high standard of living is a general belief of the society. The conversion of numerous objects into sources of sexual or pre-sexual satisfaction is evidently not only a process in the mind of advertisers, but also a deep and general confusion in which much energy is locked.

At one level, the advertisers are people using certain skills and knowledge, created by real art and science, against the public for commercial advantage. This hostile stance

is rarely confessed in general propaganda for advertising, where the normal emphasis is **the blind consumption ethic** (“Advertising brings you the good things of life”, but it is common in advertisers’ propaganda to their clients. ‘Hunt with the mind of the hunter’, one recent announcement begins, and another, under the heading, ‘Getting any honey from the hive industry?’, is rich in the language of attack:

One of the most important weapons used in successful marketing is advertising.

Commando Sales Limited, steeped to the nerve ends in the skills of **unarmed combat**, are ready to move into battle on any sales front at the crack of an accepted estimate. These are the front line troops to call in when your own sales force is hopelessly outnumbered by the forces of sales resistance.

This is the structure of feeling in which ‘impact’ has become the normal description of the effect of successful communication, and ‘impact’ like ‘consumer’ is now habitually used by people to whom it ought to be repugnant. What sort of person really wants to ‘make an impact’ or create a ‘smash hit’, and what state is a society in when this can be its normal cultural language?

It is indeed monstrous that human advances in psychology, sociology, and communication should be used or thought of as powerful techniques *against* people, just as it is rotten to try to reduce the faculty of human choice to **‘sales resistance’**. In these aspects, the claim of advertising to be a service is not particularly plausible. But equally, much of this talk of weapons and impact is the jejune bravado of deeply confused men. It is in the end the language of frustration rather than of power. **Most advertising is not the cool creation of skilled professionals, but the confused creation of bad thinkers and artists.** If we look at the petrol with the huge clenched fist, the cigarette against loneliness in the deserted street, the puppet facing death with a life-insurance policy (the modern protection, unlike the magical symbols painstakingly listed from earlier societies, or the man in the cradle which is an aeroplane, we are looking at attempts to express and resolve real human tensions which may be crude but which also involve deep feelings of a personal and social kind.

The structural similarity between much advertising and much modern art is not simply copying by the advertisers. It is the result of comparable responses to the

contemporary human condition, and the only distinction that matters is between the clarification achieved by some art and the displacement normal in bad art and most advertising. The skilled magicians, the masters of the masses, must be seen as ultimately involved in the general weakness which they not only exploit but are exploited by. If the meanings and values generally operative in the society give no answers to, no means of negotiating, problems of death, loneliness, frustration, the need for identity and respect, then the magical system must come, mixing its charms and expedients with reality in easily available forms, and binding the weakness to the condition which has created it. **Advertising is then no longer merely a way of selling goods, it is a true part of the culture of a confused society.**

Afterword (1969): Advertising and Communications

A main characteristic of our society is a willed coexistence of very new technology and very old social forms. Advertising is the most visible expression of just this combination. In its main contemporary forms it is the result of a failure to find means of social decision, in matters of production and distribution, relevant to a large-scale and increasingly integrated economy. Classical liberalism ceased to have anything to say about these problems from the period of depression and consequent reorganization of the market in the late nineteenth century. What we now know as advertising takes its origins from that period, in direct relation to the new capitalist corporations. **That the same liberalism had produced the idea of a free press, and of a general social policy of public education and enlightenment, is a continuing irony. Before the corporate reorganization, the social ideas of liberalism had been to an important extent compatible with its commercial ideas.** Widespread ownership of the means of communication had been sustained by comparable kinds of ownership in the economy as a whole. When the standing enemy of free expression was the state, this diverse commercial world found certain important means to freedom, notably in the newspapers.

What was then called advertising was directly comparable in method and scale. It was mainly specific and local, and though it was often absurd - and had long been recognized as such in its description as puff — it remained a secondary and subordinate activity at the critical point where commercial pressure interacted with

free public communication. That early phase is now more than half a century in the past. From the 1890s advertising began to be a major factor in newspaper publishing, and from the same period control began to pass from families and small firms to the new corporations. Ever since that time, and with mounting pressure in each decade, the old institutions of commercial liberalism have been beaten back by the corporations. These sought not so much to supply the market as to organize it.

The consequent crisis has been most visible in newspapers, which have been very sharply reduced in number and variety through a period of expanding readership and the increasing importance of public opinion. But while some of the other liberal ideas seemed to hold, and were even protected as such, as in broadcasting, by the state, it was always possible to believe that the general situation could be held too. Commercial priorities were extending in scale and range, but an entire set of liberal ideas, which in practice the priorities were steadily contradicting, seemed to stay firm in the mind: indeed, so firm that it was often difficult to describe reality, because the evidence of practice was met so regularly by the complacent response of the ideas.

What is now happening, I believe, is that just enough people, at just enough of the points of decision, are with a certain sadness and bewilderment, and with many backward looks, giving that kind of liberalism up. What used to be an uneasy compromise between commercial pressures and public policy is now seen as at worst a bargain, at best a division of labour. The coexistence of commercial and public-service television, which was planned by nobody but was the result of intense pressure to let in the commercial interest, is now rationalised, after the fact, as a kind of conscious policy of pluralism. The new name for compromise is 'mixed economy', or there is an even grander name: a 'planned diversity of structures'.

What has really happened is that a majority of those formerly dedicated to public policy have decided that the opposing forces are simply too strong. They will fight some delaying actions, they will make reservations, but a political situation, long prepared and anticipated, is coming through with such force that these are mainly gestures. Public money raised in public ways and subject to public control has been made desperately (but deliberately) short. Public money raised in the margin of other transactions and consequently subject to no public control is at the same time

continually an offer. Practical men, puzzling over the accounts in committees, think they have at last glimpsed reality. Either they must join the commercial interests, or they must behave like them as condition of their temporary survival. And so a mood is created in which all decisions seem inevitable and in which people speaking of different solutions seem remote and impractical. **It is a mood of submission, under the pressures of an effectively occupying power.**

What must then, of course, be most desperately denied is that anything so crude as submission is in fact occurring. Some people are always read to with talk of a new forward-looking order. But the central sign of this sort of submission is a reluctance, in public, to call the enemy by its real name. I see the form of the enemy as advertising, but what I mean by advertising is rather different from some other versions. Plenty of people still criticize advertising in secondary ways: that it is vulgar or superficial, that it is unreliable, that it is intrusive. Much of this is true, but it is the kind of criticism advertising can learn to take in its stride. Does it not now employ many talented people, does it not set up rules and bodies to control and improve standards, is it not limited to natural breaks? While criticism is discrete in these ways, it has only marginal effects.

So I repeat my own central criticism. **Advertising is the consequence of a social failure to find means of public information and decision over a wide range of everyday economic life. This failure, of course, is not abstract. It is the result of allowing control of the means of production and distribution to remain in minority hands, and one might add, for it is of increasing importance in the British economy, into foreign hands, so that some of the minority decisions are not even taken inside the society which they affect.**

The most evident contradiction of late capitalism is between this controlling minority and a widely expectant majority. What will eventually happen, if we are very lucky, is that majority expectations will surpass minority controls. In a number of areas this is beginning to happen, in small and temporary ways, and it is called, stupidly, indiscipline or greed or perversity or disruption. But the more evident fact, in the years we are living through, is the emergence and elaboration of a social and cultural

form — advertising — which responds to the gap between expectation and control by a kind of **organized fantasy**.

In economic terms this fantasy operates to project the production decisions of the major corporations as **'your' choice**, the 'consumer's' selection of priorities, methods and style. Professional and amateur actors, locally directed by people who in a different culture might be writing and producing plays or films, are hired to mime the forms of the only available choices, to display satisfaction and the achievement of their expectations, or to pretend to a linkage of values between quite mundane products and the now generally unattached values of love, respect, significance or fulfillment. **What was once the local absurdity of puffing is now a system of mimed celebration of other people's decisions**. As such, of course, advertising is very closely related to a whole system of styles in official politics. Indeed some of its adepts have a direct hand in propaganda, in the competition of the parties and in the formation of public opinion.

Seen from any distance — of time, space or intelligence — the system is so obvious, in its fundamental procedures, that one might reasonably expect to be able to break it by describing it. But this is now very doubtful. If advertising is the consequence of a failure to achieve new forms of social information and decision, this failure has been compounded by the development of the Labour government, which in submitting to the organized market of the corporations has paved the way to a more open and more total submission in the seventies. Historically, this may be seen as the last attempt to solve our crisis in liberal terms, but the consequences of the failure go beyond simple political history. For it has led to habits of resignation and deference to the new power: not only among decision-makers but much more widely, I think, among people who now need **the system of fantasy** to confirm the forms of their immediate satisfaction or to cover the illusion that they are shaping their own lives.

It is in this atmosphere that the crucial decisions about communications are now being taken. Some of them could have been worse. Pressure on the BBC to take advertising money has been held off, though there is still a lobby, of an elitist kind, prepared to admit it to Radio 1, where all things vulgar may lie down together. On the contrary, this is just where it must not be admitted, for the pressure to tie the cultural

preferences of a young generation to the open exploitation of a 'young market' is the most intense and destructive of them all. Again, the emphasis on the licence, as a means of revenue, is welcome, as a way of preserving the principle of open public money. The fee is still comparably low in Britain, and could easily be graduated for pensioners and in some cases abolished. In the BBC and in the government, some local stands are being made.

But it is not only that other people are already adjusting to the altered political climate of the seventies, in which the commercial interests expect to take full control. It is also that the decisions possible to this sort of government, or to a public corporation, are marginal to the continuing trend of economic concentration. A newspaper with two and a half million readers is now likely to shut down: not because such a readership is in a general way uneconomic, but because with a structure determined by competitive advertising revenue it is a relative lower. That process of cutting down choices will continue unless met by the most vigorous public intervention. Commercial radio would rapidly accelerate it.

And what happens, apart from the long-term hedges and options, is that new figures for viability are accepted for almost all communications services. It is absurd that a sale of a million should be too low for a newspaper. But think of other figures. What is called a vast throng — a hundred thousand people — in Wembley Stadium or Hyde Park is called a tiny minority, a negligible percentage, in a radio programme. Content is then increasingly determined, even in a public service, by the law of quick numbers, which advertising revenue has forced on the communications system.

Submission is not always overt. One of its most popular forms is to change as the conqueror appears on the horizon, so that by the time he arrives you are so like him that you may hope to get by. I don't believe we have yet lost but the position is very critical. What was originally a manageable support cost, in the necessary freedom of communications, has been allowed to turn the world upside down, until all other services are dependent, or likely to be dependent, on its quite local, narrow, and temporary needs. An out-dated and inefficient kind of information about goods and services has been surpassed by the competitive needs of the corporations, and these increasingly demand not a sector but a world, not a reservation but a whole society,

not a break or a column but whole newspapers and broadcasting services in which to operate. Unless they are driven back now, there will be no easy second chance.

[Raymond Williams](#)

Raymond H. Williams (deceased) was an educator, editor, playwright, and author. Known for his interest in the relationship between literature and society, Williams wrote many books and articles during his forty-year teaching career. His literary works include *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot: Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, and a critical biography of novelist George Orwell. Among his other publications are the novels *Border Country* and *Second Generation*; two collections of essays, *Marxism and Literature* and *Problems in Materialism and Culture*; and a play, *A Letter from the Country*. Williams edited the journal *Politics and Letters* and *The Pelican Book of English Prose*. He taught at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities.