

4 Advertising and Consumer Culture

The spirit of capitalism

Advertising and consumer culture flourish under capitalism. Advertising promotes capitalism's benefits, and its art and language express capitalism's values and promises. In 1904, German sociologist Max Weber visited the United States to study the Protestant work ethic and 'rational' capitalism at its source. Weber distinguishes between 'traditional' capitalism – practiced throughout history by diverse cultures involved in buying, selling, trading and plundering ('booty' capitalism) – and rational capitalism, based on Protestant beliefs and attitudes. For Weber, the clearest expression of rational capitalism came from Benjamin Franklin, whose homespun sayings express a philosophy of work, wealth and ethics: 'Time is money'; 'Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more' (Weber [1904] 1998: 48–50). Franklin believed that increasing his capital was an 'end in itself', and failure to practice rational capitalism was 'forgetfulness of duty' (51). People are taught to embody the spirit of capitalism, much as they are instructed to hold religious beliefs: through 'a long and arduous process of education' (62).

Weber traces the Protestant work ethic to Calvinism, which originated in Switzerland in the 1530s, spread to the Netherlands and England and was brought to New England by Puritans in the 1620s. Weber observes that Protestant belief in predestination – only God knows who will be saved or damned – creates a deep anxiety about the afterlife, only remedied by hard work, frugal living and ethical conduct. Believers must do something redemptive, just in case God is watching, since there is no way of knowing who will be saved. Catholic belief in the forgiveness of sin through confession, ritual and good works removed a source of anxiety that Protestants harnessed as a redeeming work ethic. Calvinism's rational capitalism included 'honest dealings in business, rather than greedy search for maximal profit; reliable, steady production and sales, turning into a system of mass production; and continuous

savings and reinvestment into further business growth' (Collins 1998: xiii). A disciplined, frugal life joined with the bureaucratic state and growing democratic rights to form the 'predictable social order within which mass-production capitalism can flourish' (xxiii). 'God helps those who help themselves', and thus the frugal Puritan capitalists grew wealthy.

Weber also reflects on 'the secularising influence of wealth' ([1904] 1998: 170). Like the Catholic monks before them, wealthy Protestants were tempted by wealth and the luxuries it could buy. While wealth is an expression of divine will, luxuries represent 'idolatry of the flesh' (170). Unequal distribution of wealth is the result of divine providence and therefore out of human hands. Calvin believed that the working classes remained obedient to divine will only as long as they stayed poor, thereby justifying low wages. For Protestants, work is a calling and materialism brings responsibilities. In a memorable analogy, Weber describes materialism worn by the saint as 'a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment', but threatens to become an 'iron cage' (181) when pursued without restraint. He concludes: 'In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which actually give it the character of sport' (182).

Only a few cultures embrace the Protestant work ethic and the same spirit of capitalism, but Weber's analysis illustrates that attitudes towards materialism and prestige are powerful motivators and important arenas of influence. In this chapter, we explore advertising and consumer culture as informed by an ethos, a set of beliefs and values with analogies to religion. This ethos is complicated by ambiguities and tensions regarding materialism's role in the pursuit of happiness. Advertising and marketing constantly tread an ambiguous line between promise and its fulfilment. A sales proposition always involves a contract, a *quid pro quo*, expressed in terms of future redemption and personal salvation similar to religious promises. But when capitalism loses its ethical bearings and becomes amoral, observes Weber, it becomes merely competitive.

Culture and consumption: instruments of instruction and politics

The consumer revolution is a strange chapter in the ethnographic history of the species. For what may have been the first time in history, a human community willingly harboured a nonreligious agent of social change, and permitted it to transform on a continual

and systematic basis virtually every feature of social life. (McCracken [1988] 1990: 30)

Grant McCracken says that consumer goods are paradoxically agents of both change and continuity, because they are invested with symbolic meaning. People use objects to express their status and identity – important for social stability – in the context of changing fashions and the spectacle of progress. Consumers ‘use the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of the self, and create (and survive) social change’ ([1988] 1990: xi). He argues that Weber’s ‘Protestant ethic’ hypothesis is insufficient to explain the appeal of consumer goods.

In McCracken’s narrative, there are three significant historical moments in the evolution of consumer culture. Elizabeth I consolidated power over her subjects in the last quarter of the sixteenth century by requiring nobles to attend the royal court and seek her favour. They played a material role in displaying the pomp, ceremony and legitimacy required of a world power: ‘The supercharged symbolism of the monarch’s court, hospitality, and clothing became the opportunity for political instruction and persuasion’ (11). And, in a stroke of political cunning, Elizabeth persuaded her nobles to ‘spend conspicuously’ and ‘squander vast resources’ on her behalf (12). The nobles, closely watched by their local dependents, returned from court with the newest fashions and aristocratic tastes, increasingly dependent on Elizabeth for favours and increasingly competitive in their spending.

The trends initiated by the Elizabethans accelerated in the eighteenth century with the opening of new global markets and the Romantic emphasis on individual uniqueness. British and European societies were competitive and status-conscious, and these anxieties were expressed through consumer choices, where style and fashion replaced utility as motives for purchasing. Consumer goods became an investment in status: the right goods could conceal unfavourable origins and aid social mobility. ‘This connection between consumption and individualism . . . is one of the great cultural fusions of the modern world. Each of these ideologies could now use the other as a powerful engine for its own advancement’ (20).

By the late nineteenth century, conspicuous consumption had become commonplace, with objects taking on new symbolic readings to add value. Social elites were defined by their belongings, creating new patterns of social hierarchy, such as the *nouveaux riches*. The decorative arts movement brought the pleasures of consumption to the

middle class with objects that were 'accessible, modest, and dignified' (23). The emergence of the department store, the trade fair and world exposition, film and other spaces for the observation of consumer goods further transformed relations between people and objects. The consumer was constantly exposed to a 'range of persuasive and informational stimuli without any expectation that this stimuli would result in immediate purchase' (26). Wandering through the halls of materialism, 'passive' consumers were stimulated by 'free-floating desire' (26). New credit schemes and layaway plans allowed them to buy now, pay later. McCracken concludes that 'the goods in department stores became instruments of instruction and politics' (28).

McCracken does not criticise the excess, waste, debt and distraction of consumerism, but instead observes that material goods symbolically express taste, status and identity. This symbolic expression is an ancient and transcultural human trait not limited to the capitalist West. Twitchell (1996) agrees that 'Adcult' – the ubiquitous culture of advertising – is an important channel for communicating cultural values: 'Although advertising cannot create desire, it can channel it. And what is drawn down that channel, what travels with the commercial, is our culture' (4). In this view, advertising is the new scripture instilling beliefs and values, looking for converts, turning eyeballs skyward. 'For whatever else advertising does, one thing is certain: by adding value to material, by adding meaning to objects, by branding things, advertising performs a role historically associated with religion' (12). In a more secular analysis, Schudson (1984) introduces the concept of 'capitalist realism' to compare Western advertising practices and their social effects to the socialist realism of Soviet propaganda imposed under Stalin. Capitalist realism, unlike its Soviet counterpart, emphasises consumption, individualism and private ownership over public achievements and cooperative problem solving. In both religious and secular interpretations, advertising and its art channel cultural values and promises.

Properties of advertising

It was the amusement business – first the circus and the medicine show, then the theatre – which taught the rudiments of advertising to industry and commerce. (Bernays [1928] 2005: 107)

A tragedy of the commons occurs when private interests take more than their share of common resources and rivalry develops for what remains (Hardin 1968). From overgrazing common grasslands to

polluting public water systems or monopolising the airwaves, human civilisation has witnessed many of these tragedies. Advertising is a tragedy of the commons to the extent that innovations in communication technologies have contributed to the growing saturation of public space with promotional messages. As the commons becomes more crowded with rhetoric and symbolic communication, rivalry for attention increases and advertisers look for new strategies and places to find their audiences.

As much as newspapers and magazines, the telegraph contributed to ubiquitous advertising by allowing producers to purchase ads quickly and directly from newspapers across the country. In its turn, radio carried the advertiser's message to mass audiences and became a national, even international, loudspeaker system: '[R]adio ads reverberated through people's homes on the broadcaster's own schedule, adding the evocative nuances of voice and personality, and the subconscious power of music, to the language of persuasion' (O'Reilly and Tennant [2009] 2010: xxi). Radio pioneered the 'unwritten contract' (xxii) by exchanging programming – music, comedy, drama and information – for the advertiser's message, a model followed by television and the commercial internet.

Since the late nineteenth century, advertising strategies have evolved from straightforward descriptions of products and services, to reason-why pitches, to entertainment, branding, product placement, celebrity endorsement, viral marketing, cross promotion and other strategies for layering messages. In consumer cultures, the sensory environment has become heavily layered to allow multiple messages to play out at the same time. Branding athletes and their arenas with sponsors' logos is an example of layering, but layering also occurs in product placement, celebrity endorsement, benefit performances and public service announcements, where more than one sales message is communicated. O'Reilly and Tennant ([2009] 2010) believe message layering will have a cognitive impact on whole generations who are learning to 'stack' entertainment and communications experiences by multitasking on their digital devices. In turn, advertisers use 'fully-integrated marketing' to promote products on television, mobile phones and the internet 'in the hope that every touch point will converge in one single, sit-down, "stacking" experience' (19). In cultures with widespread cellular and Wi-Fi service, people routinely socialise while computing or communicating with people not present in their physical space. Managing stacking is a survival skill in persuasive environments and a kind of sport.

Advertising is immediate, compelling, accessible and deeply embed-

ded in everyday culture. It exploits and shapes vernacular language to provide the ring of familiarity, constantly adding new catchphrases to the language. From 'Just do it' (Nike) to 'We never forget who we're working for' (defence contractor Lockheed Martin), advertising language is layered in meaning, often relying on symbolic resonance expressed in deceptively simple language. For all these reasons, propaganda appropriates the catchy vernacular language of advertising. In 2011, the British Army was 'Committed to Success' (www.army.mod.uk/), while the Canadian Army encouraged recruitment in 2006 with the forceful and controversial slogan 'Fight Fear, Fight Distress, and Fight Chaos' (Canadian Forces 2006).

Marcuse (1964) observed that the 'voice of command' used by priests, managers, educators, experts and politicians shares its compelling effect with advertising. Syntax is abridged and condensed, giving the language directness and assertiveness. It uses an emphatic concreteness (despite its frequent abstraction), repeats 'you' and 'your' and replays images to fix them in people's minds. Marcuse believed this style of rhetoric creates the 'one-dimensional' citizen incapable of protest or refusal. Similarly, Rutherford argues that advertising and propaganda are instruments of domination, in that they 'express the wishes of the powerful' (2000: 10) and confirm social hierarchy by typically being a monologue from those 'on high' to those below them in status (11).

Althusser (1971) identifies the origins of this authoritative voice as coming from religion, education, family, law, political systems and parties, trade unions and media. Ideology 'recruits' and 'transforms' individuals into followers by 'interpellation' (or hailing). Interpellation can be expressed in everyday language as 'Hey, you there!' Althusser imagines an individual in the street turning around in response to the hailing, thus becoming a subject of the ideology (86). He goes further to suggest that ideology never announces itself as anything but common sense, the way things are meant to be for the subject. With advertising, we are hailed with the sales message 'Listen up! You need this!' and then told what would be best for us. Our conformity to the message is a hidden assumption, never identified, but often described in terms of our future freedom.

Once advertisers gain their audiences through hailing, ads try to resonate with audience memories and experiences – thus, the compelling influence of popular music – while playing on anchors and stereotypes to offer solutions to problems. This interaction is often aesthetic; appreciated for its artistry, cleverness and playfulness; and more memorable for the emotions invoked. Advertising invests objects with

symbolic meaning, invoking common myths and cultural narratives to give objects distinction in the marketplace. It displaces previous forms of authoritative discourse by defining standards of cleanliness, body image, behaviour, style and success. Word-of-mouth is effective advertising, because it comes with a familiar personal endorsement and taps into the community-building properties of orality. Movie buzz, investment tips, public relations spin and political gossip all remind us of the power of orality in advertising.

Advertising is . . .

- *Ubiquitous*: it is everywhere, adding the clutter of product placement and branding of athletes, celebrities, buildings, and events.
- *Anonymous*: no authors are identified.
- *Syncretic*: layers cultures, adapts pagan and religious rituals, and revives mythic heroes, folklore and literature.
- *Symbiotic*: shares the style, techniques, and meaning of other cultural forms such as music, film, literature, sports, and religion. Advertising is a dialogue with culture.
- *Profane*: appeals to the senses, the body, and pleasure.
- *Repetitive*: gains memorability and substance by multiple exposures. Reputation is repetition.
- *Magical*: animates objects, identifies products with animals, gives them an aura; charms consumers with music and spells, creates new worlds, transfers power from technology to people, and from people to technology; identifies taboos and banishes evil (body odour, wrinkles and cellulite, erectile dysfunction). (Twitchell 1996: 16–32)

As noted earlier, persuasion mystifies by advancing through a hierarchy of values, either upward or downward, to arrive at a state that exists only in the abstract: salvation, damnation, immortality, extinction, patriotism, exile, freedom, slavery. These mystifications are political commonplaces and provide the subtext for most advertising. Following the lead of Weber, Twitchell argues that the early advertisers ‘were steeped in the Christian tradition’ (1996: 33): ‘They understood the nature of yearning and how to franchise it. They knew the language of sincerity. They knew the power of promise, large promise’ (33). Ads give thanks, shower praise, confirm self-worth, answer prayers, express

devotion, foster hope and inspire belief. Advertising fills the air with optimism for a better world. Twitchell flatly rejects the argument that advertising manipulates audiences. Instead, audiences engage with advertising ‘texts’ to arrive at their own interpretations. ‘We create our own advertising as we create news, religion, politics, law, or entertainment’ (51). In the end, we buy the advertising, not the product, because it promises something we want.



Figure 6 ‘Cuba sells the revolution’. Photo: M. Soules, 2006–8.

Case study: Cuba's revolutionary landscape

Advertising is so commonplace in developed countries that much of it enters individual and public consciousness below the threshold of awareness. Once imprinted, advertising operates like mental wallpaper, layering over our thoughts and feelings about the world. Visiting the socialist country of Cuba is instructive, because commercial messages announcing consumerism's triumph are virtually absent. From one end of the Caribbean island to the other, commercial billboards, signs and posters are replaced by billboard-sized *murales* announcing the values, heroes and challenges of Cuba's socialist revolution. Taken together, the *murales* tell the epic narrative of a people working to change their destiny against the odds.

This national narrative is symbolised around the world by images of the guerrilla freedom fighter epitomised by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos and others. The iconic image of Che Guevara – captured by Alberto Korda in 1960 – carries Cuba's message on T-shirts and posters around the world: 'Che appears as the ultimate revolutionary icon, his eyes seeming to stare boldly into the future, his very face symbolising a virile embodiment of outrage at social injustice' (Anderson 1997: 465). Che is a Cuban brand and a symbol of resistance against oppression.

The Cuban Revolution began as an independence movement from Spain in the 1860s and achieved a landmark victory by overthrowing the dictator Fulgencio Batista in January 1959. Many *murales* depict heroes of the earlier wars of independence, especially the philosopher, writer and martyr José Martí, whose image is as recognisable in Cuba as that of Guevara and Fidel Castro. In addition to heroic portraits and revolutionary sentiments, the billboards identify challenges and threats to Cuba, particularly from the United States.

Cuban billboards are produced under the direction of the Interior Ministry of the Communist Party (PCC) in Havana and in its provincial propaganda agencies. Propaganda is transparent and unapologetic in Cuba: *murales* remind the Cuban people of their history and values and educate tourists about socialism's virtues and Cuba's struggle to retain its independence. Following a theory of revolution articulated by Che Guevara – who borrowed freely from Lenin – the Cuban leadership considers itself to be the 'vanguard', forging a revolutionary path in advance of the people. Guevara believed the guerrilla struggle 'developed in two distinct environments: the people, the still sleeping mass that had to be mobilised; and its vanguard, the guerrillas, the motor force of the mobilisation, the generator of revolutionary consciousness and militant enthu-

siasm' ([1965] 2003: 213). For Guevara, the vanguard acts as a 'catalysing agent' to create the 'subjective conditions necessary for victory' (213). The masses are not a mindless herd; they are merely dormant.

Since 1960, Cuba has survived an economic embargo (blockade) imposed by successive US governments. Billboards remind citizens that their desperate material conditions result from the embargo and not from lack of planning by the government. Cuba has been subject to terrorist attacks, including the Bay of Pigs invasion by the US in 1961. Orlando Bosch and José Posada Carriles are reviled in Cuba for organising the bombing of Cubana Flight 455 in 1976, killing all seventy-three people on board. Along with Bosch and Posada Carriles, George W. Bush was demonised by Cuban propaganda as a threat to Cuban social security and education. The 'Bush Plan' – Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba – anticipates the demise of Fidel and Raul Castro as leaders and calls for the reconstruction of the Cuban economy along capitalist lines. The detention of Cuban counterterrorism agents, known as the Cuban 5, in US prisons is widely memorialised and another reminder of US hypocrisy concerning terrorism.

Ortega (2006) says that the *murales* displayed across the landscape remind the Cuban people that they are under constant surveillance and simultaneously promote timocracy. In a timocracy, leaders are known for their 'honour, worth, competence, and esteem as opposed to class, heredity, power, [and] privilege' (2006: n.p.). The promotion of timocratic ideals illustrates the shift of values seen in Cuban culture. If social values are based not on class, power and prestige, but rather on honour, loyalty and competence, the basis for determining success and happiness is turned on its head. The Cuban *murales* tell a different story than the commercial billboards of the developed world and announce very different aspirations for the Cuban people.

Branding and reputation

Fundamentally, branding is a profound manifestation of the human condition. It is about belonging: belonging to a tribe, to a religion, to a family . . . It has this function for both the people who are part of the same group and also for the people who don't belong. (Wally Olins, qtd in Millman 2013: 11)

While branding has roots in the human need to belong to a tribe, religion or family, marketing guru Wally Olins says that branding in the contemporary sense is more concerned with differentiating 'fast-moving' products in a cluttered marketplace. Advertising casts

a spotlight of distinction on a product or service by making a unique selling proposition. Differentiation is especially important with products difficult to distinguish from their rivals: soap, beer, jeans, cola, water, cars and banks. While branding has been a central fixture of advertising since its earliest days, Naomi Klein (2000) identifies a new threshold of branding activity, when a 'global web of logos and products' (xvii) emerged in the 1980s.

Following financial and trade deregulation, acquisitions and mergers, media consolidation and internet expansion, corporations discovered it was more profitable to market an image of their products – the brand and its associated meaning – than to produce goods and services. Nike shifted its focus from making athletic shoes to marketing the value of sport. The Body Shop morphed into an international franchise marketing consciousness about our bodies and the environment. These and other companies 'fostered powerful identities by making their brand concept into a virus and sending it out into the culture via a variety of channels: cultural sponsorship, political controversy, the consumer experience and brand extensions' (Klein 2000: 20). Much of this branding was accomplished without spending on conventional advertising.

Brands mystify products by adding abstract value, belief and conviction. Material things branded with symbolic meaning cease to be physical objects and aspire to pure information. The branding boom in the 1980s was partly a product of the emerging information revolution, when atoms were being translated into bits and everyone was 'being digital' (Negroponte [1995] 1996). In his analysis of the digital economy, Tapscott asserted that '[k]nowledge work becomes the basis of value, revenue, and profit' (1996: 68). Brands are forms of knowledge that need protection by their owners.

In 2000, Klein predicted an 'anti-corporate backlash' (xviii), anticipated by the Seattle riots in 1999 and growing consumer opposition to aggressive corporate marketing on university campuses. She identified four conditions that would enflame anti-corporate sentiment:

- *No Space*: As corporate branding seeks new spaces to colonise with its commercial messages, we will increasingly see the 'surrender of culture and education to marketing' (xxi).
- *No Choice*: Mergers, consolidation, acquisitions, franchises, monopolies and corporate censorship will diminish real choice and diversity in the marketplace.
- *No Jobs*: Outsourcing manufacturing to developing countries will increase lay-offs and unemployment in the developed nations.

McJobs (low-paying jobs with little or no security) and temporary jobs will become more common.

- *No Logo*: The assault on employment, civil liberties and civic space will contribute to anti-corporate activism. (Klein 2000: xxi)

When asked about the ‘No Logo’ movement, Olins said: ‘What people are really attacking is the capitalist system. Brands are the symbols of the capitalist system’ and it ‘has terrible faults’ (Millman 2013: 16–17).

In the decade following the publication of *No Logo*, the internet provided a medium for monitoring corporate activity – CorpWatch, PR Watch, Amnesty International and SpinWatch are a few examples of those involved – but corporate public relations efforts have increased to protect the capitalist brand. Corporate lobbyists and conservative politicians resist demands for higher taxes and government regulation and argue instead for deficit reduction by cutting spending on education, healthcare and social services. Corporate publicity keeps economic growth at the top of the news agenda, with the threat that higher taxes and increased regulation will result in economic slowdown and fewer jobs, despite evidence to the contrary (Linden 2011). The success of this corporate narrative is one of the great propaganda successes of the late twentieth century (Carey 1997; Gutstein 2009; Hedges 2010). Nonetheless, Klein argues that corporations are sowing the seeds of their own downfall: ‘By abandoning their traditional role as direct, secure employers to pursue their branding dreams, they have lost the loyalty that once protected them from citizen rage’ (2000: 441).

By 2010, Klein was noting Barack Obama’s ability to market his own brand and its contribution to his 2008 election success. Shortly before he was elected president, Obama was named Marketer of the Year, beating Nike, Apple, Coors and Zappos for the top award (Klein 2010; Creamer 2008). After a few years in office, however, the Obama brand – like the Tony Blair and New Labour brand in the UK before it – became tarnished by an inability to deliver on election promises. Rather than feel betrayed by Obama, Klein recalls that super brands like Apple, Google, Benetton and Diesel, with their borrowed language of social revolution and change, had awakened ‘a longing in people for something more than shopping – for social change, for public space, for greater equality and diversity’. If Obama the product is not able to deliver on its promise, Obama the brand reveals ‘a tremendous appetite for progressive change’ (Klein 2010: n.p.). Like religions everywhere, advertising and branding keep hope alive.

Digital advertising: big data, metrics, algorithms

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, imagined an unbounded ‘web of knowledge’ that would bring ‘the workings of society closer to the workings of our minds’ (Carr [2008] 2009: 109). Rapid internet commercialisation after 1994 illustrates that new communication technologies quickly move beyond their early visionary promise to stimulate unexpected creativity and provide new marketing opportunities. The imprecise idea of Web 2.0 first expressed by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 predicted an evolution of the existing web, consisting mainly of static page views and banner ads, into a media-rich, interactive and immersive environment competing with other media for attention (DiNucci 1999). Active doing, making and connecting would replace passive viewing. While Berners-Lee claimed the term Web 2.0 was ‘jargon’ (Laningham 2006) – since the existing web was already ‘a collaborative space where people can interact’ – the original architecture of the internet was evolving, with increased bandwidth and transmission speed; new layers of code and more powerful algorithms; massive increases in storage and database capacity; greater ability to track online activities of users (analytics); increased surveillance; and a dramatic increase in the ability to aggregate bits of information into patterns of behaviour – ‘the workings of our minds’.

Whether jargon or not, the term Web 2.0 signifies an evolving emphasis on internet collaboration, user input and creation and social networking (O’Reilly 2005). The proprietary encyclopaedias built by experts (*Microsoft Encarta*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*) were dethroned by the open-source *Wikipedia*, built and edited by voluntary contributors. Social networking, podcasting, blogging, tagging, Twittering, crowd-sourcing, bookmarking, reviewing and sharing all act as new channels of advertising, while contributing social capital to internet communities (Shirky 2008, 2009). Search technologies successfully commercialised by Google, Yahoo and Amazon transform how people research, learn, purchase and collaborate. Google’s PageRank algorithm determines the relevance – and value – of search queries by measuring the number of links to a given site. Every search is now delivered with targeted ads related to search terms. Amazon became one of the world’s largest online retailers with a commitment to speed, customer service and recommendation algorithms. In this ‘culture of metrics’, algorithms turn purchasing decisions into advice for other customers (Anders 2012). Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service (www.mturk.com/) pays online workers small amounts for completing repetitive tasks only

humans can perform, creating a kind of digital sweatshop (Zittrain 2009). One of those tasks is writing product reviews.

Online reviews and other forms of user-generated content – on YouTube, Flickr, Amazon, Trip Advisor and on blogs and social networking websites – shifts content creation from professionals to amateurs and creates niche markets described as the ‘long tail’ (C. Anderson 2006). A graph of the long tail phenomenon (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_tail) illustrates that a few popular products attract more people per unit, while an equal number of people are attracted to a wide diversity of less popular products. For example, only a few bands are popular enough to receive radio airtime, and the rest must be content with smaller audiences and different marketing strategies. The internet’s ability to aggregate audiences over broad geographical areas allows niche products and services to find large enough audiences to be commercially viable (C. Anderson 2006). Fans of obscure bands, out-of-print books, independent documentaries or quirky potential partners can now go online and search for their less-than-popular product. Recommendations and user reviews push demand down the long tail. This power distribution model has as much significance for social organisation, collaboration and dialogue as it does for marketing (Shirky 2008).

In her 2009 report to the US Congress on advertising in the digital age, Kirchhoff identified the main issues confronting the industry at the time: tax deductions for advertising expenses; tracking the movements and preferences of internet users; privacy; advertising to children; financial losses to newspapers; false testimonials on blogs and in consumer reviews; and marketing in social networks. She reports a 400 per cent growth in internet advertising over the past decade, projected to be US\$40 billion by 2014 (2009: 5). Mobile technologies provide opportunities for advertisers to target consumers wherever they are. Messages are increasingly delivered to a variety of screens (desktops, tablets and smartphones); websites are being optimised for smartphones; and smartphone and tablet users conduct on-the-spot research and comparative shopping, including the practise of ‘showrooming’ – viewing products in physical stores before purchasing online.

Social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and VK provide new spaces for promotion, though Kirchhoff warns that advertising in social networking sites is like ‘gate-crashing a party’ (2009: 13). In online gaming, product placement and virtual ads are common. YouTube has become a repository for video advertising, whether as archives of vintage television ads or promoted as controversial, funniest or ‘best of’ collections. Kirchhoff concludes that ‘technological advances are

forcing media companies and advertisers to refine and reshape their messages to reach consumers in new venues, from mobile phones to handheld readers to online gaming networks'. Companies are attempting 'to become part of the conversation on social networks or part of the landscape by embedding products in news and entertainment programming' (21). Advertisers still need to capture attention, differentiate and brand, but they also need to encourage consumer participation, track and analyse behaviour and serve up customised recommendations.

Data collection and customer recommendations are one of the synergies Jenkins predicts for convergence culture. He uses the term 'affective economics' (2006: 20) to describe the emotional engagement that blurs boundaries between entertainment and branding when audience members join the brand community. The Amazon Kindle eBook reader is just one of many proprietary digital technologies where the brand (Kindle) is inseparable from the content. Marketers include targeted ads with searches, collect customer metrics and integrate product placement into social networking sites to foster brand communities equivalent to fan cultures. Affective economics and social networking become indistinguishable in the metrics of internet commerce. The film *Terms and Conditions May Apply* (2013) documents that internet users virtually sign away all their rights to privacy and ownership when they agree to the terms of software use or contribute to social networking websites, write product reviews or add comments to discussion forums. Increasingly, corporations and governments are sharing information collected online, and the boundaries between public and private information are blurring (Bennett et al. 2014).

Internet activity produces market research – a significant and lucrative by-product. Cookies – small scripts downloaded to a user's computer – automatically customise browsing experiences and – the *quid pro quo* – track internet activity. New methods of determining 'viewable impressions' – what ads people actually pay attention to online – are replacing the more primitive click-through measurement. In 2000, Google shifted from click-through banner ads to the more targeted approach of AdWords, where advertising is pushed to users based on their location, navigation and search choices. Real-time bidding (RTB) allows advertisers to bid on and deliver their ads to particular users, all within milliseconds. Google launched AdX in 2009 and Facebook soon followed with AdExchange to manage delivery of targeted ads at speeds faster than humans can make decisions (Auerbach 2013). Social media provide more than access to like-minded consumers (Facebook's 'custom audiences'); these consumers join the marketing chain by contributing their own recommendations and media buzz. Larry Page and

Sergey Brin, the founders of Google, think of the internet as an evolving system, which will eventually not only supplement intelligence, but surpass it: 'For us, working on search is a way to work on artificial intelligence', says Page (Carr [2008] 2009: 213). In their world, artificial intelligence is a global market asking questions about itself.

The internet operates as a global focus group generating market research. When information is selected and collected as data, it becomes rhetorical, an argument. The convergence of searching, information gathering and advertising into a single delivery platform predicts that all information will have a persuasive bias or hook with which to attach a promotional message. Auerbach (2013) notes with alarm the tendency of online marketing giants to aggregate user profiles, preferences and online activities to 'microtarget' potential consumers. Axiom Corporation, one of the world's largest consumer databases with over 500 million profiles, aggregates billions of data points to deliver 'actionable consumer insights' (Singer 2012). Alibaba, China's e-commerce giant, was positioned in 2014 to become the global leader in online sales, data collection and market research: 'It knows more than anyone about the spending habits and creditworthiness of the Chinese middle class, plus millions of Chinese merchants' ('The Alibaba Phenomenon' 2013: n.p.).

Jointly, big data and real-time bidding are creating a powerful means of communicating with audiences. Jenkins cites Lisa Gitelman's definition of media as 'layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum', governed by technical and cultural protocols (2006: 18–19). Search technology is one of those layers and has its own style for blending information and persuasion. Publicly, marketers frame their activities not as attempts to find and influence audiences, but to increase knowledge, engagement, interaction and immersion. A Microsoft marketing executive writes:

We live in a devices and services world, where experiences are connected across screens and online engagement happens anywhere and at all times. This is empowering a new generation of consumers who are active critics, fact-finders, content creators, buzz-marketers and user-innovators. They demand highly personalized, socially relevant experiences. (Holland 2013: n.p.)

Notice the rhetorical transformation and ascent toward mystification in this analysis. While Frank Holland of Microsoft is primarily concerned with ad delivery to active consumers in a crowded marketplace, his explanation is reframed as a 'socially relevant' benefit to consumers.

Carr ([2008] 2009) warns that many users are naïve about the extent

of internet tracking, and that they leave a spider web of clues that can be assembled into detailed profiles by those with access to data. Acxiom, BlueKai and Xaxis collect many data points about online consumers and are capable of 'reidentification': converting anonymous users into identifiable people. Issenberg (2012) describes how the Obama Democrats used big data to build voter support one individual at a time and then predict election results months in advance. 'While the internet offers people a new medium for discovering information and voicing opinions, it also provides bureaucrats with a powerful new tool for monitoring speech, identifying dissidents, and disseminating propaganda' (Carr [2008] 2009: 200). In 2013, Edward Snowden came forward to journalist Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras with details of covert – and apparently illegal – mass electronic surveillance. Snowden, a computer specialist working on contract for the National Security Agency (NSA) in Hawaii, copied classified documents to support his claims and set off a deluge of denial and protest with his revelations that the NSA, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in the UK and the Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC) are spying on citizens and high-ranking government officials alike without their knowledge (Greenwald et al. 2013). Between them, national security agencies and large commercial data miners share powerful new tools for influencing audiences, whether to sell products or promote ideologies.

Exercise questions

1. Describe your approach to materialism by considering your attitudes to work, wealth, status and happiness.
2. What role does advertising play in a given sport? Try to go behind the scenes to account for advertising revenues, their effect on player salaries, sport venues and ticket prices.
3. Illustrate Twitchell's characteristics of advertising with examples from contemporary ads. Create a blog or website to share your examples with your learning group.
4. What are your thoughts on the comparison of advertising and religion?
5. Create an ad to sell a product or service to your class. Use audio, video or presentation software for this thirty- to sixty-second production. Provide a short written explanation (400 words or less) of your approach and unique selling proposition.
6. Discuss a political party in terms of branding.
7. Describe an online community you belong to, paying particular

attention to the presence of advertising and marketing in this community.

8. As a class or learning group, discuss your attitudes about internet privacy, data collection and information sharing between governments and corporations. Summarise your conclusions as a series of recommendations to your political representative.



Figure 7 'The well-armed brain'. Photo: M. Soules, Toronto, 2007.