

ADVERTISING, DEMOCRACY AND CENSORSHIP

ROBERT L. CRAIG

Abstract

The article develops an argument for the control of commercial and political advertising in the United States and a return to a journalism of public service and in support of democratic principles of communication.

Based on a number of previous studies, the author describes and analyzes the impact of a business culture on the traditional role of the media, the expectations of journalism, and the rights of citizen to be informed by a range of ideas and in the spirit of a democratic existence.

Robert L. Craig is Professor in Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota, e-mail: RLCRAIG@stthomas.edu.

The future of modern society and democracy is plagued by major contradictions between neo-conservative (neo-classical) economic policy and the values of rational, social-democratic planning for the general welfare. Advertising is one source of these contradictions and exacerbates them through structural and overt forms of censorship. Unchecked, advertising has the potential to undermine and erode democratic practice. Thus, societies developing market economies and democratic political reforms would be well served by carefully considering and regulating the impact of advertising on their culture, media systems, and political practices.

Advertising censorship must be viewed in psychological, ideological, cultural, political, social, and economic terms. In each sphere, advertising exerts different kinds of censoring pressures that undermine democratic practices and threaten democratic reforms and institutions. This article reports the results of several research projects by the author and others that examine advertising's adverse effects on U.S. American democracy.

Globally, the political interests of the corporate elite and the political right are in the ascendancy with neo-conservative policies creating trends toward smaller, less powerful, and less protective government and an increasingly deregulated business environment. Indeed, under these political circumstances, calling for increased regulation of advertising might seem passé. No doubt, advertising is an essential component of the production, promotion, and distribution of goods in a market economy. Nevertheless, some advertising practices so threaten democratic institutions that some steps to regulate them must be taken. When neo-conservatives block or kill funding for public goods such as media, political campaigns, and schools, the ensuing over-reliance on advertising revenues shifts power from the public to corporations and wealthy elites.

Theoretical Foundations

Not individual advertisements – which may be deceptively simple and often disarming – but the system of advertising must be addressed to understand corporate authority. The power of advertising is at once psychological, ideological, and economic. It addresses individuals, sows consumerist mythologies, and is an essential component of the political economy of corporate capitalism and its relation to state and media.

Still, it is important to avoid historical and cultural reductionism. The studies reported here relate to the particular historical situation of the United States and its specific political and media environment. Other nations follow different patterns of historical development with different concerns as a result of local traditions and the political landscape. For instance, European countries have already adopted legislation that addresses advertising and corporate excess.

While the U.S. bourgeois public sphere has long been situated largely within the market, government, education, and media have at least held out an ideological pretence of independence, which has had a material impact on policy. But, with neo-conservatives pressing government and public goods to the social margins through market-oriented policies, commercial voices and practices stand out more loudly in the public sphere. Global trends suggest that advertising pressures are structural, they are embedded in corporate practice. As a result, business and

advertising pressures are experienced internationally. Business and advertisers have an uncanny ability to seep into the crevices of media, culture, and society, creating many forms of insidious and overt censorship and shaking our democratic foundations. Neo-conservatives try to block any attempt to fetter corporate prerogatives and power.

Advertising is deeply embedded in the global political economy. For instance, today \$444 billion is spent annually on advertising, including \$235 billion spent in the United States alone (Salt of the Earth 2003), where citizens are psychologically bludgeoned by what amounts to a massive commercial propaganda system. Advertising's business function in the economy is to stimulate consumer demand for the global supply of goods and services. Its cultural function seems to be to drown out any competing ideologies.

Advertising appropriates cultural values to explain to people why they should purchase goods and services by defining the social and cultural roles of goods and providing consumers with a rationale for demand. Raymond Williams (1960) calls advertising and consumption a system of magic, while Roland Barthes (1972) and Judith Williamson (1978) explain advertising as a form of communication through which business gives products meaning and value via symbolic exchanges.

Psychologically, advertising ties goods to subjective identity formation by enticing individuals first into the communication process. Its modern, open-ended style works through peoples' subjectivity via symbolic association and inference. To understand advertising messages, consumers must actively make connections between known socio-cultural symbols and the meaningless product that is being advertised. Advertisements present consumers with a set of cultural symbols, so consumers infer a story about goods. Like any form of interactive storytelling, advertisers leave spaces for listeners to fill in subjective details from their own experience. Although advertising narratives are somewhat open, advertisers carefully select symbols so consumers construct an ideal view of the product.

Second, the stories consumers tell themselves in reading advertisements mostly reiterate the myth that products will change them for the better. Third, advertising and marketing turn products into meaningful, coded systems. That is, brands of related goods, like cars, are marketed so each product has a distinct meaning that appeals to a particular market segment. Consequently, advertised products together form a code of cultural meaning, which consumers learn and share with others. By selecting products from this code, people can project an identity and read that of others. In this way, business offers products as a way for individuals to create, assume, and display social identity.

Advertising, then, operates at economic, ideological, and individual levels as a powerful economic tool, a mass communication form, and a tool of identity formation. Thus, advertising and corporate ideology penetrate social, cultural and individual practices, bending them to the logic of capitalism.

Advertising as Ideological Censorship

Early twentieth century consumer advertising ceased being news about a product for sale. Instead, industry developed a modern form of *persuasive* communication, whose content offers social and cultural values that must be seen as ideological support for consumer capitalism and its culture (Craig 1992). This modern form

and practice of advertising, which operates through image, association, and inference and wallpapers every visible surface in capitalist societies, has become so codified, ubiquitous, and ingrained in the contemporary life world that people see advertisements unconsciously without critically engaging the logic behind them.

In an ideological sense, advertising promotes a consumer society at the expense of competing ideologies that might lead to alternative political and economic formations.

As a form of semiotic communication, advertising relies on symbolic forms that have a known value within a society to give meaning to products with essentially little or no intrinsic meaning or value. For instance, the typical consumer goods advertisement consists of an artistically photographed product in a setting with props that have meaning to the consumer. A strikingly beautiful model stands barely clad before a medieval castle, leaning into the arms of a handsome, athletic, stoic, and fully dressed man. In the corner of the advertisement is a display of the advertised perfume. Because consumers have been conditioned to read this wordless form of advertising since childhood, they immediately get its message: the perfume is a magic potion that will transport the wearer to an enchanted life of wealth, privilege, romance, happiness, and sexual fulfilment. None of these meanings come from the product, but from the recognition and interpretation of symbols that were chosen from the cultural repertoire of settings, models, fashions, expressions, attitudes, or kinds of photographs.

All meaningful symbols become grist for this form of advertising. Art, celebrity, fashion, glamour, religion, science and eventually some products lend their meanings to products in search of meaning. The meaning of alternative political symbols within a culture can be diluted by commercial appropriation. For instance, a Jamaican Rastafarian's dreadlocks become disconnected from their political roots in advertising or in a magazine's fashion spread.

This process was examined in depth by studying African American readers interpreting images of African Americans in magazine advertising (Craig 1991; Craig, Kretsedemus and Gryniewski 1997).

African American models have long appeared in American advertising. From happy darkies pictured serving on the plantation during slavery to shoeshine boys or maids during the era of Jim Crow segregation, blacks' roles as slaves and servants were reified by their visual representations in advertising. Leaders of the early phase of the American Civil Rights Movement (1945-60) challenged these images, which communicated stereotypical views of blacks' limited "natural" abilities and "rightful" place in American society. Civil Rights activists eventually drove these images from the American media.

However, the elimination of African American stereotypes created a different kind of discrimination in the 1950s and early 60s, when media images of blacks and black culture were simply eliminated. Except for a few television programs featuring black entertainers, such as Nat King Cole, African American faces were never seen (Dates and Barlow 1990).

During the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement (1960-1980), blacks began to re-appear in advertising and television programming. But, coming onto the existing communication stage in a racist society was fraught with ideological problems. By the 1990s, depictions of African Americans as wealthy participants in the consumer society became a new political problem, when advertising idealised the

real position of African Americans in American society by creating images of blacks as equal participants in the consumer culture. These images of success ran counter to the general history and experience of African American poverty, discrimination, and black political struggles.

The paradox is obvious. The new advertising was the most positive depiction of blacks in American history and provided a model of 'what should be' in American society. But, from a political standpoint over-idealised images are problematic. First, business creates an imaginary gloss over continued ethnic and racial disparities in America. Second, they undermine race and ethnicity as political and cultural boundaries, which are essential to forming African American group identity, establishing group identity, and forging political unity to fight racism and discrimination. Third, ethnic advertising is culturally conservative, because it accepts the very distinctions in class, wealth, and status that need to be challenged politically to address African Americans' standing.

Ironically even these seemingly positive images of African American identity position African Americans according to the needs of the dominant imperatives within capitalism. This is no better seen than when advertising images are placed in the broader context of African American representations in the news. In this context, positive images support a neo-conservative political ideology.

News representations often depict African Americans as murderers, rapists, thugs, gang members, homeless, jobless, under-educated, drug abusers, and living in rags, filth, and poverty. Advertising images of wealthy, successful blacks suggest that hard working, respectable blacks get what they deserve. This is the basis of a neo-conservative attack against affirmative action policies meant to redress centuries of second-class citizenship. Under Ronald Reagan, conservatives attacked affirmative action and other social programs designed to promote black opportunity as a waste of resources; after all, working hard enough means success in America.

Advertising's appropriation and idealisation of black models ideologically undercuts the fight against racial discrimination in the United States. African American readers can be quite critical of advertising messages that over-idealise race. But, because consumers actually spend little time reading advertisements, advertisers design them to be understood quickly, thus reinforcing uncritical reading by consumers, who scan for stories they do want to read. Only politically and religiously strong readers consciously and critically engage advertisements and produce oppositional readings (Craig, Kretsedemus and Gryniewski 1997).

Advertising Undermines Democratic Political Practice

Because modern advertising has been so effective commercially, it has crept into the political process. Increasingly U.S. legislative issues and candidates are promoted like products through image advertising campaigns that rely on symbolic hyperbole rather than on deliberative debates over political alternatives. The over-reliance on advertising style communication leads to asymmetries in political power, because only wealthy groups have the resources to bankroll expensive advertising campaigns to promote legislative issues and candidates for elections. Scholars and journalists have examined the political implications of the form and spiraling costs of political communication.

Disinformation Campaigns as a Form of Censorship

In the United States today wealthy, conservative groups form and hide behind false front organisations with democratic sounding names. Outside public scrutiny, these groups develop disinformation campaigns to obscure facts surrounding pending legislative issues, for instance. Increasingly, legislators encounter confused constituents *promoting* legislation that will harm them and enrich corporations. Consequently, legislators and their staffs spend valuable time and resources “de-programming” citizens and explaining the real intent of the legislation.

The visual communication strategy in issue-oriented disinformation campaigns is to create a populist “look” that will confuse the public. Disinformation advertising employs professional actors who dress and look like ordinary citizens talking about pending legislation. Some advertisements list phony sponsors with populist, civic-sounding pseudonyms, such as “Citizens for Reform,” “Citizens for the Republic Education Fund” and “Coalition for Our Children’s Future.” Increasingly, several companies will collaborate under the guise of an umbrella sponsor to pool resources, coordinate activities, and extend their range (Rampton and Stauber 1998).

One of the most prominent disinformation campaigns occurred during the 1994 health care reform debates in Congress. The health care industry developed a television advertisement in which a typical middle-class couple complained about reforms. In another case, Citizens for a Sound Economy – a front group for companies like Cigan and R.J. Reynolds – issued an advertisement encouraging people to call legislators in support of tort law reform (lawsuits pertaining to a private or civil wrong or injury). The tort reform would have limited damages to be paid to accident or malpractice victims. The bill would have profited corporations and protected wealthy individuals such as stockholders, insurance companies and medical doctors by limiting their liability and shifting financial burdens to accident victims.

The issue of tort reform reappeared in the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign of George W. Bush, who had long been associated with “Citizens Against Lawsuit Abuse” (CALA) in Texas. The organisation put money from corporations, such as Aetna, Dow Chemical, Philip Morris, Exxon, and General Electric, into tort reform and other political activities. CALA also funded Bush’s two gubernatorial campaigns to the tune of \$4.1-4.5 million (Lemons 2000). Governor Bush signed a series of tort reform bills designed to limit the liability of Texas corporations.

Tobacco companies have used organisations like “The National Smoker Alliance,” “Minnesota Coalition of Responsible Retailers,” or “The New England Convenience Store Association,” to front their fight against tobacco legislation. In California, “The National Smokers Alliance” ran a newspaper advertising campaign against California’s smoking restrictions, claiming that they hurt business and were “discriminatory.” The Alliance, which existed only on paper, was created by the Philip Morris tobacco company and funded by other large tobacco interests (Hayward 1995).

American Tobacco Company documents discovered in Minnesota’s successful lawsuit against tobacco companies provides insight into disinformation strategies. Kurt L. Malmgren, Senior Vice President of State Activities for the Tobacco Institute, wrote:

Our approach is to use local advocates to make our case under the umbrella of local coalition groups we set up. Quite often, the local advocate will be a local restaurateur or other member of the coalition we organize. We will expand

and deploy coalition coordinators to make the necessary rounds to the restaurants and other businesses to drum up support for our position. That support will come in the form of testimony, letters-to-the-editor and to lawmakers and other coalition efforts. Through member company reports and additional T.I. coordinators, we are ready to make it happen.

In Massachusetts, we are using the base we've built with the New England Association of Convenience Stores. They are the backbone of our monitoring system on the introduction of local challenges, allowing us to get into the hot localities as early as possible to round up allies and counter-attack. RJR and Philip Morris support in Massachusetts is already in place as well. Member company efforts at coordinating retailer support have already improved our ability to respond in a meaningful and timely fashion....

Of course our ultimate goal in Massachusetts and all other states is preemption of local anti-tobacco ordinances. The other actions I have outlined are necessary holding efforts to limit local damage while we work vigorously for local preemption (Malmgren 1992).

The memo also reveals tobacco's strategy to use the legitimate concerns of civic organisations to drain money that might go to local health boards, anti-tobacco lobbying efforts, and groups trying to increase cigarette taxes.

In advertising, lobbying and public relations disinformation campaigns, the goal of corporate special interests is to gain credibility by being pictured alongside groups that have a positive image. The strategy should work best when these groups are long-standing pillars of the community. The problem, of course, is that groups with credible reputations have them precisely because they avoid associations with unsavoury partners. When instant credibility is not available, the disinformation campaign strategy manufactures it.

Timber and mining companies in the western states are a case in point, according to Samantha Sanchez (1996).

Although these groups typically rely on donations from resource companies and developers, they specialize in rallies, petition drives, even T-shirt and bumper sticker campaigns – anything that puts a workingman's face on the developers' profit motive. With innocuous, populist-sounding names, these organizations appeal directly to the economic frustration of blue-collar voters....

Typical of these organizations is People for the West!, which describes itself as "a grassroots campaign supporting western communities." The ongoing interest of these people is the preservation of an 1872 mining law that gives mining companies cheap access to mineral-rich public land. In 1992 about 96 percent of the organization's \$1.7 million budget came from corporate donors, led by NERCO Minerals, Cyprus Minerals, Chevron, and Hecla Mining, according to Audubon Society researchers. PFW's corporate members include such timber and power companies as Boise Cascade, Potlatch, and Pacific Power and Light; the group also includes cattlemen and woolgrowers associations, as well as mining interests. The chairman of PFW, Bob Quick, is the national director of state legislative affairs for Asarco, a mining company.

Microsoft employed a disinformation campaign in 1999-2000 to create the impression that the U.S. Justice Department's anti-trust suit was a witch-hunt, and to manufacture public pressure on members of Congress and state attorneys general, who were suing Microsoft. The corporation hired former tobacco company and National Rifle Association lobbyists to develop the campaign.

Joshua M. Marshall (2000) describes a related attempt by Microsoft to fool the public using electronic media:

[Microsoft] has also been setting up grass-roots citizens' coalitions to agitate on its behalf. One of the more humorous examples is the grandiosely titled Freedom to Innovate Network (FIN), which has a prominent link on the front page of the Microsoft Web site. According to the Fin's site, the group was founded in response to an "overwhelming amount of correspondence [Microsoft] received from around the U.S. and overseas regarding the trial with the Department of Justice and other public policy issues. The FIN is a non-partisan, grassroots network of citizens and businesses who have a stake in the success of Microsoft and the high-tech industry." But when I pressed a PR representative from Microsoft on whether the FIN was a truly independent organization, he ultimately conceded that it was "really just a Web site" run by Microsoft.

Research has begun to address how disinformation campaigns fool consumers. Craig and Soley (2002) designed six variations of an ad to test responses to a phony disinformation campaign. The advertisements took the anti-reform side of the Lead Reduction Act and employed copy and imagery typical of disinformation campaigns.

Tests were devised to examine whether consumers believed that lead was not dangerous, if their like or dislike of the advertisement correlated with whether they would take political action based on this advertisement, and whether a populist sponsors' names and pictures affected the consumers' political intent.

The results showed that people were overwhelmingly misled and if they liked the advertisement they were more likely to say they would call their legislator. However, none of the differences in photographs and sponsors were predictors of behavioural intent.

Apparently seeing a proposition in a conventionally designed print advertisement persuaded people to believe false information. People seem to be predisposed to believe what they read, and simply do not stop to consider whether anyone had been ever killed by ingesting lead or not. In the absence of real knowledge, respondents took a common sense approach and assumed that since they had never heard of anyone dying from swallowing lead that it must not have occurred.

Disinformation campaigns are a kind of censorship. They misinform the public and impede public discourse.

Advertising Costs Censor U.S. Elections and Campaign Finance Reform

As of March 2004, President Bush had already raised \$170 million dollars to refinance his November re-election bid. In 2002, winning candidates for the U.S. Senate spent an average of \$5.4 million while losers spent \$3.5 million. Total spending in the 2002 U.S. Senate elections reached \$183 million. Mark Dayton, a U.S.

Senator from Minnesota (Democrat) estimates that the Republican Party will spend \$30 million to unseat him in 2006. To match that spending, he will have to raise over \$41,000 per day over the next two years.

Most observers believe that the large amount of money necessary to run for political office has distorted American politics in several ways.

A large proportion of candidates' campaign war chests come from corporate political action committees (PACs) seeking legislative influence – 21% for U.S. Senate races and 39% for U.S. House races in 1996. Candidates have to think twice about how they vote on issues that might have a negative impact on donors.

Studies have been conducted to determine whether PAC spending has an independent (statistical) affect on election outcomes. A study by Soley, Craig and Cherif (1988) that examined the interactive effects of incumbency, political party affiliation, overall spending and PAC spending indicated that for U.S. House of Representatives races, PAC spending had increased to a large enough proportion of total spending that it was having an independent affect on election outcomes. A similar study of U.S. Senate elections by the authors did not find this result.

Large campaign contributions have been tied to subsequent votes on legislation by successful candidates.

Significantly more money flows to incumbents, making it increasingly difficult for challengers to compete in U.S. federal elections. Apparently contributors think that to buy influence one must back the winner. Because incumbents have name recognition, which gives them an election edge, money flows to them. During the 1996 U.S. Senate elections, winners spent \$4.7 million and losers \$2.7 million, and 19 of 21 (90.5%) incumbents were returned to office. The same year, 94% of incumbents were returned to the U.S. House of Representatives. This is hardly a healthy formula for democratic electioneering.

High election costs force candidates to spend excessive amounts of time raising funds, usually from wealthy donors, which decreases the time candidates have to spend with their constituents.

High election costs causes candidates to seek election funds from individuals and groups outside their constituency.

High election costs keep women and minorities from running for office.

The large amount of money available to campaigns has led to increased reliance on television advertising. Selling candidates like soap relies on emotion and symbolic techniques, which dumb down political campaigns. As Bill Moyers reported in a PBS documentary, *Illusions of News* (1989), candidates are getting better and better at scripting Hollywoodesque publicity stunts, staging pseudo-events, controlling access to candidates, and creating and selling media images that have little to do with the pressing issues of the day. And when they are relevant, staged images are often a politician's attempt to compensate for backing an unpopular policy. In Moyers' documentary, U.S. Representative David Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin, referred to American network news organisations as "a public affairs/entertainment division of a profit-making corporation."

The media's acceptance of and reliance on staged publicity is a form of censorship, because it allows those with access to the press to gloss over hard issues, mask their political intentions and policies, and create false impressions among viewers about public policy.

In Moyers' documentary, President Ronald Reagan's deputy chief of staff (1981-85), Michael Deaver, describes his basic premise in managing the news and public opinion, by saying, "The media, while they won't admit it, are not in the news business. They are in the entertainment business." When news was not going right, the White House created a positive, compensating image to offset negative perceptions. "We thought of ourselves, when we got into the national campaign, as producers. We tried to create the most entertaining, visually attractive scene to fill that box so the cameras from the networks would have to use it. It would be so good that they would say that 'Boy, this is going to make our shot tonight.' And, that is exactly [what happened], we became Hollywood producers."

The pursuit of large amounts of advertising revenue has pitted the U.S. broadcast industry against the process of democratising campaigns and elections.

While election watchdog groups decry the influence of money on elections, the broadcast industry often works against some aspects of campaign finance reform. This seeming contradiction is due to the fact that advertising revenue is its only source of profits and millions of dollars are spent on campaigns for federal and state-wide offices. So, in spite of knowing of the negative impact of advertising dollars on campaigns and legislation, organisations such as the National Association of Broadcasters lobby against reforms that would limit campaign spending or force television to provide free or cheap advertising to candidates.

Louise Slaughter, a Democratic party congresswoman from New York sponsored legislation that would have given candidates five minutes of free advertising during elections to cut campaign costs. Over a four-year period broadcasters spent \$11 million to kill the bill. They succeeded.

In this sense, corporate media vote to maintain and enhance their profits at the expense of democracy. In the past, media have contributed to spiralling election costs by raising their rates during election campaigns, and they fought legislation that would require them to sell political advertising time at the lowest-unit rates during election times. Broadcasters have also fought against political advertisement voucher programs, which would refund the cost of advertising to candidates who agree to specific campaign conditions.

Simply put, the drive for advertising profits has led broadcast media not only to censor but also to actively oppose legislation that might reduce their profits. To protect the integrity of legislation and elections, governments must enact legislation to keep large, special interest money and the media's pursuit of profits out of the political process.

Advertisers Censor the Press

Advertising is big business, and advertising agencies are experiencing the same effects of globalisation and the centralisation of ownership as other industries. Surviving agencies grow larger and more powerful. With fewer competing agencies, survivors are in a better position to negotiate favourable advertising contracts (rates) with large media companies.

Businesses also withdraw (and threaten to withdraw) advertising from media, unless they agree to tailor or censor copy to fit business needs. A survey of U.S. American newspaper editors by Soley and Craig (1992) reveals that businesses do pressure newspapers, and that some do cave in and tailor and censor newspaper

content. Indeed, 90 percent of news editors had actually experienced advertisers withdrawing advertising to influence content. Over a third said that advertisers had succeeded in influencing newspaper news or features. The study also shows that small circulation newspapers are more likely to kill stories than large newspapers; only 16.7 percent of 100,000+ circulation newspapers reported that they been influenced while the number jumped to 41.9 percent at papers with 25-50,000 readers.

A follow-up study by Soley (1997) reveals that advertiser pressure is a growing problem for 80 percent of the members of the Society of American Business Editors and Writers, and 45 percent of them know of instances where news coverage was compromised.

Hundreds of examples of advertisers pressuring media to change copy have been reported. For example, golf ball manufacturers withdrew \$1 million in advertising contracts when *Sports Illustrated* ran a story on lesbian golf fans at the Dinah Shore tournament in Palm Springs. Ford withdrew six months of advertising for its Lincoln and Mercury brands when a story quoting sexually explicit rock lyrics ran next to a Mercury advertisement in the *New Yorker* (Knecht 1997).

However the most disconcerting reports are of media compromising their editorial integrity. When *Esquire* killed a short story about a gay man writing papers for college students for sex, the *Wall Street Journal* discovered that some large corporations, like Proctor and Gamble, had standing orders for magazines to provide prior warnings about offensive content so the company could withdraw its advertisements (Knecht 1997). For publications not to provide these warnings meant risking the loss of large advertising accounts. *Esquire* killed the short story for this reason. A *Fortune* magazine exposé of Steve Forbes during his bid for the presidency revealed that the *Forbes'* publisher routinely re-wrote stories to avoid alienating advertisers (Diamond 1996). *Ms.* magazine stopped accepting all advertisements to free itself from business pressures through advertising practices (Steinem 1990).

The most egregious tale of the erosion of a newspaper's reputation occurred at the *Los Angeles Times*. In 1995, Mark Willes was hired as CEO by Times-Mirror, which owns the *L.A. Times*. With a Ph.D. in economics and experience teaching at the Wharton School of Business, Willes had served as president of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, but he had never worked at a newspaper. Despite resignations from experienced newsmen, such as publisher Richard Scholsberg and editor Shelby Coffey, Willes moved ahead with a corporatist plan to bring news editors together with members from advertising sales, marketing, and circulation. The move broke down any pretence of a wall between editorial and advertising departments. Three years later it led to one of the biggest gaffes in American newspaper history (Auletta 1997), when the *L.A. Times* split the profits of a 16-page special section about the new Staples Center sports arena with the Center itself. Reports on the profit-sharing plan, which put the paper in bed with a newsmaker, reveal that it had been approved by the publisher and editor but kept from journalists (Risser 2000).

Soley and Craig (1992) show that business pressure on news is greatest in small markets, where real estate companies, grocery stores, and automobile dealers, who are large advertisers, wield enormous power. Withdrawing their advertising can send small papers into red figures. But even for large papers, the drive to profit in media chains creates pressures on editorial and advertising staffs to appease ad-

vertisers. Most American newspapers have large automobile, real estate, and travels sections, whose content is little more than ‘wallpaper’ for advertising. The editorial staff of the Twin Cities *Star Tribune*, for instance, has discussed giving over those sections entirely to the advertising department to avoid undermining journalistic integrity. Although those sections look like news, they never contain any hard-hitting stories, since they would create trouble with large advertisers.

The Decline of Ideological Competition in Newspapers

Finally, economists have long recognised that competition for advertising revenues is one mechanism that has led to the decline of newspaper competition and to the overall centralisation of media ownership. In Britain, for example, James Curran (1977) describes how the radical working class press, which had survived government censorship and control through taxes, stamps, limited access to information, physical censorship, and libel law, was killed by the onset of mass advertising. Despite its larger audience, vastly more advertising revenue flowed to commercial papers, which destroyed working class papers. Curran concludes that advertising revenue is a more powerful censor of the British press than governmental controls had ever been.

In the United States, competition for profitability has led to a decline in the number of daily newspapers and the number of cities with competing dailies (Bagdikian 1962, 1987). The spectrum of political perspectives in the press is quite narrow, ranging from liberal-conservative to ultra-conservative. Baldasty (1992) ties this development to the commercialisation of American newspapers, beginning in the nineteenth century. A more recent study of the financial data of a newspaper that took an anti-war stance during the Vietnam War shows that it had lost 27,000 inches of advertising despite the fact that it was the best advertising vehicle to reach its audience of 20,000+ readers. The study demonstrates that when newspapers take unpopular stands, businesses will use their advertising to censor them (Craig 2004).

Selling Audiences: Marketing Strategies and Infotainment as Censorship

Competition for the advertising dollar among U.S. media is stiff. As a result, U.S. media increasingly have turned to marketing experts to help design content that attracts and builds reader and audience profiles that advertisers find lucrative (Underwood 1993). As a result, we see less news and more entertainment in U.S. American newspapers and television, leading to a phenomenon called *infotainment*. Infotainment replaces serious editorial material in the ‘news hole’ and emerges as a kind of censorship.

U.S. newspapers have experienced declining readership in recent years. Rather than relying on the professional expertise of editors to supply the public with information it needs to know to function in a democratic society, newspapers increasingly rely on marketing research and focus groups to determine content. They run more stories packaged with photos, sidebars, and graphics, which can lead to better, more in-depth coverage. But, research has also led newspapers to develop special sections on sports, travel, food, autos, and religion to attract and hold readers. These soft feature sections have filled newspapers with “fluff.” Little of the new content is related to serious social and political issues. While these sections may appeal to readers, they also allow advertisers to narrowcast their promotions.

If newspapers are bad, network news is worse, and local television news far worse still. With television news executives using the same rating systems as entertainment programming, it is little wonder that the criteria for deciding what is a good news show have shifted toward infotainment. Coupled with the drive for extensive profits (Underwood 1993), which means putting the right bodies in front of the sets, it is no wonder that politicians can influence the news by staging stunning visual opportunities for the media. No one has ever been better than Michael Deaver, who constantly staged entertaining images of Reagan: riding horses, sawing wood, eating jelling beans, chatting with working men in pubs or jobs sites (Moyers 1989).

Although I am not arguing that U.S. media have become lackeys of industry, I do detect – as a life-long news reader – the shift in print and broadcast journalism that others (Bagdikian 1962; 1987; McChesney 1999) have long noted. It is a shift away from defining *news about serious political events and issues as the product* that journalists create to *sell to readers* toward defining *the reader or audience as the product* media create to *sell to advertisers*. From the latter perspective, an elite audience – with a large disposable income and the politics that go with it – is a better product for advertisers. To establish this demographic appeal, media must eschew alienating readers, especially the wealthy elites desired by advertisers. This is an insidious form of self-censorship of information and opinion, which accounts, in part, for the limited, centre-right political spectrum represented in U.S. news. The result has been a dangerous disappearance of critical media in the U.S. mainstream, a dearth of opposition to neo-conservative policy, and a more conservative tone to U.S. public opinion.

Advertising and Education

As a result of neo-conservative economic policy, government funding for U.S. public education has been radically cut at all levels. Schools have been closed and curricula killed, including programs for art, music, and student-run newspapers. To compensate for funding cuts, school administrators have resorted to selling businesses and advertisers access to students. In exchange for money and equipment, schools agree to air Channel One's programming and guarantee that students will view targeted advertising. School cafeteria, football and baseball stadiums, gymnasiums, hallways, and even textbook covers are sold to advertisers. Some school districts have sold exclusive vending rights to major suppliers for hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Health educators argue that such advertisements, especially for soft drinks and junk food, contradict and undermine the educators' message to students: to resist advertising pressures and to adopt healthier diets.

One corporate response to over-consumption by children has been especially cynical. Credit card companies in America have been pressing for legislation that would allow them to issue credit cards to kids as young as twelve under the guise of teaching them better financial management and for "emergencies." As in Taiwan, where such cards are already issued to twelve year-olds, parental approval is needed.

Thus, neo-conservative policies have changed the character of public schools, not just directly by eliminating programs, but indirectly, by forcing schools to sell out to the ideological pandering and psychological manipulation of corporate advertising and consumption. No space within U.S. society would appear to be safe

from the onslaught of corporate advertising. Even the public good of education, which has traditionally been a sacred venue, where teachers protect and nourish young minds, is being auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Conclusion

The United States exhibits signs of a slow erosion of the integrity of its social and cultural institutions, which is due, in part, to the effects of a wide variety of forms of censorship by business and advertising practices. U.S. politics, the press, and even education seem to be driven less by policy debates than by the ability to manipulate the communication process and to raise revenues through marketing schemes. A neo-conservative insistence on eliminating any financial drag on a corporate pursuit of maximum profits, has established financial conditions that make U.S. social and cultural institutions vulnerable to business pressures.

Therefore, a number of approaches to regulating advertising would seem to be essential for stemming the tide of corporate censorship and for adjusting advertising's impact on democracy.

1. Reduce an over-emphasis on profits, which makes media susceptible to business and advertising pressures.

- Media owners must recognise that media, especially news organisations, must meet important social obligations.
- Media owners must recognise that profits, although essential to the private press, cannot be allowed to drive its practices.
- Media owners, managers, editors, journalists, and advertising directors, and their staffs must maintain a wall between newsrooms and advertising departments. Under no conditions should media cave in to business pressures by tailoring or censoring stories. Publishers and the advertising staffs should never be allowed to pressure journalists.
- Media managers should be drawn from the ranks of experienced journalists.
- Media managers should practice democracy in the newsroom and allow rank and file journalists more freedom to dictate content.
- Market surveys and readership surveys should not be allowed to dictate content by taking resources from the news side.
- Increased shifts of content away from news and information should threaten print media's postal subsidies and broadcast license renewals. Tax incentives that encourage increased commercialisation should be repealed.
- Non-commercial media are in the public interest. Declines in public funding for media must be reversed.
- Legislation should prohibit collusion among businesses for the purpose of censoring the media by withdrawing advertising.

2. Reduce advertising's effects on the political process

- Reducing the cost of elections will reduce the amount of expensive advertising communication and encourage more face-to-face and (less mediated forms of) campaigning.
- Political campaigns should be entirely publicly funded when candidates agree to spending limits, do not to take funds from large donors, agree not to fund their own campaigns, and raise a set number of small contributions from within

their districts. Arizona and Maine, for example, where these campaign finance reforms have been implemented, have reduced the influence of wealthy lobbyists and PACs, encouraged more poor, minority and women candidates for office, and turned the attention of politicians from fundraising to the communities they represent (Moyers).

- Political campaign advertisements should address political issues.
- Negative campaigns advertisements that focus on personalities and are disrespectful of opposing candidates should be banned.
- Independent advocacy advertisements for issues and candidates should have to reveal their major funding sources.
- News media should systematically analyze and criticise political advertisements that employ commercial advertising techniques to create false inferences about issues.
- Media should ban advertisements from fake sponsors.
- Media should not run disinformation campaigns, when they recognise misleading advertisements.
- Media should expand the coverage of candidates' addresses on political issues.
- Media should eliminate coverage of campaign pseudo-events.
- Media should not allow candidates to stage or frame photographs or video.
- Media should sell candidates advertising at its lowest, last year's unit rate for its most favoured customer.
- Media should support campaign-spending limits and use their influence to drive reforms, which may hurt its profits but protect and advance the cause of democracy.

3. Society should regulate advertising more tightly, because over-commercialisation of culture demeans others sources of meaning and value.

- Ban all advertising to children.
- Ban all cigarette and alcohol advertising.
- Allow representatives of minority groups to establish guidelines for the representation of their groups in advertising.
- Develop guidelines for judging truth claims of advertising visuals and content.
- Consider eliminating photographs or drawings of anything but products in advertising.

References:

- Auletta, Ken. 1997, November 17. Demolition Man. *The New Yorker* 73, 40-45.
- Bagdikian, Ben. 1987. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bagdikian, Ben. 1962, April 16. Why Dailies Die. *The New Republic* 146, 16, 17-23.
- Baldasty, Gerald J. 1992. *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Craig, Robert. 1991. Designing Ethnicity: The Ideology of Images. *Design Issues* 7, 2, 34-42.
- Craig, Robert. 1992. Advertising as Visual Communication. *Communication*. 13, 165-179.
- Craig, Robert, Philip Kretsedemus and Bruce Gryniewski. 1997. Picturing African-Americans: Readers Reading Magazine Advertisements. *Visual Sociology* 12, 1, 28-58.
- Craig, Robert. 1999. Fact, Public Opinion, and Persuasion: The Rise of the Visual in Journalism and Advertising. In B. Brennen and H. Hardt (eds.) *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography Journalism History*, 36-59. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Craig, Robert and Lawrence C. Soley. 2002. Populism and Deception in Astroturf Advertising. ICA Conference, July, Seoul.
- Craig, Robert. 2004. Business, Advertising and the Social Control of News. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28, 3.
- Curran, James. 1977. Capitalism and Control of the Press, 1800-1975. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Wollacott (eds.), *Mass Communication and Society*, 195-230. London: Edward Arnold.
- Dates, Jannette L. and William Barlow. 1990. *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*. Howard University Press.
- Diamond, Edwin. 1996. Thanks Steve, We Needed That. *Columbia Journalism Review* 34, 30-32.
- Esernio-Jenssen, Debra, Andrea Donatelli-Guaganti and Howard Mofenson. 1996. Severe Lead Poisoning from an Imported Clothing Accessory: 'Watch' Out for Lead. *Journal of Toxicology*, 34, 329-332.
- Hayward, Brad. 1995, July 23. Hiding in the Grass Roots. *San Francisco Examiner*, B1.
- Kelder, Graham and Patricia Davidson. 2004. The Multistate Master Settlement Agreement and the Future of State and Local Tobacco Control. Available at: http://www.tobacco.neu.edu/tobacco_control/resources/msa/index.html.
- Knecht, G. Bruce. 1997, April 30. Magazine Advertisers Demand Prior Notice of Offensive Articles. *Wall Street Journal*, A1, A6.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 1995, March 26. When a Grass-Roots Drive Actually Isn't. *The New York Times*, 1.
- Lemons, Katherine. 2000. Bush Bought by Phony Grassroots Groups. AlterNet. Available at: <http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=9598>.
- Malmgren, Kurt L. 1992, December 3. KLM Remarks for the 12/10 Executive Meeting. American Tobacco Company documents collection from the Minnesota lawsuit (document ID 60207992). Available at: http://www.tobacco.neu.edu/tobacco_control/resources/msa/index.html.
- McChesney, Robert. 1999. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press.
- Moyers, Bill. 1989. Illusions of News. In a PBS video series: The Public Mind: Image and Reality in America.
- Moyers, Bill. 2004. The Road to Clean Elections. Available at: <http://www.publiccampaign.org/publications/trtce/index.htm>.
- Marshall, Joshua M. 2000. Mr. Gates Goes To Washington. *American Prospect* 11, 16. Available at: <http://www.prospect.org/page.www?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4261>.
- Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber. 1998. Keeping America Safe from Democracy. *PR Watch Archives*, 5, 3. Available at: <http://www.prwatch.org/prwissues/1998Q3/astroturf.html>.
- Risser, James. 2000. Lessons from L.A.: The Wall is Heading Back. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 26-29.
- Salt of the Earth. 2003. Public Service Announcement: Watch out for Advertising. *Claretian Publications*. Available at: <http://salt.claretianpubs.org/stats/2003/12/sh0312.html>.
- Sanchez, Samantha. 1996. How the West Is Won Astroturf Lobbying and the "Wise Use" Movement. *American Prospect* 7, 25. Available at: <http://www.prospect.org/page.www?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4954>.
- Soley, Lawrence C., Robert Craig and Samir Cherif. 1988. Promotional Expenditures in Congressional Elections: Turnout, Political Action Committees, and Asymmetry Effects. *Journal of Advertising* 17, 3, 36-34.
- Soley, Lawrence and Robert L. Craig. 1992. Advertising Pressures on News: A Survey. *Journal of Advertising* 21, 4, 1-10.
- Soley Lawrence. 1997. The Power of the Press Has a Price. *Extra*. Available at: <http://www.fair.org/extra/9707/ad-survey.html>.
- Steinem, Gloria. 1990. Sex, Lies & Advertising. *Ms.*, 18-28.
- Underwood, Doug. 1993. *When MBA's Rule the Newsroom. How the Marketers and Managers are Reshaping Today's Media*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Williamson, Judith. 1978. *Decoding Advertisements*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Williams, Raymond. 1960. The Magic System. *New Left Review* 4, 27-32.