

Is Advertising Detrimental to the Health of Humans?

By Brett Anderson

The answer to this question, like the answer to most complex questions, is yes and no. Firstly, it must be admitted that businesses and governments have for a long time been very attentive students of human nature, eliciting the hidden springs and levers that drive us to action. Much of advertising exploits glitches in the mechanisms that relate our desires to behavior, causing us to buy things that don't fulfill the desires they were expected to fulfill. The beer commercial with attractive actors is the most salient example (even though drinking beer is somewhat related to having sex). Also, when a service or product causes or leads to detrimental effects, the advertising rarely gives customers full information on the outcomes of consumption.

At the level of the individual, the best thing we can do is educate ourselves about what advertisers are doing and how to blunt their force. As the philosopher John Dewey continually said, either we must discover and disseminate knowledge about ourselves, or non-personal forces and groups with narrow interests will run the show undetected behind the scenes. Part of being free means knowing how you are prone to error.

I

But advertising as such, like science, or religion, is not good or evil in and of itself. In its best form it is communication about how to effectively satisfy our needs and aspirations. At worst, it preys on consumer's weaknesses for the benefit of others and causing consumer harm. Witness the gambling industry.

So, should we try to eliminate advertising? If we do, how will I know about the great new Italian place a couple miles away? Or the newest hybrid? Or a great new novel? Probably, forms of advertising are the only way to communicate this information. We must take the beneficial with the harmful and educate people in mental judo so advertising doesn't jump them. The alternative of a society without advertising is worse. A society where there are no known options, whether TV's, religions, or lifestyles, might as have no options.

Any free society needs communication, a web of information sharing. But more than that, we need quality communication that enhances our lives, activates our abilities, and makes us more aware of the connections in and amongst our community. We need ways that companies and individuals that are productive can make their products and services known. There is no essential difference between advertising cars and disseminating ideas about the good, the true, and the beautiful.

My purpose is not to say that everything goes; that there are no ethical distinctions regarding advertising and the products and services sold. My point is that some forms of communication that fall under the heading of advertising are necessary. Advertising is too hooked into our existence to banish completely. For if we did somehow get rid of advertising we are left with a problem: how do we communicate our own productive efforts and activities and find

others whose productive efforts we in turn value? Abolishing advertising leaves us with the unfulfilled task of creating forms of communication that are open, free and beneficial. Instead of getting rid of advertising, I suggest we look for new ways of communicating, while enacting smart realistic public policy i.e. limits on advertising when necessary. Rules and freedom require each other.

II

From our armchairs we cannot always see the effects of forms and contents of communication. In our relatively open society we allow a lot to go on that most people think is harmful. We do this for a variety of reasons; some think there is a set of naturally occurring rights that governments cannot violate, some think the truth and social progress is better served overall if there are lots of opinions and lifestyles out there, even if some are harmful. Some see free exchange of information, including advertising, as a check on the power of governments and other agents on our freedom. So, despite our reluctance to repress certain forms and content of communication, I believe it is legitimate to discourage certain forms of communication both in our private lives, and through smart public policy. One cannot yell "fire" in a crowded movie theatre; you cannot incite people to violence. These are legitimate restrictions on communication.

I think it is fruitful to think of these sorts of restrictions as protecting ourselves from the limitations and finiteness of humans. It is too risky not to head for the exits when someone yells fire. Reasonable debate and scrutiny are out of the question; the cost is simply too high and information too limited. As a practical application we may wish to require by law the simplification of language on credit cards so that people have a better idea what they are getting into. Of course, we do not want to hide people from reality with a paternalistic state. But there is no *a priori* line to be drawn; the line should be drawn only after a close examination of the question at hand.

For instance, the full potential of the internet to affect communication has yet to be tapped. Whether, over all, the internet will be better or worse for humans has yet to be determined I think. One thing to notice during this sea change is that, at least in the West, there have been no laws abolishing any types of advertising. But at the same time, policies at the "backend" of the internet (distribution of addresses, creation of and access to infrastructure, etc.) affect internet content and the behavior of users. Wherever possible, our public policy should attempt to alter content and behavior through altering incentives, rather than top down laws forbidding particular forms of advertising. But all this requires democratic decision making that is open, attentive to details and inclusive. These goals are only partially realized at present.

III

We should encourage and seek out ways, both in our private lives, and through public policy where we can encourage and discourage certain practices and behaviors. This could take the form of reasonable rules for advertisers, no beer and cigarette ads on kids TV shows, and educating citizens, especially young

citizens, about defending themselves against advertising. As individuals, we should not patronize businesses that utilize manipulative tactics.

In our private lives, I think we can participate in forms of communication in our daily lives that are not associated with advertising. This may be as simple as reading a book or participating in a support group, or getting together with friends and giving more thought to our communication. Switching our modes of communication from the TV to real people will, I argue, transform the way we communicate and the contents of our thoughts. The stunted, black and white communication style of the sound byte or thirty second TV commercial will be replaced by contextual understanding, careful listening and wise actions. This is our best defense against tyranny, whether by governments or corporations. Let them listen in. They will find no easy mark and some of those marketeers and spies will join us. All solutions to problems with advertising (and propaganda) hinge on average people getting off the couch and rearranging their lives to some extent. One good thing is that getting off the couch improves the lives of the individuals who do so, even if no wider change occurs. The trouble is that this sort of positive change is nebulous, difficult and often competes poorly with video games, explosions and beer.