Reviews


This book is a strong addition to the growing group of texts offering a critical perspective on advertising. Rutherford's book fills some critical gaps in the literature, as a study of the varied spectrum of public-service, corporate, and political advertising. Although the latter has received a fair bit of academic attention over the years, the first two have not. The different faces of "civic advocacy" (corporate-image campaigns; religious, social, and issue messages; government, non-profit, and charitable organizations) determine both "public goods" (clean air, healthy bodies) and social risks (drug abuse, pollution, cancer). While this promotion might initially seem laudable, Rutherford argues the determination of these goods and risks are carefully calculated to extend and reinforce the interests of the elite. The "gathering of problems, products and solutions" (p. xvi) is neither exhaustive nor arbitrary, and functions strategically in the exercise of control by the powerful.

Rutherford's title is descriptive; Endless Propaganda is really more about propaganda than about advertising. Little time is spent deconstructing ads for their multilayered meanings or investigating the semiotic potency of particular camera work. These elements do receive some mention where pertinent, but they are secondary to his central focus on the construction of a strategic moral compass by vested interests. As the most common form of propaganda, civic advocacy functions as a monologue, never a dialogue. For Rutherford, this is the corrupted form of Habermas' ideal public sphere, a concept he continuously revisits in the book. Civic advocacy forestalls the possibility for rational-critical debate and the supervision of the exercise of domination, merely "presenting and representing authority to supine groups of clients and consumers" (p. 20). This kind of advertising becomes a persuasive way to compel assent, preclude dissent, frame issues, bestow honour and dishonour, and delimit social concerns. This transformation of the public-sphere ideal works also to dispel the myth of television as an open forum—networks and broadcasters in the United States and Canada have consistently refused to air counter-ads or campaigns that appear to contradict their media-friendly, consumerist environment (such as the ongoing Adbusters campaign to air their "subvertisements").

Rutherford offers three compelling ways of characterizing civic advocacy as an instrument of hegemony. First, these ads tend to be totalizing, controlling texts, which create and erase meanings. Second, they interpellate viewers into political subjects through naturalizing strategies like direct address and personalized language. Finally, they are privatizing, turning public goods into tools of government, non-profit, and corporate interest. This propaganda defines and constructs its viewers according to the needs of the producers. The National Crime Prevention Council in the United States (makers of the McGruff advertising campaigns in the 1980s) hailed (and so called into being) "the citizenry as subjects who required guidance" (p. 262). The corporate interests behind "Keep America Beautiful" constructed individuals (and not industry) as responsible for controlling pollution.

Preceding each of the five sections is a short chapter on the relevant writings of various theorists. A few pages on Habermas' idea of the public sphere precede a chapter on the imperialism of the market; there are short chapters on Gramsci, Foucault, theories of "risk," Ricoeur and Baudrillard "and company." These offer succinct summaries of concepts related to Rutherford's discussions and arguments and presume no familiarity with the material. With barely more than two pages devoted to an explanation of Foucault's writings on power, for example, there is inevitable simplification, but these sections serve their purpose. The writing is clear and accessible, and makes this book particularly appealing to teachers of undergraduate courses.

The first two sections outline the history and evolution of civic advocacy, effectively marking the extension of marketing into all spheres of human interaction. Rutherford's
focus is primarily on the United States, with interesting asides about Canada. He traces the establishment of the Ad Council and its subsequent decades-long stranglehold on “social marketing.” There is discussion of the rise of paid television advertising and the legal and legislative issues surrounding it. He offers compelling ideological readings of early PSAs, whose “progressive crusades” are shot through with disturbing ambiguity. The section on the first war on drugs (1969-73) is interesting as a comparison with those that followed for its pointed attempts to taint and discredit political threats posed by the counterculture.

The third and fourth sections offer some quite engaging chapters on social-marketing discourses of health, charity, civic duty, shock-vertising, technological utopias, and environmental efforts. The chapter on health presents some fascinating institutional attempts to control the body as a site of pleasure and pain. The creation of an entire realm of specialists in this domain requires continuous surveillance of the public body, with a strong “blame the victim” theme excusing and even inviting the unwelcome interventions of strangers into our personal habits. (Consider the public smoker or the non-breastfeeding new mother.) The section on Oliviero Toscani’s bricolage campaigns for Benetton argues a well-documented, if not particularly novel, case for brand differentiation through attitude or pose. The chapters called “Technopia and Other Corporate Dreams” and “Green Nightmares” are twinned, preceded appropriately by a short section on theories of utopia and dystopia. The section on marketing of technology has some intriguing insights into the advertising of new technologies, a subject that requires more academic attention.

Finally, there is a brief section on American political advertising, with an emphasis on the 1996 election. To some small degree, this chapter feels tacked on to the rest, perhaps because so much has been written on this form of political communication as a separate entity. Nevertheless, it is clear how it fits in with the overall notion of propaganda, and Rutherford makes a convincing argument about how candidates market themselves as public goods (and, increasingly, market their opponents as social risks). As such, it defends its inclusion in the book. Political campaign ads create and sell ideologically manufactured “products” in much the same way as corporate interests sell “concerned” or “green” images.

There are a couple of relatively minor gaps. The first is an almost complete lack of discussion of audience analysis. In fact, the viewer is almost completely absent in this volume. It’s hard to make sense of the construction of public goods without at least considering the processes of reception. Teen cigarette smokers deliberately collect all the graphic warnings on their cigarette packages in defiance of the authority they depict. Young males in the U.K. display a particular fondness for “a great, violent crack-up in drink and drive advertising” (p. 103). Clearly, the official expression of the wishes of the powerful does not always filter down as intended (or expected). The textual and discursive analysis handled so well in this book needs to be balanced by some acknowledgment of the variety of possible readings and meanings.

The second concern is an occasional contradiction of Rutherford’s central thesis; if civic advocacy functions on the whole to express the interests of the powerful, what is one to make of successful non-profit campaigns that appear to take on the corporate elite? For example, the environmental lobby would seem to threaten the bottom lines of many in the private sector, despite efforts to contain or re-characterize the issues. The anti-smoking crusaders certainly have the weight of the medical and insurance industries behind them, but they are also taking on so-called Big Tobacco. Few of these issues are quite so straightforward as Rutherford might argue, nor is it entirely believable that expressions of the less powerful are always “lost in the profusion of other messages that bombarded the population daily” (p. 173). The Media Education Foundation’s “culture jamming” campaigns are perhaps too quickly dismissed. In another instance, the Chief Iron Eyes Cody ad, part of the Keep America Beautiful (KAB) campaign in the United States in the 1970s (sponsored by
corporate interests), is alluded to as a particularly memorable PSA. But if KAB was a “corporate fund to displace the blame for pollution from business to the consumer” (p. 83), how are we to make sense of the Native chief canoeing past a refining plant? The exercise of power is rarely neat, and instances of contradiction need to be investigated as more than exceptions that prove the rule.

It needs to be said that Rutherford has an impressively intimate knowledge of his topic. Certainly, it is not the first time he has written about this field (Rutherford, 1994). Advertisements, unlike so many other media products, tend to be fleeting. They are rarely preserved or archived in publicly available spaces, making research a daunting task. Yet his examples are numerous, illustrative, and compelling, often supplemented by images from print or video. He borrows equally from American, Canadian, British, and European sources, with ads from Australia, Scandinavia, and Asia as well. Where necessary, the descriptions of the ads are supplemented with contextual information. Each ad is carefully referenced, and there is a helpful list of advertising sources provided at the end for interested readers.

*Endless Propaganda* is about much more than advertising (arguably the central focus of the book). It is about the colonization of the public sphere by a marketing ethic, about the determination of public goods and risks according to a code that gives priority to the reinforcement of existing power structures. Finally, it is about the way in which this fundamentally political process has become naturalized through the same kinds of pervasive and seductive images used to sell us soap and soft drinks. *Endless Propaganda* fills an important gap in the literature and will be appreciated by both teachers and students of a wide variety of courses, from advertising to mass communication.

**Reference**

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