Advertising, Alcohol & Maclean's

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Journalists should take a few moments to look at advertising. A few minutes thinking about it would cast a different, and possibly unfavorable, light on the role of media in society.

For some reason, media personnel don't like to discuss advertising. During a four-year journalism course at the University of Western Ontario I heard almost no discussion of the subject. It was as if advertising didn't exist. When it was discussed most instructors were determined to keep advertising and editorial material entirely separated as though one did not influence the other.

Such a view of media is false. Editorial and advertising content go hand-in-hand; they share the same magazines, newspapers and airwaves. Discussion of one is not complete without discussion of the other.

Advertising is big business. In the end, it pays the journalist's salary, puts the car in his driveway and pays his press club membership. In 1972, advertisers spent nearly $111 for every man, woman and child in the United States. By 1985 this is expected to increase to $237 - a lot of money to persuade people to buy goods and services. There's no reason to believe the figures are much different for Canada.

Let's bring the finances of advertising a little closer to home. The June 1975 edition of Maclean's contained 108 pages including the covers. Nearly 57
pages, or 52 percent of the magazine, were taken up with ads. Ads for beer, wine and liquor accounted for over 20 percent of the magazine's content.

Assuming all the ads appeared in national editions and assuming no discounts for quantity advertising, the space the ads occupied had a value of $617,135. Advertising space for alcoholic beverages was valued at $257,510, or nearly 42 percent of Maclean's advertising revenue. (These figures were computed from information in the June 1975 edition of Canadian Advertising Rates & Data.)

Let's look at alcoholic beverage advertising more closely. It's Maclean's largest single source of advertising money and without it the magazine would likely fold if replacements couldn't be found.

Like all businesses, the alcohol industry places ads to sell their products. If the ads don't sell, it's wasted money.

H. David Archibald, executive director of the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario, told people attending an advanced course on addiction:

"As for the effects of advertising, we find there is no reason to believe that alcoholic beverages differ in any way from any other consumer goods. Volume and patterns of alcohol sales are affected by advertising just as are sales of television sets or cars. There seems to be no question, judging in part from the industry's own use of the media, that advertising — particularly by television — exerts a powerful influence over drinking styles and particularly over the developing habits of young people."

It's been shown over and over again that as per capita consumption of alcohol increases, the proportion
of people suffering from alcoholism also increases. Since it must be assumed alcohol ads increase consumption, the media which carry these ads must bear some responsibility for the increasing number of problems related to alcohol.

Alcoholism is an expensive problem.

"In terms of absolute costs based on 1971 figures, the Ontario taxpayer paid $89 million through the Ontario Hospital Insurance Plan for illness related to alcoholism; he paid almost $17 million through the mental hospital system; almost $9 million through the Family Benefits Act, and over $11 million through Children's Aid Societies for activities attributable to alcoholism," said Mr. Archibald.

"Of the more than $1 billion spent by the province through these various agencies plus the Addiction Research Foundation, the taxpayer paid $134 million in one year for illness and disruption attributed directly to alcoholism - and I must emphasize that this figure does not include physicians' fees, municipal welfare payments, the costs to business and industry through loss of productivity and manpower (and we know from our research in industry that these costs are enormous). Moreover, the $134 million does not reflect the fact that alcohol is involved in over 50 percent of deaths due to traffic accidents in Canada."

By carrying beer, wine and liquor ads Maclean's plays a role in fostering increased alcohol consumption and the resulting social problems. It's a role the magazine cannot easily give up because over 40 percent of its advertising revenue comes from the alcohol industry and Maclean's is only one example of many magazines in this situation.

Because the media are only one of many factors influencing a person's behavior we cannot blame them en-
tirely for increased alcoholism. But we must also not under-estimate their power.

Media with advertising are present for a large part of most people's waking lives. On the average in 1972, American households had TV on for nearly six hours daily, radio for three hours daily and they purchased 55 newspaper pages daily. They also contacted advertising through billboards, posters, magazines and the mail.

There is little doubt advertising influences behavior. Now we must ask: How does it affect behavior? What behaviors are affected? What is the cost of this changed behavior in human and dollar terms? Who is responsible? And, what role do the media as the largest distributors of advertising play in the whole system?