

ADVERTISING AS A PLATFORM FOR CONSUMER-CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the potential of the advertising system as a citizenship participatory setting. Looking at advertising through the alternative lens of citizenship instead of the traditional consumption insight, it focus on modalities, levels and profiles of participatory interactions between advertising and consumers. Critical reflexion on previous research leads to argue that both the paradigm shift to a more interactive, multimodal communication flow and the emerging of consumer-citizen self awareness, have been challenging advertising to open to consumer-citizen' participation, with benefits for all parts involved, that ultimately results in the sustainability of the advertising system itself.

KEYWORDS

Advertising; participation, consumer-citizen; subvertising; Volkswagen Dieselgate

LA PUBLICIDAD COMO PLATAFORMA PARA LA PARTICIPACIÓN DEL CONSUMIDOR-CIUDADANO Y PARA LA CIUDADANIA

RESUMEN

Este artículo discute el potencial del sistema de publicidad como una herramienta de participación de la ciudadanía. Observando a la publicidad a través de la lente alternativa de la ciudadanía en lugar de la visión tradicional del consumo, se centra en las modalidades, los niveles y los perfiles de las interacciones participativas entre la publicidad y los consumidores. La reflexión crítica sobre investigaciones previas lleva a argumentar que tanto el cambio de paradigma a un flujo de comunicación multimodal más interactivo como el surgimiento de la autoconciencia del ciudadano consumidor han desafiado a la publicidad a abrirse a la participación del consumidor-ciudadano, con beneficios para todas las partes involucradas, que finalmente resulta en la sostenibilidad del sistema de publicidad en sí.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Publicidad; participación; consumidor-ciudadano; subvertir; Volkswagen Dieselgate

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Advertising has been traditionally haunted by critical voices and mistrust, enhanced and supported for its pervasive omnipresence and a broadly recognized seductive and persuasive power.

Manipulative, pushing us out of our discerning abilities – “advertising is the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it – Stephen Leacock” (Twitchell, 1997, p. 12) – due to the numbing effect of entertaining pleasurable commercials and emotional entanglement driven by desire dynamics, advertising is frequently portrayed as the mean bad wolf of little red hood consumers, strolling unaware of dangers in the consumption forest. Well, it is a good bedtime story. Nevertheless there is another possible narrative to make sense of the capitalist-consumer paradigm: the consumer-citizen approach.

ADVERTISING INFLUENCE POWER AND ADVERTISING CRITICISM

In a free adaptation of what Carlsberg has been telling for years¹, advertising might be considered “probably” the most influential institution in the world. Although the “probably” is an intelligent creative move to escape regulation that forbids advertisers to lie (yes, another founding myth of advertising as commonly perceived), in a scientific article evidence is crucial.

Frequently the target of consumption and capitalism criticism, for being a metaphor of both, advertising function is to help to connect product and consumer and, by doing it effectively, constitutes a powerful economy driver (Evans, 2008). The advertising industry generates income, jobs and adds value to the system. The Zenith/IMF report (March 2018) predicts that global ad expenditure by the end of 2018 will reach 579 billion US dollars,

¹ Carlsberg slogan “Probably the best beer in the world” was created in 1973 and used until 2011, when the Danish beer marketers decided to drop it in the scope of an expansion to Russian and Asian markets, where the word “probably” was allegedly perceived as weak. But the “probably” approach was too imbedded in popular culture and the rebrand effort had to be called off, because “consumer language is critical, but it’s even more critical that you listen to your customers” (Howard, 3 may 2017).

representing a growth of 4,6% in one year. Furthermore, the forecast indicates that the global ad spend will increase 77 billion US dollars, driven mainly by the United States (26%) and China (22%) and a set of the so-called rising markets that will contribute with 57% of that extra ad expenditure. Although specialists “expect advertising expenditure to grow more slowly than the global economy as a whole out to 2020” (Zenith, 2018), numbers seem to indicate a dynamic industry.

But the influence of advertising and its importance in contemporary society cannot be fully understood only by looking at economic data. As many authors observe (Baudrillard, 1981/1995, 1972/1981; Jhally, 2000, 2014; Kellner, 2003; Sinclair, 2012; Turow & MacAllister, 2009; Twitchell, 1997), advertising is part of the western capitalist contemporary culture, taking part in every single aspect of people’s daily lives, providing information, entertainment, attitudinal guidelines, behavioural codes, framing values, choices, beliefs and even decision-making and problem solving processes in “an ideological notion that all problems can be resolved within the existing society by following conventional behaviour and norms. Advertising often deploys a similar model, showing a problem and that the product advertised provides the solution” (Kellner, 2003, p. 98). Working as a self-referential system it accommodates all needs and solutions, leaving no room for discussion or the motivation to seek alternatives. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy (Boorstin & Rushkoff, 1962/2012) that frequently becomes the merchandise itself and sets cultural structures. As Twitchell (1997) observes,

where the social cost of advertising is felt, however, is not in achieving the economies of scale but in the cultural ramifications of delivering the pitch. In giving value to objects, advertising gives value to our lives. With Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs) especially, we consume more the advertising than we do the goods. (...) Although advertising cannot create desire, it can channel it (...) For what is carried in and with advertising is what we know, what we share, what we believe in. It is who we are. It is us. (p. 4)

Being highly ideological, advertising must be observed beyond the circle of economy, following Baudrillard’ proposal as “the prestigious image of abundance” (1981/1995, p. 175). Or, as Schudson puts it, “advertising is capitalism’s way of saying ‘I love you’ to itself” (2009, p. 251) and, as Jhally (1995) refers, “we must not allow its enormous presence in a variety of domains to obfuscate what it really is” (Jhally, 1995, p. 13).

Politically speaking, advertising may be considered a form of social intervention that uses self-promotion and self-renewing strategies in order to maintain the balance of power – “all aspects of advertising are political” (Turow & McAllister, 2009, p. 7) – and to constitute itself as “an emerging fourth power that determines speech, sensitivities, images, appearances and essences of all media and social processes and interactions” (Marshall, 2003, p. 163).

Criticism to advertising is “probably” matching its influence. Accused of being manipulative, intrusive, pervasive and of constructing stereotypes (but also of changing them) amongst a diverse set of arguments, advertising is permanently under scrutiny of public opinion and institutions, namely by strict regulation, including self-regulatory bodies, best practices directives, etc.

RE-INVENTING THE FLOW: A PARADOXICAL CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

The media paradigm shift induced by the internet, the new media and the new forms of media consumption as well, supported by consumer attitudes, behaviour and expectation’ changes, has been widening the borders of advertising territory out of the commercial and into the social and the citizenship realm (Balonas, 2011). Frequently this means also that advertising ventures out of the private, corporate business into the public interest sphere, although strategically with a private interest in mind. Behaviour change, community bond building, environmental and social change and development causes, health programs, just to mention a few use advertising know how and language to be effective.

For the purpose of this paper we take into consideration this broader notion of advertising.

Advertising communication flows changed dramatically in the last years: from top down unidirectional to horizontal, multi-level, hyper-segmented, personalized, interactive, networked, community communication. This posed some challenges to the advertising industry, namely the loss of control over the final message and the growing empowerment of the targeted publics to avoid unwanted ads. To breakthrough such changes, advertising was challenged to cope with consumer-citizen interaction (Beelen, 2006) resulting in an harder effort to produce more relevant messages and interesting approaches (Buskirk, 2010), matching insights to consumers expectations, involving and engaging them, not only into the co-creation of advertising messages (Melo, 2014; Melo & Balonas, 2013), but also

influencing politics and corporate social responsibility settings, as clients became more demanding and consumers less faithful, resulting in better advertising: more creativity, better budget management and more accountability, more professionalism.

Consumer empowerment emerges as a new utopia discourse: each consumer is also a content producer, an editor, an opinion maker, a trendsetter; by being empowered, consumers become full right citizens of the world.

Nevertheless whilst opening space to consumer' inputs into the advertising circle, the system is also capturing them as functional, operative tools, keeping levels of engagement and attention. Having the power to choose, to engage, to determine part of the symbolic territory of advertising, they are concurrently fuelling and strengthening the system, now more adapted, more resilient, in the face of a radical change in environmental conditions (Elliot & Ritson, 1997). In short, a paradoxical empowerment of the consumer is being established.

MAPPING PARTICIPATION IN ADVERTISING

Seminal research to map consumer-citizen participation modalities (Melo, 2013), based in a mix method of interpretative hermeneutics, observation, interviews and multiple case studies, covering different stakeholders (corporations, agencies, professional associations and regulators) indicated that the advertising system has been challenged to negotiate power and territories through participation. Notwithstanding study limitations related with the type and size of the research, three dimensions of participation translated into negotiated consumer power were categorized:

a) the power to influence: by providing data and insights to the advertising industry, consumers are (even if unaware and/or unwilling) shaping advertising and media products, namely as audiences (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins, 2012), determining formats, contents and even lifetime duration, ensuring their success or deterring their failure. Probably never like in the new media ecology this was so evident, as search engine preferences, profile mining and constant monitoring of consumer' digital activities provide valuable (and profitable) data to the industry. This information wealth is particularly interesting when advertising strategists seek creative and relevant insights, matching (and shaping) consumer's needs and expectations, thus contributing to the overall efficiency of campaigns;

b) the power to decide: the advent of "zapping" gave a new meaning to the idea of remote control. And works as an interesting metaphor

to this participatory dimension. Sitting comfortable in his sofa, consumers jumped erratically from one program to another and skipped commercial breaks. Remote control 2.0 came with the possibility to record, fast forward or re-play, allowing advertising to be ignored with minor interference in the consumer experience, and the 3.0 version matches the “skip ad” possibility present in the digital experience. This apparently inconsequential move had relevant impact in the way advertising space was marketed, sold and valued by buyers, both advertising agencies and companies with products and services to promote. Soon media and advertising industries were breaking through this challenge adapting formats, including more product placement or new forms of sponsoring, producing specifically anti-skip ad commercials that grab the audiences through extremely well thought creativity that makes consumers not only want to see the full ads but even long for them. For example: Geico series of “Unskippable” ads that was awarded Ad Age’s Campaign of the year in 2016 (Diaz, 2016). It is important to note that the remote control metaphor applies also out of the media and advertising universe: consumers have the power to decide to buy or not to buy, and what to buy. Obviously there is no novelty in this, but advertising criticism seems to systematically ignore this fact.

c) the power to act: consumer activism is noticed in the advertising system mainly by denouncing bad advertising, being it deceitful, misleading, illegal or simply tasteless (Melo, 2014). This is the kind of participation that takes place within the regulatory framing, but there is more to it. Consumers have the power to demand a rightful conduct both to companies and to the advertising and marketing agencies that promote their products. And they do, even if not systematically or in an organized manner. Furthermore, consumers have the power to support or boycott products and brands, to consume or not consume, and by doing so, they participate indirectly in the advertising ecology, once again framing insights and positioning, that is, the very communicational essence of a brand, product or service. The most simple and sought for result for strategists – the word-of-mouth – relies entirely in the consumer will and behaviour, thus the continuous advertising industry effort to harness that power.

CONSUMER, THE ACCIDENTAL CITIZEN

Consumers’ participation in advertising is observed in multiple modes, levels and intensities, ranging from conscious to unaware or

manipulated participation, from almost professional inputs to rather amateur contributions. This implies different participative consumer profiles – frequency, activism or awareness wise. Some are professional complainants, others reach such a degree of expertise and fandom on a certain field, brand or product that are hired by companies to defend corporate values. Others are simply consumers that randomly participate in an advertising contest or endorse a brand to their pairs.

Contemporary trends on consumerism (Trendwatching, 2017) feature a greater awareness of consumers towards the consequences of their own behaviour and expectations, whether over fashion choices, food origin, beauty standards, transport impact or cosmetics pre-testing, related to sustainability of the environment and society as a whole. Ethical consumption deals also with advertising consumption. Consumers can make a difference by being more aware and empowered to make their voices heard, whether to destroy products, services or brands reputations or to co-create ads, content and insights or to set regulatory standards and best practices in advertising.

Notwithstanding the fact that the impact of these actions is difficult if not impossible to measure, it is worth noting that the most visible and “probably” most spectacular form of consumer participation is *subvertising*. By combining guerrilla and ambush approaches it disrupts the advertising system from within, using its own codes and even physical spaces (Melo, 2011, 2018), it occupies advertising symbolic territory with signalling alert flags into the everyday of consumers, drawing attention to ethical and political issues and inserting them in media agenda, thus a definite form of political activism.

Such participatory phenomena coincide with Scullion’s view on the emergence of the accidental citizen (Scullion, 2010), transforming the consumer into a citizen by its political action and impact through consumption practices (media consumption included), an hybrid identity of consumer-citizen, a mash up of two parallel universes: consumption and citizenship. This is supported by Bakardjeva’s concept of “subactivism” (Bakardjeva, 2003, 2009), a low profile type of intervention, frequently individual and independent embedded in the everyday.

Intermittently some initiatives pop up through the media agenda and evolve into more tangible and consequent measures.

The “Diesel Gate” case, as it became known, is probably the best contemporary example of the consumer-citizen participation in and through advertising.

In 2015, the number one car seller in the world, Volkswagen – a popular and beloved brand, matching the original meaning of the name² –, was exposed in a scandal on gas emissions not being properly measured – and advertised – due to integrated software that manipulated results on gas emission tests. Such exposure affected 11 million cars worldwide at the time, according to Volkswagen sources (Topham, Clarke, Levett, Scruton & Fidler, 2015) – and many more consumers – and later spread to other car brands. The scandal produced a toll: unprecedented measures like a massive buy back policy or car modification; a tsunami of lawsuits and compensation processes (Davies, 2017); new European laws and more strict mechanisms to test car gas emissions and a shift towards less polluting or electric cars, both in the industry, in politics and in city management (Brand, 2016; Tietge & Díaz, 2017), ethical responsibility demanding cases (Fracarolli Nunes & Lee Park, 2016), as well as further investigative journalism (Parloff, 2018) and even calls to consumer action: “if governments will not punish VW’s shocking behaviour, consumers must” (If governments will not punish VW’s shocking behaviour, consumers must, 2018).

Interestingly, it was the International Council on Clean Transportation, “an independent non profit organization founded to provide first-rate, unbiased research and technical and scientific analysis to environmental regulators”³ that discovered and produced evidence on the emission discrepancies. Not regulators, not governmental institutions, not gatekeeping journalism, but “independent testing, and amazingly, testing that sought to prove VW’s diesels were really clean” (George, 2015). A set of random events allegedly resulted in a storm with ripples on the entire automotive industry and mainly on the consumer’s trust in it, as well as in its advertising. Volkswagen communication had to be adapted: a swift change of the logo – the motto “Das Auto” was covered by a much more flat statement: “Volkswagen” and Volkswagen ads stating that regaining consumers’ trust was the company’s priority (Majláth, 2016).

Further ripples made their way through the media, namely a number of creative and political subversions of the original message (Figures 1-5). As the Volkswagen *greenwashing* efforts were exposed to give place to the Dieselgate event, it became an emblematic case (Siano, Vollero, Conte & Amabile, 2017) inspiring the setting of a kind of popular culture reference (Eichinger & Gudacker, 2016; Jenkins, 2006) to conquer further ground for resistance (Figures 4 and 5).

² “Volkswagen” can be translated as “the people’s car”.

³ Retrieved from www.theicct.org



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4: The original VW and slogan “Das Auto” was subverted to express the Dieselgate scandal

Source: Eichinger and Gudacker, 2016, pp. 1, 51, 54, 56



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Figure 5: Greenpeace action in VW premises

Source: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/334955291015425443/?lp=true>



Figure 6: Brandalism project COP21, “The other COP 21”, exposes VW Dieselgate Scandal in the streets of Paris (December 2015)
Source: Brandalism: posters sarcásticos invadem ruas de Paris, 2015



Figure 7: A PETA - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “the largest animal rights organization in the world” billboard, uses the Dieselgate case to draw attention to their cause
Source: Majláth, 2016, p. 122

Both the examples of Brandalism’ COP 21 action (Figure 6) and PETA’s billboard (Figure 7) constitute cases of “opportunity” advertising, a specific indirect type of consumer-citizen participation. These ads strategically use a particular context to disseminate messages with a greater impact due to their meaning added value, thus the opportunity to communicate. Furthermore, by harnessing current events or trends, they reframe or redirect institutional and media discourses and audience’s attention, eventually having an impact in the media and in the political agenda. 2017 Super Bowl was a fruitful ground for these opportunity ads. A relevant number had explicit or subtle references to the United States political moment, subsequent to Donald Trump’s election, controversial measures and consequent waves

of protest. Dealing with emigrants, the Mexico border wall, discrimination, security, women's rights or climate change issues these ads engaged in a participatory practice into the political realm, even if some of this participation was unintended, resulting from contextual changes. In these cases, advertising becomes political and participatory accidentally. Yet, its accidental impact is to be taken into account (Melo, 2017).

FINAL NOTES

As a wrap up to this reflexion it's worth to mention a number of argumentative reasoning points.

First, nevertheless the ongoing academic debate over the concept of participation is providing a number of interesting perspectives (Atlee, 2017; Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013; Kelty & Erickson, 2018; Wimmer et al., 2017) we would frame consumer-citizen participation in advertising in a broad perspective. Forms of interaction with advertising such as co-creation, *prosumer* actions, *subvertising* initiatives or complaints within the regulatory structure are forms of participating in and within the system. Other modes of interaction might be less clear as participatory practices. Yet, simply being exposed and influenced by advertising and acting accordingly, buying one product or endorsing a brand, have an impact that cannot be ignored.

Secondly, the paradoxical empowerment of consumers by the advertising system, encapsulates some issues to be discussed, as the final word belongs still to corporations and to the institutional powers. As in many other fields of action, – “participation should remain an invitation – permanently on offer and embedded in balanced power relations – to those who want to have their voices heard” (Carpentier, 2011, p. 359) –, participation in advertising implies a constant struggle for power balance.

Thirdly, consumer-citizen's participation in advertising is not systematic or clearly visible. On the contrary, it tends to be more generally random and unnoticed. Yet, it should not be ignored, as “the accidental citizen can act as a catalyst for further political action, and as such, is an important concept with widespread consequences” (Scullion, 2010, p. 278). We might add that in our view it can emerge as a counter-power to corporative hegemony.

Finally, to conclude, the advertising ecology due to its structure, *modus operandi* and mainly due to its pervasiveness in the everyday, sets a number of opportunities for civic participation, even if embedded in consumerist practices. More civic education, including advertisers and

professionals from the advertising industry education on advertising ethics – notwithstanding the many anonymous pro bono campaigns and networks these professionals are engaged with (Balonas, 2011) –, consumer and media literacy and, not the least, raising awareness over the consumer-citizen identity and of the participatory possibilities of advertising is crucial to built a more sustainable advertising system and therefore a better, more inclusive, power balanced society.

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