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Currencies of Commercial Exchange

Advertising agencies and the promotional imperative

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Abstract. Drawing on interviews with advertising practitioners, this article explores the circulation of understandings of research in the advertising process. These understandings flow between advertising practitioners, their clients, and academics, and function to constitute important power-knowledge formations. Focusing on agencies’ imperative for self-promotion in a competitive, unstable market, I argue that attention to this circulation of knowledges is crucial for a fuller understanding of advertising as a commercial and social force. In the last section, I explore the interface between academia and the commercial realm and argue for a most subtle analysis of its inherent power-knowledge relations.

Key words academic investments ● advertising agencies ● advertising practitioners ● advertising research ● power-knowledge ● promotion

ADVERTISING HAS POTENT CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS and is inflected by meanings and forces ascribed to contemporary capitalism. Often conceived as a predicate to the expansion of consumer demand and hence capitalism’s ideological thrall, advertising occupies a central place in analyses of contemporary society. Many studies focus on advertising’s textual artefacts and analyse the sophistry they are thought to deploy as a weapon of persuasion. In this approach, advertising tends to be seen as a ‘cultural economy of signs’ (Goldman and Papson, 1998: 1) which creates ‘structures of meaning’ (Williamson, 2000: 12). Most commonly, advertising is understood as a
‘commodity–sign industry’ (Goldman and Papson, 1996: 7). But this industry produces more than advertisements or commodity signs: its practices generate a wide range of discourses that circulate in complex ways between multiple participants. Surprisingly few studies of advertising look at these practices or at the industry’s practitioners (see Leiss et al., 1990; Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996; Nixon, 2003; Schudson, 1993; Slater, 1989; Tunstall, 1964). Thus whilst practitioners have been cast as important ‘captains of consciousness’ (Ewen, 1976), relatively little attention has been directed at their everyday work practices, commercial imperatives or application of expertise. Within these few studies of advertising practices, very little analysis has focused on the role of research. Sociological or cultural studies’ accounts often centre on the management of consumers through marketing research and audience segmentation (according to social and psychological classifications, and media placement). Typically, accounts of market research in advertising practice stress its role in governing consumers, often claiming that it ‘forms a powerful site of consumer surveillance in the late 20th century’ (Leslie, 1999: 1443). By segmenting and ‘delivering’ groups of potential consumers to advertisers, audience measurement techniques are thought to be an important form of this governance (e.g. Ang, 1991). In this understanding, media viewers are scrutinized, described and formalized into calculable, predictable viewing demographics in a form of Foucaultian (1991) disciplinarity. In parallel, the deployment by advertising and marketing of ‘psy’ expertise – such as psychological understandings of individuals’ motivations – has also been cast as a form of governance of consumers (Miller and Rose, 1997). Often, audience or market research used by agencies is viewed as a key element of the industry’s power such that ‘the surveillance, categorization and interpretation of consumer data by advertising agencies represents a significant dynamic driving advertising’s ideological force’ (Hackley, 2002: 213).

This article broadens the focus of many accounts’ concern with the governance of consumers. It considers the relation of advertising research to the contingencies faced by agencies and their negotiations with their clients, and examines how understandings of advertising are set to work by diverse ‘stakeholders’ such as advertising practitioners, their clients, and academics. Framing this circulation of interests and understandings of advertising in terms of power–knowledge relations allows an appreciation of the interest–driven and protean nature of knowledge–claims flowing through the advertising industry. As Foucault (1990) has wryly noted, it is a blunt misreading of his work to suggest a symmetry in power–knowledge relations, such that power is knowledge, and knowledge is power. Rather than
casting power-knowledge as an isomorphic or identical formation, Foucault’s project was to analyse the shifting relations of power and knowledge. In this way, he examined the “political economy” of truth as a shifting, fractured terrain (Foucault, 1980: 131). I argue that the ‘truth’ of advertising, and research deployed by advertising practitioners, is defined both by the practitioners and by their clients in highly instrumental terms which are influenced by the asymmetrical power relationship between agencies and their clients, and between brand managers in client firms and their immediate superiors. What is ‘true’ about advertising and advertising research for these interested parties is defined in terms of its capacity to facilitate and legitimate the commercial circulation of images, capital, and promotional claims that constitutes the advertising industry. In effect, what counts as true in this arena is determined by the degree to which it is true to advertising’s commercial imperative. The use of research in advertising is only one part of this circulation of claims and counter-claims, but I have taken it as the focus of this article as it carries considerable significance and it has been somewhat neglected in the academic literature. Therefore, the following analysis centres on the circulation of understandings of advertising and advertising research as currencies in the exchange of various forms of power and knowledge. This article draws on interviews with practitioners at five major London-based agencies: Grey Worldwide, Ogilvy and Mather, Partners BDDH, Rainey Kelly Campbell Roalfe/Y&R, and one mid-sized agency which wished to remain anonymous.1 I supplement data from this small study with insights from the few interview-based and ethnographic analyses of advertising practice. At the agencies, I interviewed Creatives, Account Planners and Account Managers. Creatives are either art directors or copywriters who are responsible for generating ideas for a campaign and for producing the images and the copy (written text). Account Planners write briefs for the Creatives that outline the scope and aims of the campaign; they analyse and prepare long-term strategy, and liaise with research companies. Account Managers are responsible for project management and finance, and day-to-day contact with the client.

COMPETITION AND SELF-PROMOTION

Several studies have argued that the field of contemporary advertising is characterized by intense competition between agencies, considerable job insecurity for individual practitioners and a profoundly asymmetrical power relationship between agencies and their clients (Grabher, 2002; Lury and Warde, 1997; Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996; Nixon, 2003; Slater, 1989). The material from my interviews bears out these accounts of the industry and
supplements them with insights about the use of research data. The first (collective) challenge faced by agencies is to convince clients of the need to advertise at all, for it is well-known amongst clients that some products have achieved considerable success without the benefit of that form of promotion. Agencies must then persuade potential clients to select an agency rather than engage in their own ‘in-house’ advertising, and then individual agencies have to compete with many others to be selected and to secure a contract. It is thus a very unstable and competitive field from the point of view of agencies – they must coordinate their resources and channel their skills into understanding their clients’ commercial problems and second-guessing their corporate strategy. This is in itself a challenging task as clients ‘can make decisions that can be unexpected and appear capricious to employees of the advertising agencies’ (Kover and Goldberg, 1995: 53). Furthermore, it became clear from my interviews that practitioners see agencies themselves as brands circulating in a competitive arena. Therefore, part of their job is not only understanding their clients, but also continually pitching their agency’s creative and commercial talents to existing clients and potential clients in a reflexive self-promotional strategy. The terrain of competition is not only densely populated, but constantly shifting in character. Several practitioners commented that competition from management consultancies in the past, and now branding consultancies, requires the constant re-evaluation and promotion of advertising agencies’ ‘core skills’, but there was little agreement on how to characterize these skills. As one Account Manager put it, ‘is it in actually producing a TV ad? To an extent, but actually it’s about understanding a brand and understanding the consumer and it’s that kind of knowledge and skills base that are important’. In this competitive arena, the multiple understandings of agencies’ principal skills thus form the basis from which claims about individual agencies’ special competencies are pitched to potential clients.

Another challenge faced by agencies competing for business is the thorny issue of advertising’s commercial effects. The default position on advertising taken by many academic analyses – particularly those with a sole focus on advertising texts – tends to emphasize advertising’s power in both commercial and ideological terms. This is most evident in studies such as those of Goldman (1992) and Goldman and Papson (1996, 1998), but the tendency is present to a lesser degree in many other accounts of advertising. Yet studies focusing on advertising practice have noted the widely-circulating understanding amongst clients and advertising practitioners that the effects of advertising on sales are ambiguous, or more radically, are impossible to gauge. In his classic study of 1964, Jeremy Tunstall argued...
that in the context of the simultaneous impact of pricing, packaging, distribution and other promotional factors, little can be known about the commercial effects of advertising: ‘the other variables are so many that in practice the single factor of advertising cannot usually be isolated and its effect precisely measured’ (Tunstall, 1964: 16). This point has been taken up most effectively by Michael Schudson (1993) in his influential study. As noted, this indeterminacy of effect is broadly recognized by agencies and their clients (see Alvesson, 1994), and it is highlighted as a major problem for agencies by one of the key trade bodies, the Institute for Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). When a completed advertising campaign is circulated in the media, clients have no reliable means of assessing its direct impact upon sales. In an interview, the spokesperson for the IPA described the client’s position in relation to this indeterminacy:

That’s both a blessing and a curse. It’s very inexact . . . it is very difficult to work out what contribution the advertising has made. That fuzziness can give you some comfort, or can make you feel uneasy as to whether you’re wasting your company’s money. [Spokesperson, IPA]

This general recognition of advertising’s indeterminate effectiveness places increased stress on agencies to promote to clients the commercial value of advertising. The IPA has tried to aid agencies in this task by setting up the IPA Effectiveness Awards. Whilst there are many industry-driven awards for creativity and artistic innovation, for example the prestigious ‘D&AD’ (Design and Art Direction) awards, such awards do not draw on indicators of commercial efficacy for their assessment criteria. The introduction of the IPA Effectiveness Awards was intended to address this issue and to bolster the perception of advertising as an efficient commercial tool. However, several of my respondents commented that the introduction of the awards has backfired in its aim of managing client beliefs about advertising’s effectiveness: the IPA set such strict criteria to prove the commercial effectiveness of an advertising campaign that almost no ads have been submitted to the competition. In effect, the IPA’s initiative has drawn increased attention to the ambiguous impact of advertising upon sales, thus counteracting the promotional efforts of the IPA on behalf of the industry as a whole.

In short, the popular image of the advertising industry as a super-efficient ‘persuasion factory’ is far removed from the commercial realities and everyday practices of agencies. The actual process of producing advertisements is fraught with technical problems, tight deadlines, budgetary
restrictions, and there is no guarantee that the broadcast or print advertise-
ment will be either a creative or commercial success (see Arlen, 1980; Miller, 1997). The process of securing a contract with a client, generating a creative brief and producing the final ad is unstable and riven with false starts, disagreements, and power struggles. Belying the image of the industry as a streamlined commercial production line, the actual practices involve considerable negotiation and compromise between client and agency, and between Account Managers, Account Planners and Creatives within any agency (see Leiss et al., 1990; Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996). In this context, advertising practitioners attempt to ‘manage’ clients’ understandings of advertising and its effects through self-promotional rhetoric about their creative skills and commercial competencies. In this way, ‘the extremely weak base of advertising from a material point of view, creates a context which must be carefully managed by means of linguistic and other symbolic means’ (Alvesson, 1994: 544).

Agencies’ self-promotional imperative and their management of client beliefs is nothing new – since at least the late 19th and early 20th centuries, agencies have striven to promote their expertise as commercial intermediaries (Laird, 1998; Marchand, 1985; Ohmann, 1996). For instance, Ralph Hower cites a 1910 promotional puff for the agency N. W. Ayer and Son in the US trade paper *Printer’s Ink*:

> Other agencies of lesser age, fewer workers, and scantier experience will readily draw pictures, write copy, prepare plans, and tell you without any considerable amount of difficulty just how to make two dollars grow where one grew before. We are anxious to talk with businessmen who do not believe in fairies. (cited in Hower, 1949: 22)

This is a promotional pitch by one traditional agency set against the flood of newer agencies and their counter-claims of innovative approaches and commercial acumen. Whilst framed in the language of 1910, the promotional imperative and competitive tendering of a ‘skills profile’ to potential clients resonates strongly with today’s advertising context. Pope (1983: 144) notes of this period that, ‘for the agencies, marketing expertise was no doubt more often advertised to prospective clients than practised successfully’. Can the same be said of today’s advertising agencies? The following section explores the circulation of understandings of effects and of research used in advertising. I will argue that this circulation of knowledge-claims between advertising practitioners, their clients, and academics operates in a complex and ambiguous manner; ultimately, it troubles those
accounts which identify advertising research’s principal role as that of a disciplinary force governing consumers through surveillance and codification.

**RESEARCH DATA AND COMMERCIAL MANAGEMENT**

In this competitive market, agencies attempt to manage clients’ beliefs about advertising by the strategic rhetorical use of market research data and data from the pre-testing of ads. This is a complex undertaking as client companies’ perspectives on research and on the commercial efficacy of advertising are highly variable. These comments by an Account Manager were typical of my study and demonstrate practitioners’ acute awareness of the diversity of client understandings of advertising,

> Some clients just have faith in the power of advertising and aren’t particularly fussed about research. Some use research just to fine-tune something that they’re already doing. . . . Other big groups like Mars and Master Foods found they analysed all their pre-testing against sales and found that it never correlated so they actually stopped doing pre-testing and they just used qualitative research. . . . Then there’s a group that hardly believes that advertising works at all and are very suspicious of the whole process.

*Do they still advertise?*

They do but it’s a very painful process. [Account Manager]

This Account Manager indicates the variety of responses clients demonstrate in relation to advertising research and the validity of advertising as a commercial practice. Many of my respondents commented that certain clients continued to advertise despite their strong reservations about advertising’s potential to impact upon sales. Several authors have offered explanations for clients’ apparently paradoxical financial and conceptual investment in advertising. Miller argues that companies advertise their products or services despite their lack of faith in the practice due to an anxiety about keeping up with competitors: ‘it’s a reactive fear of the competition’ (1997: 194). Advertising offers a higher profile for the brand and the company and can reassure clients that they are doing everything they can to combat the competition. In this way, agencies can play on producers’ anxieties about unpredictable consumers, powerful competitors and uncertain financial markets by pitching their talents as expert (commercial) knowledge providers (Lury and Warde, 1997). In an influential analysis, Schudson (1993) proposes that advertisements are directed not only at
potential consumers but also at shareholders and potential shareholders. In this bid to increase investment in the company, advertisements are deployed as promotional corporate signs because ‘expensive, well-executed, and familiar ads convince the investors, as nothing in the black and white tables of assets and debits can, that the company is important and prosperous’ (Schudson, 1993: xiv). This generalized belief in advertising’s power to inflate sales can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for it pumps more money into the company which can then be deployed for investment in design, distribution and so on. In parallel, high-profile advertising may positively affect the behaviour of retailers and salespersons in relation to that brand, thus potentially amplifying sales. This, in turn, makes more money available to produce expensive, glossy ads. So it may well be the case, as Schudson suggests, that sales cause ads, not that ads cause sales.

However, my interest does not lie in attempting to assess advertising’s effects on sales; my focus is the circulation between clients and practitioners of multiple understandings of those potential effects. The previous quotation accents the significance of practitioners’ reflexive awareness of the variability and fragility of clients’ beliefs in advertising and in advertising research. As I shall go on to argue, practitioners respond to this blend of anxieties and ambiguities by offering clients forms of knowledge-management and by pitching them claims about their capacities to ‘deliver the consumer’ through research and effective advertising. This generates a number of challenges for the agencies, one of which is clients’ requirement for ‘post-research’ whereby a finished advertisement is shown to a group of consumers in order to assess their interest in it. This is a very unpopular practice amongst practitioners who argue that such research merely reproduces viewers’ prejudices about what constitutes an interesting or appealing ad and does not assess any campaign’s true impact:

So what they like to do is put it [the finished ad] in front of consumers to see what consumers think. And that, for me, is dreadful because consumers are only happy with things that they have seen [before] and they’re comfortable with. So if you present them with something new and outlandish, they don’t like it because they haven’t seen it [before]. [Senior Creative]

The perceived conservative nature of consumers faced by a new style of advertisement clearly causes tensions between the creative impulse of practitioners and clients’ demand for research that demonstrates the advertisement’s ‘consumer appeal’.

Another element in this network of power-knowledge relations is that
of individual practitioners’ own motivations. My respondents appeared to be heavily invested in creating what they termed ‘good’ or ‘successful’ advertising campaigns, but their definitions of such a campaign did not necessarily tally with those of their client. I asked one practitioner how he would describe a successful campaign:

A really successful one changes something in people’s minds – something that does that in a really creative way is a successful ad. . . . In commercial terms you’d absolutely want to prove that it was successful [in terms of sales figures]. . . . On a personal level, I’m not really fussed. You’d want to try and demonstrate to a client that it was good but, long term, I actually don’t care that much on the sales front. [Account Manager]

All my respondents wanted their campaigns to have an impact but, for them, increased sales was not the primary benchmark of a good campaign. Certainly, they needed to make claims to their client about the campaign’s commercial impact, but the practitioners’ over-riding motivation was that of making innovative, creative, artistic products that earned them respect from their peers. Such campaigns also improve practitioners’ chances of winning creative awards with the associated benefits of enhanced career prospects and increased salary (see also Jackall and Hirota, 2000; Miller, 1997; Nixon, 2003; Soar, 2000). Thus, practitioners’ own sense of the aims of a campaign, or even what constitutes good advertising, can differ from their clients’ understandings in several important respects. Indeed, clients appear to be well aware of this divergence of interests and this serves to amplify practitioners’ imperative to legitimate and promote advertising agencies’ commercial skills. A key way this is implemented is through the strategic rhetorical use of research and pre-testing data. But I found that practitioners routinely used this data in very selective, instrumental ways. Elements of research or pre-testing results were often used retrospectively in ways designed to support their own intuitive responses to a brief, or to give an alibi for their creative or financial decisions after the event (or to ‘post-rationalize’ the process, as the practitioners put it). One Account Planner said:

Post-rationalization, which I’d always understood as a criticism, is sometimes celebrated as an art. And sometimes people say, ‘and this is the point that we’ll post-rationalize this’ as if somehow it’s a standard part of the process, that you have to explain yourself backwards. Because advertising moves to a time-scale which is
not dictated by the quality of intellectual knowledge – it’s dictated by the need to get the stuff on air by June – you do learn as you go along and often there’s no time to do up-front research about how consumers feel about product X. [Account Planner]

It is often the case, then, that practitioners use research data in an unsystematic way. Instead of directing a campaign’s approach from the outset, research can be deployed as a rationale for the sometimes random decisions made by practitioners faced with the multitude of contingencies and ambiguities inherent in creating advertisements. In addition, the status of research methods remains a source of contention within agencies and amongst many consumer researchers (see Stern, 1998). There was a clear trend amongst my respondents of what one practitioner called ‘anti-intellectualism’ and a focus on what is seen as ‘real life’ research:

The idea of reading books to discover something is by and large frowned upon as a source of knowledge, whereas sitting in some badly run [focus] groups in Croydon is regarded as an extraordinary source of knowledge even though all you discover in these groups is things you already knew if you only sat and thought about it. . . . Most research is research into our own ignorance rather than research into the consumer. [Account Planner]

This candid account indicates practitioners’ doubts about the validity and transferability of data gathered from focus group discussions of a product or the early stages of an ad campaign. Focus groups are frequently used as a data-gathering technique as they are cheaper and faster to process than other forms of research, such as quantitative surveys (Leslie, 1999). But as the quotation makes clear, not all practitioners are confident in such methods’ capacity to deliver useful material (also see Leslie, 1999; Miller, 1997). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged within the industry that it is increasingly difficult to find members of the public to participate in focus groups. The result is that the same members are used again and again, and the same ‘badly run group in Croydon’ comes to represent national views on ads for everything from cars to new flavours of crisps. Academic analysis of focus groups in advertising research has tended to highlight the construction of categories of consumers through surveillance and codification. Leslie, for example, argues that ‘subjects are “manufactured” by advertisers and only exist in the space of the focus group . . . Research plays a role in
“making up” the consumer by enabling identities to be observed and charted’ (1999: 1452). But my analysis does not take this form of governance of consumers as its focal point. Instead, I am interested in the circulation of understandings of research data and the forms of power-knowledge that frame and are framed by these movements. It is certainly the case that research constructs categories of consumers, but this fabrication is not couched in terms of a truth-claim in agencies’ rhetoric. As the above quotation exemplifies, practitioners’ engagement in research is directed less at unveiling the ‘truths’ of the consumer – most practitioners (and indeed clients) are dubious about the possibilities of achieving this and freely admit their own ignorance. Rather, the aim is to generate material which can be deployed as convincing evidence of commercial expertise in the competitive regime of self-promotion that exists between agencies. The research methods are chosen, therefore, according to their capacity to produce data that are seen by clients as appropriate and acceptably framed, and according to the material’s ease of access for practitioners. One Account Planner described this choice of methods and its rationale:

Desk research is not a skill which is pursued very much. We prefer to commission our own, but that’s not because what we get through commissioning our own is any better, there’s just a laziness about the choice of methodologies . . . if you said [to advertising colleagues] ‘we should look through Hansard online to check something’, they’d say ‘oh we don’t want to do that. Just tell me what it says, just give me five lines I can quote’. [Account Planner]

Most research is thus directed by pragmatic, short-term aims of producing acceptable material that can be used to pitch a campaign. Moreover, the clients’ assessment of the ‘acceptability’ or appropriateness of the research is not necessarily based on the degree to which they are convinced by the accuracy or veracity of the data. Indeed, practitioners attribute multiple motivations to clients and appreciate that the contact person from the client firm has a range of considerations other than that of the advertising campaign:

The people we’re dealing with [at the clients’] – due to the status that advertising and marketing has – are quite low down, so there are a fair number of people above them that they have to satisfy. And they’re often more worried about that than they are about getting the advertising right. [Account Planner]
This demonstrates practitioners’ awareness of the relatively subordinate status of the brand or marketing managers within the client company. Indeed, research data can be used as a kind of alibi by those brand managers to justify to their superiors’ decisions they have made about the campaign. In this way, brand managers can deploy research as a way of negotiating their (relatively powerless) position in the management structures of client firms, rather than as any benchmark of actual consumer preferences. In parallel, Account Managers in agencies help out, or ‘manage’, their contacts at the client firm by framing the research data so as to facilitate the brand manager’s task:

What causes the most anxiety [for brand managers] is how they will look as marketing people to the rest of their company . . . when they present this idea or script . . . You want to give them any help you can to manage that anxiety. [Account Manager]

As the quotations suggest, the brand managers in the client firm are usually quite junior and tend to focus their efforts on impressing their superiors and moving up the career ladder. Brand managers’ vested interests in appearing competent to their employers can have far-reaching consequences for advertising practitioners’ remit of research into a campaign’s effectiveness. Indeed, the potential efficacy of such research sometimes runs counter to the brand managers’ interests:

I was meant to do an effectiveness study for one of our clients – who I won’t name! – so I asked for all the data to be put together, and there’s a lot of data. And I got this thing back which said that they couldn’t possibly give you all that data, which isn’t true because they do have all of it. But reading between the lines what this guy is saying is ‘as marketing director of this region, I’ve convinced everyone above me that this advertising has worked for three years and the last thing that you’re going to do is haul through all the figures and prove that it hasn’t’ . . . so if you can rigorously and incontrovertibly prove [that a campaign does or doesn’t work] it’s likely to make you very unpopular. [Account Planner]

This is an interesting account of advertising practitioners’ management not only of beliefs in advertising’s effectiveness, but also of the complex needs of their contact person at the client firm. Sometimes called ‘smokescreen research’ (Leiss et al., 1990: 183), data can be used as an alibi or to provide a rationale for decisions made by the representative of the client company.
Thus my analysis does not focus on proofs of the effectiveness of research or of advertising campaigns; I am more interested here in the discursive techniques practitioners deploy to facilitate the complex commercial manoeuvres required by their subordinate status relative to their clients and their position in an intensely competitive field. As Slater (1989: 122) argues, ‘discourses of advertising’s power are weapons of competition as well as legitimation and “proof”’. It is clear from the interviews that agencies have a strong self-promotional imperative and use various rhetorical devices to this end. But there is a sense amongst practitioners that because many of their number have now gone ‘client-side’ – left advertising agencies to work in client firms – practitioners’ task of generating successful self-promotional ‘spin’ is more challenging:

Clients have got closer and closer to the actual agencies. A lot of agency people have crossed over and gone to work as clients . . . and you can’t pull the wool over their eyes any more and go ‘ok, that’ll cost a million quid for that’ . . . and they know that it’ll only take three days to do it and not three weeks. The mystery has gone from it. [Senior Creative]

This is a rather wistful account of ‘the good old days’ when it was easier to manage clients’ understandings of advertising processes and costs. Such developments place a renewed stress on agencies to generate and circulate particular understandings of advertising and advertising research.

Throughout this article I have argued that the use of research in advertising deserves closer attention. As noted in the introductory section, analyses of advertising research have generally focused on its governance of consumers through observation and categorization. Hackley (2002) suggests that the knowledge produced about consumers may not be formally systematized and stored in written form as in Foucault’s (1991) classic model of disciplinarity. Instead, this informal mode of understanding ‘resides in agencies as knowledge not as codified facts but, rather, as folklore or cultural knowledge’ (Hackley, 2002: 213). But my analysis points to a more expansive view of advertising research’s role that highlights the circulation of multiple understandings of advertising’s effects and research data. These forms of knowledge do not reside in any one locale to be deployed by one set of ‘experts’, whether they be formally codified or informally archived as advertising ‘folklore’. Rather, they circulate between different groups – advertising practitioners, brand managers at client firms, the managerial superiors of the brand managers, academics – and actively constitute the broad field that is understood as advertising. What counts as
‘true’ in this flow of understandings is a complex question: the validity of the research comes to be defined in terms of its utility which may have only a loose relationship to its conventionally-conceived veracity. The research is deployed strategically in multiple ways: it is used by agencies to manage the asymmetrical power relationship between themselves and clients and to claim legitimacy for that particular agency’s range of commercial and creative skills; it is used to promote the advertising industry as a whole in the face of competition from other service providers such as management and branding consultants; it can be viewed by representatives at the client firm as source material which can be operationalized for specific ends – in this case, the brand manager of the client firm may not necessarily view practitioners’ claims to ‘know the consumer’ as baseline truths, but rather as a flexible resource; it is used by practitioners to justify to themselves the status and value of their work. Elsewhere, I have explored more fully practitioners’ personal investments in circulating understandings about advertising and the way in which research data can be used by Account Planners, Account Managers and Creatives to compete with each other for more input in a campaign or more status within their agency (Cronin, 2004). The accounts of the status of research produced by practitioners thus vary according to context and the particular interests at stake. For instance, the practitioners’ statements about the dubious nature of research expressed in my interviews are contrasted markedly with the self-promotional claims made by agencies in public arenas such as the trade paper Campaign. In all, what counts as ‘knowledge’ in this field is that which enables and legitimates the circulation of beliefs about advertising, and that which facilitates commercial interests in generating both reputation and profit. This is an interest-driven production of knowledge in which data is defined as ‘true’ when it is true to the interests of those parties engaged in the exchange.

This complex terrain of claims constitutes what Foucault has called ‘a régime of truth’, in which “truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it’ (1980: 133). Thus in the context of the advertising agencies, power, the capacity to influence what counts as knowledge, and the capacity to circulate those claims, are implicated in a recursive relationship – they feed off one another and further fuel their continual circulation and legitimacy. In this “political economy” of truth, truth ‘is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power)” (Foucault, 1980: 131). Thus the generation and circulation of claims about research is subject to economic incitement and commercial imperatives.
But the economic benchmarks are not defined by the simple questions of ‘does advertising work in that it generates increased sales?’ or ‘does research in advertising deliver the truth about consumers or successful campaigns?’. The baseline economic imperative for agencies is the securing or retention of their contract with the client, whilst for clients it appears to be a general satisfaction that they are engaged in a competitive, promotional practice even if proofs of its effectiveness are at best ambiguous.

In the above sections, I have explored the use of research in advertising. In the final section, I move on to examine the use of research about advertising in sociology and cultural studies. There is an interesting relationship between the commercial realm of advertising and the academic realm: agencies often use theories and methods imported from academia to support their claims to expert knowledge; they use a range of research techniques which have strong parallels with academic practices, and have even been called ‘folk ethnographers’ (Kemper, 2001: 4). Techniques and theories imported by agencies from academia function less as means of accessing ‘the real’ (or as accurate means of describing and targeting the market), and more as rhetorical means of legitimating advertising as a commercial tool.4 But less attention has focused on the way in which certain academic accounts (most often in sociology or cultural studies) strategically deploy certain limited understandings of advertising and advertising research as analytic devices (although see Davidson, 1992; Lury and Warde, 1997). In what follows, I am not suggesting that agencies’ tactical and selective deployment of research data is directly equivalent to academic analyses’ use of advertising as a hermeneutic device. Instead, I am arguing that we need to pay closer attention to the interface between the two realms and that we should be more reflexive about the status of some academic claims about advertising. The following section, then, is offered not as a fully substantiated argument, but as a speculative account which may help the generation of debates in this area.

**ACADEMIC AND COMMERCIAL KNOWLEDGES**

As noted above, academia plays a key role in the regime of truth and power that constitutes advertising as a commercial enterprise by supplying agencies with techniques and theories. Yet, academia also draws on advertising for its own purposes: some academic analyses deploy broad understandings of advertising in order to exemplify or substantiate their arguments about social or cultural change. Studies that do not take advertising as their specific focus sometimes use advertising as a trope or analytic device – a kind of litmus test of the social. Here, advertising comes to
exemplify and ratify arguments about social change (such as the impact of television, the growth in significance of the visual, or the development of ‘postmodern’ identities). In studies that take advertising as their focus, advertisements are sometimes thought to offer a map or precise textual transcription of contemporary capitalism. For instance, Jhally argues that ‘advertising functions as a mirror, highlighting the major elements of capitalism as a system of production’ (1987: 205). In this understanding, advertisements are a privileged analytic site and can be analysed textually in order to ‘map the cultural reproduction of commodity hegemony’ (Goldman, 1992: 2). Others have taken a more sceptical stance, arguing that the history of advertising cannot be read as a teleology of capitalism (McFall, 2000), and that ‘we should not mistake advertising’s style with capitalism’s substance’ (Sinclair, 1987: 184). Accounts of advertising which place sole emphasis on its textual end-products (advertisements themselves), or on advertising’s broad social impact, tend to lose sight of the weak position of agencies in relation to clients and the reactive tactics they develop as a consequence. I have argued that these self-promotional and ‘managing’ strategies are key to the operation of the advertising industry. Many generalized accounts of advertising obscure these complex circulations of power-knowledge in their rush to set advertising up as a ‘sign of the times’ and to frame it as an index of social or cultural change. Using a principle of distillation, the complex of economic interests, commercial imperatives, creative input and circulation of research data that constitutes advertising is reduced to a mere sign. This is a form of governance – not, this time, of consumers by advertising practitioners (directed by commercial imperatives), but of the social by academics (directed by our own imperatives to research and publish). In order to function as a paradigmatic case or index of social change, advertising processes and textual products are discursively reduced or distilled to an imagined core which is thought to hold an isomorphic relation to changes in the social – reading advertising is thus thought to be the equivalent of reading the terrain of the social or the cultural. Installing a relation of equivalence in turn functions to reduce the complexity of the social and make it more readily available to analysis. In effect, the use of advertising as a trope for a diversity of social phenomena is a way of managing the social, of rendering it pliant to social and cultural theory (see also Lury and Warde, 1997). Just as research data affords advertising practitioners the material with which to make claims about delivering the target market to clients, so also understanding advertising as trope or figure delivers the social to theorists.

The parallels and overlaps in these groups’ strategic deployment of
understandings of advertising are telling. Both academic analyses and agencies use advertising as a ‘sign’: agencies use ‘academic soundbites’ to circulate a self-promotional image of themselves as experts in knowledge about the consumer, and some academic analyses use advertising as sign, trope, or shorthand for social change. Advertising practitioners tend to criticize academic analyses for being unwieldy and inaccessible – one Account Manager in my study said that academic studies ‘over-complicate’ perspectives on society. Knowledges taken from academic sources are thus assessed according to their ease of access, and their transferability and applicability to the specific issues faced by agencies. This extraction of information (and use of academic analysis as sign of expertise) is instrumental, context-specific, short-term and interest-driven. Some academic accounts’ use of advertising as sign of the times extracts certain qualities of advertising and establishes a system of equivalences between advertising and society. In this way, analyses often cast advertising as an accurate mirror on society and convenient means of tracking shifts in social structure or patterns of identity; in effect, social change is read off from advertising texts. Conversely, advertising is seen as a key driver of social change in capitalist societies, actively refiguring consumption patterns. In this framework, the analysis of advertising is thought to unveil the logics of capitalist expansion and the power of capitalist ideologies. In both cases, advertising is used as a hermeneutic device: it abstracts and simplifies certain commercial and discursive practices and thus renders the social available to analysis.

The corollary of the instrumentality evident in both groups’ practices is that only certain forms of research data or knowledge come to prominence. The emphasis is placed on the potential ‘transferability’ and exchange-value of knowledge-forms. This creates a kind of sub-archive in Foucault’s (2001) sense (in which an archive is defined as a system of enunciability). An organization of what can be said and known, an archive is ‘the general system of the formation and transformation of statements’ (Foucault, 2001: 130). The circulation of understandings of advertising and research data between practitioners, their clients, and some academics is thus an organization of knowledge according to principles of transferability and instrumentality. More than this, the flow of understandings forms a currency of exchange that actively constitutes the social, economic and creative institution that is advertising. This is a regime of power-knowledge in which research data manages – and indeed constitutes – categories of consumers through governance. But equally significantly, it is a regime in which advertising agencies and some academics manage research for their own interests. Some authors have touched on these issues by arguing that...
advertising rearticulates relations of power. For instance, Mattelart suggests that ‘what is radically altered with the prodigious rise of the industry of social mediation or engineering of assent are the modes in which power is exercised and the nature of authority’ (1991: 214). This is a more subtle formulation when contrasted with other accounts of advertising’s overwhelming commercial and ideological power. However, it does not recognize the important impact of power-knowledge that flows between agencies and their clients, and between agencies and academics. In this circulation of understandings, the boundaries of that research – the conceptual horizons it enables (and simultaneously constrains) – comes to manage agencies and academics. This management occurs through the constitution and redefinition of conceptual boundaries such as those between academic knowledges and marketing/advertising knowledges, and disciplinary divisions within academia such as those between management and marketing studies, sociology, and cultural studies. These distinctions mark the terms of ‘acceptable’ knowledges and research methods. Such an ‘enunciative domain’ also configures ‘the possible position of speaking subjects’ (Foucault, 2001: 122): it enables and (provisionally) legitimates both the intellectual authority of academics and the status of advertising practitioners as commercial intermediaries.

My own academic investments in analysing advertising are complex and ambiguous, and perhaps represent the tensions between power and knowledge – and academics’ privileged position in the circulation of and access to that knowledge – that are endemic to academia. I am critical of the marketization of access to (multiple forms of) knowledge that appears to be occurring across several arenas. When I have been asked by advertising agencies to work as a consultant for them, I have always refused; not because of a knee-jerk reaction to keep academia untainted by the commercial realm (we have never been distinct from it), but rather, because of a concern about a marketization of access to knowledge. Indeed, I do not think that enough attention has been directed at analysing the politics of the relationship between commercial and academic realms with particular reference to advertising and marketing. For instance, a recent collection of papers edited by Malefyt and Moeran (2003) explores the use of anthropological understandings and techniques such as ethnography in advertising and marketing. The collection promotes the use of such analyses, arguing that academia has much to offer the commercial world in terms of new understandings of consumers and techniques for researching them. Yet any analysis of the politics of such an interface is lacking. By calling for closer attention to be paid to the power-knowledge relations here, I am not calling...
for a rehearsal of widespread criticisms of ‘commodification’. These are often ill-defined and over-generalized. Rather, I would like to see a nuanced debate about the politics, not just the mechanics, of such circulations of power, legitimacy and knowledge in the fields of academia and advertising/marketing.

This article has attempted to explore one element of advertising practice by tracking the circulation of understandings of advertising’s effects and research data. The scope of the analysis is therefore limited and much more must be done to supplement the few key studies of advertising practice that take a social or cultural perspective (Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996; Nixon, 2003; Schudson, 1993; Slater, 1989; Tunstall, 1964). These studies’ insights into advertising’s ambiguous effects, complex commercial imperatives, and the industry’s reactive rather than proactive practices, have had little impact on more general analyses of advertising (see Cortese, 1999; Goldman, 1992; Goldman and Papson, 1998) or on broader social or cultural analyses that use advertising or marketing as exemplum. Such accounts tend to read off social change from advertising texts – or ascribe advertising a determining role in the inexorable expansion of consumer capitalism – in ways which tally with their particular theoretical projects. I have suggested that advertising should not be seen simply as a model of textual sophistry which creates ‘channels of desire’ (Ewen and Ewen, 1982) that organize the dreams and desires of individuals and direct them into consumption practices. Advertising does not merely produce discursive currencies for the articulation of individual or collective identities. Neither should advertising be seen as a super-efficient capitalist machine: its practices are more contingent, hesitant and reactive than commonly supposed. The rhetoric produced by advertising practitioners, and disseminated in trade press publications such as Campaign, should not be taken at face value, but rather seen in the context of practitioners’ interests to generate self-promotional ‘spin’. As Raymond Williams (1980: 190) has argued, this is ‘the language of frustration rather than power’. In an attempt to open up some of these questions, I have argued that understandings of advertising and research data circulate as commercial currencies. As forms of power-knowledge they constitute the field of commercial promotion and the field of academic analysis. In order to fully apprehend advertising’s commercial and discursive impact on the social realm, studies must take account of advertising practice and, more radically, produce more reflexive analyses of academic understandings of the commercial realm.
Notes
1. This was a small-scale research project involving interviews with nine advertising practitioners, representatives at the Institute for Practitioners in Advertising (an important UK trade association), and the Advertising Standards Authority (the self-regulatory body for print advertisements in the UK). Each interview lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and was conducted in January 2002.
2. The circulation of various claims also functions to constitute an agency's public profile, for example, as a 'cutting edge' agency or as a 'safe pair of hands'.
3. The 'pre-testing' of advertisements usually involves showing the early stages of an ad, for example its storyboard, to focus groups in order to gauge audience responses. Many forms of research are used in the industry, from the most informal, impressionistic accounts generated by individual practitioners to large-scale quantitative and qualitative studies commissioned from external knowledge-gathering institutions. My aim in this article is not to explore the full range of such research types and processes, but rather to analyse the significance of the circulation of various understandings of such research's use-value and exchange-value to practitioners and to clients.
4. For instance, I have been approached several times by agencies and market research companies and asked for analyses of contemporary consumption and the latest developments in social and cultural theory. It was made clear to me that the content of what I might say was of little relevance because they intended to use the status of academic knowledge as a promotional gambit or 'sign' to compete with other agencies. In effect, they required 'academic soundbites' as a currency to support their claims to be expert knowledge providers.
5. For example, in constructing an argument about a shift from disciplinary to 'control' society, Deleuze frames advertising and marketing as 'the instrument of social control and produces the arrogant breed who are our masters' (1995: 181).
6. I have explored this circulation of understandings elsewhere as 'myth' (Cronin, 2004). For Barthes, myth is not an idea or an object; it is 'a mode of signification' (1974: 109). Myth, therefore, does not deny social phenomena – it functions to continually generate understandings of them. It can therefore be seen as a galvanizing category which constitutes those very phenomena.

References


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