

2. Write an essay on advertising in the 1990s, incorporating examples of “advertising as a psychological weapon against consumers.” Find current ads from magazines, such as those mentioned in paragraph 7, that appeal to consumers’ psychological needs. Discuss what the advertisers are trying to do in these ads.
3. If you disagree with specific sections of Schor’s essay, write a rebuttal to these arguments, giving your own opinions. Back up your ideas with solid evidence.

The Hard Sell

Deborah Baldwin

Imagine our world without ads. If Deborah Baldwin’s vision is accurate, it would be a world of reduced clutter, clamour, and anxiety. In this piece, Baldwin catalogues the innumerable ways advertising intrudes and, more dangerously, seamlessly blends into daily life through television, corporate sponsorships, sports events, museum exhibits, print media, and even school programs. What concerns her is not so much the “ad-saturation” per se, but how all the advertising has turned America into a consumption-crazy culture. She makes a strong argument that the line between citizen and consumer has nearly vanished.

Baldwin writes for *Common Cause Magazine*, in which this essay first appeared in longer form in 1991.

BEFORE YOU READ

Read only the first four paragraphs of this piece. Given this introduction, can you surmise what the key ideas in Baldwin’s argument might be? Can you predict what value judgments she might make about our culture?

AS YOU READ

Ask yourself if the power of advertising as described accounts for your own behavior as a consumer.

- 1 Consider a day in the life of the semi-fictional American household—let’s call them the Urbanes.

- 2 The Urbane family awakens to the strains of National Public Radio—“non-commercial” radio brought to us this morning by “REI, Recreational Equipment Inc., Providing Outdoor Gear and Clothing.” Mom grabs her Liz Claiborne signature purse, stuffs her Fila sweats into a Bloomies shopping bag and heads downstairs. Let’s eat! Pass the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle cereal to the kids. Front page of the newspaper looks grim, but not the ad for Petites

Week at Macy’s or the article by the 15-Minute Gourmet on the back of the Safeway ad in yesterday’s Food section.

Snatches of conversation about world affairs emanate from *Good Morning America* between plugs for TYLENOL and Toyota. Dad reminds the kids to take their Flintstone vitamins. And for the third time, put on your Reeboks! They pile into the car with the She-Ra lunchboxes and Lands’ End backpacks, drive past the bus-stop billboard advertising those bright Benetton clothes, turn on the oldies station and sing along with the Connie Francis remake that’s now an ad for the local mall—“Where the Stores Are.”

Five o’clock and time to go home! The country music station is playing a song from Barbara Mandrell’s album “No Nonsense”—as in No Nonsense Pantyhose, which the singer is under contract to promote. Flipping through the mail, Mom finds three fund-raising appeals, a glossy from Hecht’s department store announcing unbelievable sales, four catalogs, and a *New Yorker* with an attractive 10-page spread on the glories of the Caribbean, which turns out to be not colorized John McPhee but a paid “advertorial.”

After the Urbanes wrest their kids away from the TV, they tuck them into their Little Mermaid sheets and catch the tail end of *Washington Week in Review*, made possible by a generous grant from Ford Motor Co., whose high-powered Crown Victoria sedan fills the screen. Checking the time on tomorrow’s theater tickets, they notice a plug for USAir. Dad spends a few absorbing moments with the J. Crew catalog, then admires the way car ads during the 11 o’clock news are always photographed on empty mountaintops.

Bedtime already?

Welcome to Real Life, circa 1991. While our forefathers and mothers rose with the sun to labor in the fields, we rise with the radio and TV, immersed every waking hour in non-stop nudges from corporate America to just Say Yes.

Round-the-clock commercialism has crept up on us, evolving from 19th-century pitches for products like Lydia Pinkham’s medicinal pick-me-up into a sophisticated art form that pops up everywhere we are—from the brand-name labels that turn consumers into walking billboards to the corporate-sponsored informational posters that hang in classrooms.

Few things, it seems, are sacred: *Advertising Age* says there’s a firm that sells space at the bottom of golf cups, reasoning that nothing concentrates the mind amid all that green like a word from a sponsor. Some advertisers have been known to put their messages in public restrooms—one of the few places most people think of as a commercial-free zone.

Despite such incursions, many people might nonetheless wonder: With all the problems besetting the world, why lie awake at night worrying about commercialism? Besides, what can one person do to beat back the media equivalent of a 20-foot snowstorm?

Enter the brave little Center for the Study of Commercialism. Just over a year old, it is headed by nutrition activist Michael Jacobson of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Jacobson hopes to do the same thing to ad glut

that he has done to greasy food: make the public realize that too much of this stuff can make a person sick.

Armed with a board of advisers whose professional lives are dedicated to the study of the consumer culture, the Washington-based center wants to raise awareness of commercialism's costs and counteract the gimmicks with a vision of a "less selfish, more civic-minded" lifestyle. As Jacobson and co-founder Ronald Collins wrote in one manifesto, "Omnipresent commercialism is wrecking America. Our cultural resources are dwindling. Value alternatives beyond those of the marketplace are disappearing. The very idea of *citizen* has become synonymous with *consumer*."

Fighting commercialism, of course, is like wrestling your way out of a spider web. Indeed the commercial and non-commercial often blend together so seamlessly, says critic Mark Crispin Miller, an adviser to the center and author of *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*, that life can be lived as "a theme park experience."

He points to the way the war in the Persian Gulf was turned into a spectacle—partly thanks to the networks' presentation of this dramatic conflict in the best mini-series tradition. While advertisers initially were reluctant to sponsor war footage, before long they rushed to associate their products with patriotic good feelings, donating goods to the troops and incorporating the red white and blue in their ad campaigns.

Miller sees sharp parallels between the way the war was presented to the public and the way the 1988 presidential campaign unfolded on TV. Both involved simplistic plots, with beginnings, middles, and ends, and both made heavy use of emotional images and sound bites.

Sort of like ads.

Advertising has long oiled the machinery of our economy and probably always will. All told, corporations spent an unbelievable \$130 billion on it last year—the equivalent of \$6 a week for every man, woman, and child in the United States, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. That's 50 percent more per capita than is spent in any other nation. Essayist Pico Iyer once calculated that by age 40 we've seen one million ads, with incalculable effects on the way we view the world—never mind our capacity to absorb information of a more profound nature. And conventional ads are only the flotsam in the flood tide: Every day the average American is bombarded by hundreds of marketing messages, many of them adroitly woven into the content of the print and electronic media we depend on for information and entertainment.

The post office delivered 63 billion pieces of junk mail last year, much of it aimed at selling something. Product manufacturers stuck ads on videotapes and in movie theaters, and they spent millions to plant their products in Hollywood movies. Automatic dialing systems delivered canned messages at a rate of seven million a day, according to a congressional study, and that's nothing—coming soon to a store near you will be grocery carts outfitted with TV monitors that sense which aisle you're strolling down and advertise the relevant name-brand products.

The big brains on Madison Avenue are coming up with such innovations at a time when the public suffers, in the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, from "ad nauseam." The ads on TV come so thick that many advertisers overcompensate, stepping up the volume and intensity in order to be heard over the clutter. Or they act as seductively entertaining as the sitcoms and melodramas they make possible. Try zapping through the Taster's Choice campaign that basically consists of 45-second episodes from an ongoing soap opera, complete with romantic leads.

"It's no longer enough to show the product and tell what's good about it," says one marketing executive at a personal-care products company that is among the nation's top advertisers. "You have to be as entertaining as the regular programs."

Ads once celebrated the pleasures of society and the senses, says Miller, but today they're more likely to celebrate personal empowerment. Kids' candy ads, for example, used to suggest that having some would make you popular. Now such ads are more likely to revolve around the "story" of having it when someone else wants it.

Some of the most sophisticated ads—the so-called postmodernist genre—poke fun at the art form itself, which becomes a kind of shared joke. But this appealing self-parody doesn't mean audiences are so savvy that they know they're being manipulated. "Everybody's sophisticated," Miller says, "in a superficial kind of way. But a kind of knowingness, the fact of growing up with TV, does not imbue you with an understanding of how images work." And even when a specific ad fails to sell a certain product, adds Pat Aufderheide, a communications professor at American University who writes about popular culture for *In These Times*, it contributes to the ceaseless message that "you can solve life problems with commodities."

Corporations use various strategies to reach the various segments of the market. To move the consumer spirit of opinion leaders, they buy time on public broadcasting, where \$250,000 will yield two mentions on National Public Radio six days a week for a year. Private art galleries and museums have become so dependent on corporate money in recent years they hardly mind when it comes with name-brand banners and posters attached.

To reach middle America, advertisers are turning to cable TV, which has greatly eroded the networks' hegemony because it divides the market into easily targeted segments. Low-cost time during sports events on cable, for example, is a big draw for the makers of shaving cream.

When companies aren't hawking their goods during halftime, they're hanging their logos everywhere the eye or camera can see, plugging beer and cigarettes to armchair athletes with no apparent irony. Sports sponsorship is a booming business, reports the *Wall Street Journal*, with 4,200 companies pouring nearly \$3 billion into special events ranging from the Olympics to the Virginia Slims tennis tournament. Nike invested \$7 million last year on basketball-related promotional efforts alone, including contracts with college coaches to put their teams in name-brand hightops, a *Washington Post* investigation revealed.

26 One of the fastest growing target audiences is America's youth. Companies spent about \$500 million last year to reach children age 2 to 12—five times what they spent in the early '80s—according to James McNeal, a marketing professor at Texas A&M University.

27 As many beleaguered parents may suspect, advertisers are drawn to children because children have more influence over the household pocket-book than ever before. According to Consumers Union, children age 4 to 12 spend \$8 billion annually and indirectly influence household expenditures of a \$1 billion a week. Bombarded by slick ads for fast-food joints, junky breakfast cereals, and—a recent phenomenon—shoes and clothes, children have learned to speak up at the mall.

28 Corporations long ago infiltrated the schools, emblazoning their logos on educational materials and offering rewards like free computers and pizza in exchange for brand-name recognition among the next generation of consumers. Whittle Communications, which is credited with some of the most innovative marketing practices of the '80s, beams Channel One, a 12-minute TV news show that includes two minutes of ads, free to more than 8,900 high schools. To sweeten the deal, Whittle gives the schools satellite dishes, VCRs, and TVs as well; all the teachers have to do is round up the kids to watch the spots for Burger King, etc.

29 Unfortunately, many of us aren't even aware of the extent to which we are immersed in messages that say "buy, buy, buy," says George Gerbner, former dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and a member of the commercialism study center's board of advisers. "It's like saying, 'Is the average fish aware it's swimming in salt water?'" The average consumer literally can't imagine life without commercials, not to mention life without the many possessions commercials so effectively sell.

30 "My interest is the kind of culture we have created and in which our children are being raised," says Gerbner, a longtime critic of commercial TV who is trying to launch what he calls a cultural environment movement. "The mainstream of our culture is television, which is on an average of seven hours a day. It's not a product of the home, family, community, or even the native country for some, but transnational corporations with something to sell." He adds ominously, "Entertainment is the main source of information for most people . . . and whoever tells all the stories will guide what we think and do as a civilization."

31 If Gerbner seems most concerned about the impact of commercialism on the littlest consumers, it's because preschoolers spend more time watching TV than doing anything else except sleeping and are perceived as especially vulnerable to Madison Avenue's unsavory ways. As Neil Postman, an adviser to the center, argues in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, TV reduces literacy and distorts the learning process. Children also age quickly from exposure to violence, ineptitude, and other adult themes on TV.

32 If the ceaseless barrage of hyped-up, MTV-style plugs for toys and junk food during Saturday-morning cartoon shows strikes adults as manipulative and almost cynically deceptive, so are the ads targeted at the rest of society.

"The thing I hear most often is, 'I don't even look at ads, I don't pay any attention to them,'" Jean Kilbourne, a lecturer and adviser to the center, said in her film *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*. Yet "advertising is one of the most powerful socializing forces in the culture. And the effects are as inescapable as the effects of pollution in the air. . . . Ads sell more than products. They sell images, values, goals, concepts of who we are and who we should be. . . . They shape our attitudes, and our attitudes shape our behavior."

When we aren't buying self-images, we are "turning time into entertainment and connecting entertainment to buying," says Tom Engelhardt, who writes about advertising and children's TV. Tackling kidvid alone won't do much as long as kids keep getting the message that buying stuff is the ultimate fun. Adds Engelhardt, a father himself, "You can barely head into a museum without stumbling into seven gift shops. . . . Take the family on a visit to a historic site, and everything boils down to, yes or no, do we buy the Liberty Bell earrings?"

Once upon a time, Pat Auderheide observes, children and adults alike could seek refuge from the commercial world at school—not to mention at home. Now the average busy household is itself a target of new products—such as kids' microwavable TV dinners—emanating from the outside world. The only sanctuary left, she says, is inside a church.

What's got the critics upset is not just marketing's encouragement of the human urge to own, which has done so much damage to the environment and eaten away so thoroughly at our sense of values. It's the changing nature of commercialism, its gradual intrusion into the privacy of our homes, the fabric of our cultural lives, and the sanctity of our public places.

The corporate invasion is taking place at a time when public institutions are particularly vulnerable to economic pressure—one legacy of the Reagan era, when taxes declined and so did the resources available for public libraries, schools, museums, and other institutions. Robbed of government support, these institutions "now have to appreciate the crumbs they get from corporations," says the Center for the Study of Commercialism's Michael Jacobson. "Instead of giving these companies tax deductions for their contributions," he adds, "the government ought to raise corporate income taxes."

That seems unlikely, given the tax-loathing politics of the '90s. Indeed, one element of President Bush's ballyhooed education initiative would be greater corporate involvement in the classroom, not less. This is the same administration, incidentally, that asked the Beer Institute to sponsor a safe-driving campaign for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Because corporate America feels strapped—thanks partly to the merger mania of the '80s—it is becoming more demanding of the media. In the magazine world, advertisers have become shameless in seeking special treatment from editors, a practice that has long plagued women's magazines. "It's not just a matter of individual advertisers influencing editorial content," says a former *Self* magazine editor. "The whole point of the magazine is to promote products, so the advertiser doesn't even have to ask." Once unique to beauty and fashion rags, this concept is spreading throughout the magazine world.

39 Moviemakers have long been open to the notion of incorporating paid ads into their works, but in the '80s the practice became institutionalized, says Mark Crispin Miller, as professional brokers set up business in Hollywood to negotiate ever more lucrative deals. According to one tally, the creative minds behind *Die Hard 2* found room for 19 paid ads. When one company, Black & Decker, discovered "its" scene on the cutting room floor, it sued for \$150,000. Feeding into the product placement phenomenon is the sheer cost of producing movie blockbusters, TV series, new magazines, and even books. While the practice is hardly commonplace—at least not yet—the *New York Times* uncovered one instance of literary encroachment in a novel featuring a Maserati whose "V-6 engine had two turbochargers, 185 horsepower, and got up to 60 in under seven seconds." Turns out the author had cut a deal with Maserati that landed her \$15,000 worth of book promotion in exchange for the mention. The publisher meanwhile was thrilled to have the help.

41 So symbiotic are commercial and creative interests that well-known actors, producers, and filmmakers frequently "cross over," lending their talents to Madison Avenue and further blurring the line between merchandising and the arts.

42 In his book *Boxed In*, Miller quotes Bill Cosby as saying his popularity stems not from his role as the quintessential TV dad, but from his appealing ads for Jell-O and the like. Thirty-second commercials, he confided, "can cause people to love you and see more of you than in a full 30-minute show." Along with sheer entertainment, there's an intensity in these spots, a one-on-one connection that few can resist. Such intimacy helps explain why kids not only stick around when the commercials come on during those tiresome Saturday-morning cartoon shows, but pay special attention. "Don't turn it down! my 9-year-old daughter exclaimed when I wandered by the TV during one particularly colorful, fast-cut spot. "This is the best part!"

Topical Considerations

1. In a single sentence summarize the message about advertising that Deborah Baldwin wants her readers to get from this essay. Who is the audience for whom she writes? Do you consider yourself part of that audience?
2. According to the author, what are the differences between today's ads and ads from earlier periods? How do these differences affect our roles as consumers and our self-image? Is it possible to solve the problems in our lives by buying products as ads suggest?
3. How do corporations advertise on public broadcasting networks and in private art galleries and museums? Do you think private companies should sponsor sporting events such as women's tennis tournaments and the Olympics? Do you think such sponsorship compromises the integrity of an art exhibit or a sporting event?
4. How do you feel about ad-saturation in your daily life? Do you enjoy ads, hate them, or simply ignore them? Do you agree with Jean Kilbourne that