**“SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING”** Michael Serazio and Brooke Erin Duffy

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**Introduction**

The story of advertising in the 21st century might be summarized in two words: *lost control*. This is, at least, the conventional, received wisdom among industry professionals who view the technological, economic, and cultural upheaval wrought by digitization through such a narrative prism. In their reckoning, the mass media of the analogue era offered a comparatively predictable model of audience habits, platform monitoring, and content output; accordingly, advertisers functioned as “top-down communicators, in control of what information is released, to whom and when, as well as the channels of communication themselves” (Spurgeon, 2008: 1).

Marketers’ confidence and sense of authority within this traditional model might well be nostalgically overstated: audiences were never really that docile; large-scale persuasion never that assured. Nonetheless, this rather crude framing—top-down versus bottom-up—maps emblematically onto the structural transition from mass media to social media as the ideal means for commercial coaxing. Audiences, long regarded by the industry as passive recipients for mediated advertising messages, are now articulated as *co-creators* in a fluid, digital brand conversation; what had been a one-way flow of content through 30-second TV spots, full-page glossies, and roadside billboards is being complemented (and, in some cases, supplanted) by online initiatives configured for two-way interactivity. If mass media advertising had to interrupt content in order to reach audiences, social media advertising offers a different approach, both philosophically and operationally: It tries not to seem overly commercial and instead operates, guerrilla-style, to blend seamlessly with social patterns, streams, and platforms (Serazio, 2013).

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that marketers—more than 97 percent, according to a 2014 industry survey of professionals throughout North America, the UK, and Australia—utilize social media as part of their overall communications strategy (Stelzner, 2014). The seismic growth in social media expenditures is both staggering and telling. Forrester Research pegged U.S. spending at $12 billion in 2015—an increase from just $2 billion in 2010 and en route to an estimated $27 billion by 2020 (Miglani, 2015). Globally, eMarketer projected 2015 spending would inflate to $24 billion—more than doubling from just two years earlier (eMarketer, 2015). These figures, while clearly a testament to the sprawling digital media landscape, also reflect widespread disillusionment with more traditional techniques of and channels for persuasion. Thus, before examining how social media communication is reconfiguring marketing discourses and practices, it is useful to take a look back at the recent history of the advertising-media system.

**Contextual Crises**

An appraisal of the contemporary state of advertising provides the necessary backstory to understanding the allure of social media. Though admittedly painting the industrial history in broad strokes, a series of escalating threats to the traditional advertising model have compelled marketers to explore alternative opportunities to deliver their messages. Chief among these fears and laments is the proliferation of ad-skipping technologies. From 1980s-era worries over the VCR and remote control to more recent anxiety directed at spam filters, DVR recordings, and “Do Not Call” registries, these tactics of avoidance represent—to marketers, at least—a “backlash” against unwanted commercial exposure (Evans, 2012: 12). One recent estimate holds that more than 200 million people worldwide regularly employ some kind of ad-blocking software and, given the presumed impatience of younger Web users, those rates are only projected to increase (Block shock, 2015). Together, these forces have hastened various eulogies about “the death of advertising” as we know it (Rust and Oliver, 1994).

The pervasive sentiment that there is more advertising than ever to evade—as consumers wade through the thickets of a “mature sign economy” within advanced capitalist nations—has also prompted advertisers to rethink traditional communicative approaches (Goldman and Papson, 1996: 8). Tallying a precise figure for advertising exposure has long been an inexact science, with widely varying definitions, methodologies, and contexts for assessing “clutter.” One of the more extreme—though often cited—estimates from market research firm Yankelovich suggests that people now face as many as 5,000 ads competing for their attention on a daily basis (Story, 2007). Critiquing the promotional overload that seems to define contemporary environments, cultural critic James Twitchell (1996) contends, “Almost every physical object now carries advertising, almost every human environment is suffused with advertising, almost every moment of time is calibrated by advertising” (56). Naturally, then, the rise of social media has lent itself to the latest frontier in this persistent “colonization” of communication formats (McAllister, 1996).

These patterns of ad-skipping and commercial clutter have, moreover, taken shape amidst a fragmentation of media and society that has meant smaller segments of the audience pie for advertisers to divvy up (Turow, 1997). For nearly a quarter-century, advertisers could count on the vast majority of American homes tuning into one of just three television networks during prime time scheduling. By the start of the new millennium, cable channels had collectively garnered bigger audiences than the network share and, a decade later, studies showed the time that Americans spent with digital media had surpassed the amount watching television (Delo, 2013b; Jenkins, 2006). Such findings mirror the patterns of audience fragmentation in other geo-national contexts, such as the UK (Oliver & Ohlbaum, 2011). If advertising once bought and sold audiences in “tonnage” bulk – and if “it seemed logical to use media vehicles to mass-produce customers in the same way that the factories mass-produced the merchandise” – then the new conditions ushered in by Facebook and Twitter demand a more nimble, targeted commercial alternative (Turow, 2005: 108–109). With widespread audience immersion in these networked, co-creative media contexts, advertising professionals have adopted the rhetoric that “the age of mass advertising is over” and that social media might offer a necessary solution (Deuze, 2007b: 126).

When articulating their motivations for exploring such social media strategies, practitioners routinely cite all three of these conditions—avoidance, clutter, and fragmentation—as part of a churning industrial maelstrom. It is, however, a fourth challenge—trustworthiness—that makes traditional advertising so comparatively lacking and social media opportunities so enticing. One recent survey reveals that only four percent of Americans believe that marketers conduct themselves with integrity (defined as “always keeping promises”) (Morrison, 2015). Scholarly research has further found that consumers do not particularly trust advertising in any of the dominant forms of mass media (e.g., TV, newspapers, radio, magazine, and the internet); rather, consumers deploy an automatic cynicism to deal with advertising within those confines (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Soh et al., 2007). At the same time, a global study of trust in advertising by Nielsen, an audience measurement company, confirmed the long-standing truism that personal recommendations from friends and family rate the highest as compared to professionally created messages (Nielsen, 2013). Naturally, then, advertisers would begin to turn toward settings wherein this personal communication flourishes. As a writer for *Inc*. magazine emblematically enthused:

Often we think of social media as a way to drive traffic to websites, or build brand awareness or as another channel for marketing communications… but one of the best outcomes with social media is how it can *build trust in customers and the general public that ultimately adds to your bottom line* (Campbell, 2014, para. 3, italics added for emphasis).

**Proto-History**

Despite the upbeat euphoria over this seemingly innovative approach to promotion, social media marketing—both theoretically and as an industrial practice—needs to be placed within a timeline that well predates the rise of Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Before these digital platforms emerged, the strategy of deploying peer influence was known simply as “word-of-mouth” or “buzz” marketing (see Serazio, 2013, for expanded detail of this summary). An early incarnation of these techniques can be traced as far back as the first World War, when the Committee on Public Information enlisted opinion leaders (“Four Minute Men”) in communities across the United States to propagandize their neighbors to build military support (Ewen, 1996). Such tactics inspired Edward Bernays (1928), frequently hailed as the “father of public relations,” to leverage the authority of third-party intermediaries in hopes of swaying public opinion; today, social media strategists attempt to achieve much the same. Though perhaps best known for spearheading the “Torches of Freedom” campaign, which exploited the women’s suffrage movement to position cigarette smoking as a conduit to gender equality, Bernays also famously increased bacon sales by convincing physicians to recommend it to their patients under the guise of a “hearty” breakfast (Cutlip, 1994). Similarly, beauty and kitchenware companies like Avon and Tupperware found success by targeting female consumers through their social networks—recruiting respectable women of the community and organizing party dates to embed sales strategies (Clarke, 1999; Manko, 1997). Over the years, such schemes also found their way into both political “astroturfing” (i.e., implanting grassroots momentum) and pop music promotion—the assumption being that fans and supporters can do the best and most authentic shilling on behalf of campaigning candidates and record labels (Serazio, 2013, 2014, 2015, forthcoming). Youth have, in particular, been pursued through these proto-social media machinations—as seen in “teen peer-to-peer marketing” (Quart, 2003). By the early 2000s, this industry had grown fast enough that a Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association could be formally chartered.

Yet even as marketers were “discovering” the utility of everyday social practices among consumers—concomitant with the waning of faith in mass media efficacy—scholars had long since established these patterns as fundamental to understanding how interpersonal influence flows throughout society. Word-of-mouth marketing—and, later, its social media stepchild—exists largely because of diffusion: the theory that ideas and trends spread over time from innovative individuals through to mass adoption (Rogers, 1962). Moreover, a related “two-step flow” concept holds that there are “opinion leaders” found in every social network that facilitate the outreach of those mass media messages (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006). Such individuals are imbued with significant “social” or “subcultural” capital, depending on the theoretical formulation (Bourdieu, 2001; Thornton, 1996).

Marketers—unsurprisingly—lust after these opinion leaders and hope to draw them in as brand evangelists; one of the largest word-of-mouth firms, BzzAgent, boasts upwards of a million participants across the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. ([www.bzzagent.com](http://www.bzzagent.com), 2015). As brand ambassadors, individuals receive free products to try out, talk about with friends, and then provide feedback to clients about those interactions (Balter and Butman, 2005). One practitioner who has hired barflies, doormen, Little League moms, and mass transit commuters to show off such samples likens the strategy to “real life product placement” (Eisenberg, 2002).

With the rise of the internet—and the explosion of user-generated content enabled by digital tools–word-of-mouth sparked interest in a “word-of-mouse” equivalent (Word of mouse, 2007). The voracious market for “interactive” or “two-way” communication emerges at a moment when the *network* – rather than *broadcasting*—is upheld as the “core organizing principle of this [new] communication environment” (Bruns, 2008: 14). Between Amazon reviews, Facebook updates, and YouTube commentary, conversations that had been private and ephemeral are now rendered more public and quantifiable than ever before. Advertisers, particularly those clinging tightly to the rhetoric of “lost control,” endeavor to secure part of this market “share” by deftly managing social media communication. But how do these professionals strategize and coordinate their efforts amidst the heady brew of digital options? To what extent have they been able to regain control of the social media conversation? How might these practices challenge and/or reaffirm existing power relations—including those between producers and consumers of advertising content? And what are the socio-cultural implications of these changes for consumer-citizens who increasingly live their lives *in and through* (digital) media (Deuze, 2012)?

The following sections find answers to these questions by illustrating the new holy trinity of social marketing: earned media (i.e., promotion-driven publicity); owned media (i.e., content channels directly controlled by marketers); and paid media (i.e., the traditional purchase of ad time and space). And quite symptomatic of the emergent logics animating 21st century marketers, “neither earned media nor owned media *explicitly involves advertising*” (Turow, 2012: 133).

**Social Media Marketing’s Holy Trinity**

Earned Media

Within this much-hyped marketing triad, earned media represents word-of-mouth promotion that is amplified by the networked capability of digital platforms. Simply put, earned media signals online buzz: It is the one-off YouTube clip that goes viral; the glowing product review posted on a blog or Amazon; the auspicious brand-centric moment that suddenly rouses the Twitterverse. “Authentic” and “organic” are frequent euphemisms for earned media; as one popular social media marketing guidebook exhorts:

The best social media marketing is always going to be done by your fans, not by you, so get out of their way… Motivate your fans to create content on social networking sites for you. Organic content is much more convincing (Zarrella, 2010: 67, 76).

Such “motivat[ion]” may take many forms. A felicitous earned media exemplar comes from the British supermarket chain Sainsbury’s: In 2011, “3 ½” year-old Lily Robinson wrote a letter inquiring why the company’s “tiger bread” was named as such, rather than what she considered the much more apt “giraffe bread” (Stevens, 2012). Chris King, a Sainsbury’s customer service representative, responded to the toddler’s query with a letter concurring, “I think renaming tiger bread giraffe bread is a brilliant idea—it looks much more like the blotches on a giraffe than the stripes on a tiger, doesn’t it?” King included a £3 Sainsbury’s gift card with his charming response, which was signed “Chris King (age 27 and 1/3).” When Robinson’s mother posted the letter exchange on her blog, the “giraffe bread” story went viral—garnering significant mainstream press coverage along with more than 150,000 Facebook “likes” and nearly 50,000 “shares.” Indeed, the response was so profound that a representative for the company later announced it was officially changing the appellation of the bread. From a strategic planning perspective, it is difficult to imagine that Sainsbury’s could have predicted the extent to which a happenstance exchange could burnish their public image.

However, earned media isn’t necessarily *unanticipated,* and many companies go to great lengths to try to steer the online conversation about their brand or product. Emulating the offline seeding practices described above, marketers distribute their wares to social media *influencers*—the voguish term for those with substantial clout in the digital arena (e.g., followers, friends, subscribers). Traditionally, bloggers represented one of the first amateur groups targeted by marketers, likely owing to the platform’s ascendance prior to other social networking sites; increasingly, though, “blogger” activities take place across a raft of social platforms. Given advertisers’ deep-rooted assumptions about women as chiefly “social” shoppers, companies have been especially eager to curry favor with bloggers who have cultivated a following in the fashion, beauty, and parenting realms (Duffy, 2013b). In 2008, relatively early on in marketers’ attempts to leverage digital influence, consumer goods behemoth Procter & Gamble invited more than a dozen “mommy bloggers” to their corporate headquarters for an event orchestrated by their Pampers brand. Dispelling the claim that the company was trying to “buy their loyalty” with this all-expenses paid trip, an external relations representative explained—in terms indicative of social media marketing’s commercial self-effacement—“We’ve made it clear that this is not really about pitching products per se…but exploring areas of common interest, such as baby development and how to help moms in this topsy-turvy time in their lives” (Neff, 2008).

More recently, as these sorts of influencer programs have become a central part of marketers’ strategies, they have expanded in both size and scope. The fashion industry, in particular, has become notorious for comping products to high-ranking bloggers and Instagrammers in hopes of scoring favorable publicity among the sartorially inclined. In her exposé of the gifting suites at Sundance, an independent film festival held annually in Park Springs, Utah, *New York Times* reporter Sheila Marikar (2015) explained how fashion bloggers, Viners, and Instagrammers are eclipsing traditional celebrities as public taste-makers. To woo these social media personalities—some of who boast readership in the millions—advertisers and publicists furnished them with brand-named clothes, shoes, tech accessories, and even an all-expenses-paid trip to Aruba. In exchange for the gratis, the digital influencers were expected to share photos and reviews of the Sundance swag with their social media friends and followers in an “organic” way. Highlighting the financial boon of this system to marketers, a public relations representative explained, “We see higher conversions off those girls than we do with celebrity placement that we might have paid money for” (ibid). Here, the rep nods to an assumption that underpins the earned media imperative: persuasive communication is deemed “authentic” precisely because it is not paid.

To be sure, discourses of authenticity have long been at the heart of commercial strategy—particularly in the US context. By the time Coke was famously touted as the “real thing” to American consumers in the early 1970s, marketers understood the value of using authenticity-draped pitches as a response to the consumerist desire for expressive individualism (Duffy 2013a; Frank, 1997). Yet “authenticity” as a cultural construct seems to have taken on a particular salience in the social media era; as Alice Marwick (2013) argues of the Web 2.0 ethos, “Authenticity has become an axiom that primarily differentiates user-generated brands from each other” (248). Thus, the authority of fashion bloggers and other “influencers” comes not from traditional markers of expertise or prestige but rather, from their ability to position themselves as “relatable” throughout their arsenal of social media content (Duffy, 2013b; Duffy 2013c). Yet as we discuss below, this rhetoric of “relatability” effectively veils some of the covert marketing strategies deployed to peddle products—*for pay*.

Owned Media

If earned media is meant to connote “authenticity,” then an apt euphemism for owned media might be the equally buzzy term “engagement.” Recall that owned media are channels that are under marketers’ direct control: webpages, mobile sites, and brands’ “official” or “verified” social media destinations. British luxury retailer Burberry, oft-regarded as a pioneer among prestige brands on the digital frontier, has been delivering content through the company’s Facebook page since 2009; posts include “behind-the-scenes” photo shoots, footage from catwalks, product images, and store opening announcements. Above all, this kaleidoscope of imagery, videos, and text is designed to be “sharable,” which is all the more vital considering their Facebook page has close to 17 million followers across the globe (Swire, 2014). The retailer’s more recent forays into social media marketing include a Twitter account dedicated exclusively to customer service inquiries, a YouTube channel that has amassed more than a 180,000 subscribers, and an Instagram account that includes live video footage from its runway shows. To further engage fans in their owned media content, Burberry maintains a micro-site, “The Art of the Trench,” populated by images of “real people” donning their iconic line of coats. Created in 2009 and re-launched in 2014, this user-generated initiative includes features that allow users to filter the style of the garment by style, color, and gender; recordings of “up-and-coming artists” provides a soundtrack for the site.

To date, legions of companies have—like Burberry—launched micro-sites that leverage the content, publicity, and networked capacity of social media users. In the ever-popular “contest” model for social media participation, corporations invite photo and video submissions featuring fans with branded goods. Doritos’ “Crash the Super Bowl Contest” might be the most prominent example, in which competitors create ads in the hopes of landing them in a television break during the U.S.’s most widely watched sports event. Initiatives such as this fit quite cozily into the wider context of convergence culture, where the boundaries between production and consumption are blurring and power is ostensibly being redeployed to the “newly empowered consumers” (Jenkins 2006: 19). Though such initiatives are upheld in the popular imagination as potential springboards to fame and creative success, they have also been critiqued for the extent to which they rely upon the unpaid labor of brand ambassadors (Carah, 2011; Duffy, 2009). After all, traditional media and advertising companies don’t need to bankroll researchers, producers, and promoters if self-enterprising “co-creators” are willing to do the work for free (or the oft-deterred promise of “exposure”) (Burgess and Green, 2009).

In another example of using owned media to solicit co-creative content, *Cosmopolitan* targeted a young, socially connected female audience with their 2010 “Fun, Fearless, Female” user-generated campaign (see Duffy, 2013b, for an overview). A multi-platform promotion, the contest invited women around the world to “be the star” of a *Cosmopolitan* ad campaign that was timed to coincide with the magazine’s international expansion. The initiative was announced on the brand’s YouTube channel with a video featuring then-editor-in-chief Kate White, publisher Donna Kalajian Lagani, and singer Jordin Sparks, among others. Signaling the increasingly global nature of the brand, “readers and users around the planet” could upload their photos on the website, cosmofff.com, and “see themselves as part of the campaign,” Lagani announced. After submitting a personal photo on the website—using either a Facebook photo or another digital image—visitors were immersed in a digital simulation of a “*Cosmo* Photo Studio” and given virtual “makeovers.” Young women were then encouraged to share their mock photo shoots with their friends via Facebook, a nod toward the growing utility of social networks as promotional and data-generating tools. Furthermore, the contest section of the campaign required participants to provide their names, street and email addresses—personal information that could then be harvested by corporate partners. As this example suggests, the ambition in launching such initiatives is twofold: both capturing detailed personal information about consumer preferences and also seeding “authentic” buzz into social network communities.

Paid Media

“Paid media” in the digital world harkens back to its analogue antecedents: marketers *pay for* time and space while taking full advantage of the customizable, trackable potential of the internet. Positioning the unique benefits of “paid media” as a mechanism for industrial control, a social business strategy executive summarized, “[Such] initiatives usually target prospects in an effort to create brand awareness or new customer acquisition…While it can certainly be expensive, you have complete control over the creative, content and marketing” (Brito, 2013). To date, most, if not all, of the top social media platforms are ad-supported, although their technological and targeting capacities continue to evolve in rapid succession.

Although it has become the biggest beneficiary of social media marketing, Facebook appeared initially cautious, preferring to build up its user base (and the enormous sums of time spent on the site) before monetizing those eyeballs and hours of interaction through advertising intrusion (van Dijck, 2013). As with almost any form of advertising, what began confined to the margins (e.g., banners on the side) has increasingly crept into and colonized more central spaces (e.g., sponsored updates in the “News Feed” timeline) (Delo, 2013a). No doubt attentive to eye-tracking research that reveals habitual blind spots in places that advertising regularly appears—and building upon a central thesis here, that advertisers seek to co-opt people for their pitches—Facebook began exploiting the names of users’ friends in the ad content, if they had “liked” a particular product or brand. Once again, the exploitation of the credibility and social capital of ordinary individuals—as though “micro-celebrities” in their own right—is a central ambition and tension in this space (Marwick, 2013).

Twitter played it similarly coy in its early days, before expanding the opportunities for sponsored tweets and promoted trends to interested partners; the “real-time” immediacy of the network (and, therefore, potential for on-the-fly messaging responsiveness) has been one of its most sought-after assets (Learmonth, 2013). The progressive evolution of these platforms from non-commercial to ad-subsidized has set the stage for marketing on newer—and more spectacularly visual—social networks. Pinterest, for instance, has rolled out “promoted pins,” and more recently “cinematic pins”—both of which are positioned as ways to engage captive users who may potentially “click through” and purchase the displayed product. The YouTube model, by contrast, is heavily dependent on pre-roll advertisements, which have a historically low viewership because of their skippable feature. Consequently, advertisers have responded by trying to craft slicker ads that reach people in the crucial, initial five-second viewing window. Geico, in particular, has been lauded for creative spots that “specifically tailor ads to pre-roll”—an indicator that marketers are trying to work *with* –rather than against—digitally enabled ad-avoidance technologies (Nudd, 2015). Here, too, “lost control” —and the adaptation to a more complicated social media set of commercial circumstances—resonates with advertisers.

**Evaluating the Social Media Marketing Mix**

Of course, as the previous discussion makes clear, the boundaries between earned, owned, and paid media are often quite fluid as marketers attempt to optimize impact on social media denizens. In the “contest” model described above, for instance, both paid (i.e., ads promoting the contest) and owned (i.e., the contest micro-site) media strategies are implemented in an effort to mobilize consumers to become (un/under-paid) promotional channels (earned media). As Pepsi’s vice president for marketing explained of a social media contest they organized soliciting fan photos, “A Pepsi brand communication going from friend to friend is much more powerful than brand to consumer” (Zmuda, 2013). In other cases, these pillars of the social media marketing mix are integrated into more comprehensive marketing plans that also involve traditional media. Such is the case with “alternate reality marketing” schemes, which—like *The Dark Knight*’s “Why So Serious?” promotion—tend to be elaborate, cross-platform, interactive, puzzle-like experiences that are frequently employed on behalf of films and video games (Serazio, 2013: 143).

Among the more insidious forms of this blurring, and owing much to the stealth marketing programs of yesteryear, are paid media initiatives that are deployed under the pretense of earned or “organic” media. So-called “native advertising” tries to pass advertising content off as editorial news or entertainment, much like traditional magazines have done through oft-disparaged (and presumably ignored) *advertorials*. The immensely popular Buzzfeed, a so-called “laboratory for viral content” that draws 150 million viewers each month, is a prime exemplar of this tactical blurring: The start-up boasts a 75-person division that is “dedicated to creating for brands custom video and list-style advertising content that looks similar to its own editorial content” (Isaac, 2014). This breach of church-state ideals threatens to leech journalistic credibility much as Facebook and Twitter have leeched off our interpersonal credibility with their efforts to blur social and commercial content.

It is this very same logic—or perhaps more accurately, surreptitiousness—that has powered the tremendous growth of paid influencer programs, wherein digital media personalities receive payment to puff various goods among their social media audiences. Although regulatory bodies in several Western countries now require bloggers to disclose these payment deals (as we discuss in a later section), the extent to which this actually happens is unclear. So-called “influencer marketing programs” have become so pervasive that a whole industry has sprung up to broker deals between brand marketers and social media producers. Often, the latter are selected, evaluated, and compensated on the basis of their digital metrics: followers, shares, views, and more—a testament to the new currency that increasingly drives commercial activity the social media age.

And, indeed, the advertising industry as a whole has begun to reconsider its system of evaluation: Rather than simply judge return-on-investment based upon how many audiences are “*reached* *by*” a given campaign, firms now privilege how many people “*reached out*” with convergence contributions including likes, shares, retweets, submissions, and comments (Serazio, 2013: 126, italics original). Messages circulated from peer-to-peer (in what quickly came to be known as “viral” advertising) are held in greater esteem than those simply forced by a mass media outlet onto a “passive” receiver.

The incredible abundance of personal information that is available through social media channels naturally captivates advertisers who have implemented profiling and targeting practices. Two case studies, in particular, stand out as exemplary of these ambitions. In 2011, the Polish vodka brand, Ultimat, released “The Social Life Audit,” the first-ever Facebook app that scans and rates a user’s profile and content across a dozen dimensions including “social status” (photos posted per week), “crew size” (number of people counted in those photos, through facial recognition software), “trendiness” (check-ins at popular locations), “nocturnality” (check-ins tracked late at night), and even “good times” (percentage of smiling faces in photos) and “hookup” potential (percentage of photos tagged with single people). The app won plaudits from *Mashable* and *Creativity* magazine, with the latter acknowledging that, “In the social media age, you are what you put on Facebook” (Creativity Online, 2011; Wasserman, 2011). In effect, the campaign represented a branded variation on the “Klout Score,” a social media analytic standard which measures the interactivity and influence of users across a variety of online platforms; with the “Audit” app, Ultimat aimed for opt-in viral circulation, social comparison, increased partying (tips were given to improve low scores), and affiliated mindshare along the way.

On the other hand, Amnesty International New Zealand’s “Trial By Timeline” app exemplified much the same means of social media-derived profiling and targeting, but toward very different ends. The 2013 campaign, which was meant to drum up a sense of empathy for and solidarity with political prisoners and human rights victims worldwide, developed an algorithm to similarly scan a Facebook user’s timeline “to an unprecedented level” and “[take] note of anything that could be used against you,” including likes, postings, friendships, demographic information, and political and religious views. It subsequently delivered a summary of hundreds of punishments that would have been administered in countries around the world where such behavior is outlawed (e.g., “stoned for drinking alcohol, imprisoned and beaten just for talking to the opposite sex, or hung for premarital sex”) (Trial by timeline, 2014). The campaign claimed a total reach of 15 million people, being particularly effective in reaching “key online influencers” on Twitter (e.g., those sharing results had an average of more than 1,500 followers), and it garnered the top prize that year in Facebook’s non-profit awards category. The potential demonstrated by these two campaigns – one to incentivize bacchanalia, the other to caution about the international consequences of it – show how much advertisers have to gain in systematically plumbing social media data for personalized insights and attention-grabbing content. Whether any governmental authorities will step in to oversee access to and manipulation of that data is another matter.

**Regulating Social Media Content**

As commercial logics make further inroads into various aspects of online life,

there is growing concern about the extent to which advertisers are monitoring and harnessing consumer information—a fear pithily summarized as the “creep factor” (Turow 2013). Such apprehension about marketers’ access to and control over personal data has triggered backlash from grassroots advocacy groups and consumer protection agencies alike. In 2013, for instance, thousands of Facebook members rallied against the social network through the “Say NO to suggested posts” community page. Group members denounced Facebook’s move to better tailor ads through the site’s “suggested posts” feature; however, participation in the group waned after a few months. More recently, in a *New York Times* op-ed critiquing Facebook’s data monitoring practices, internet scholar Zeynep Tufecki (2015) proposed a novel economic model where users could pay a fee to *opt out* of the network’s surveillance activities. Based on a calculation that Facebook makes about 20 cents per user each month in advertising revenue, Tufecki envisioned a micropayment system wherein social media users could contribute a small fee for an ad-free experience.

Government organizations have a more formal charge to uphold the rights of citizen-consumers in the digital age. Yet the velocity of change and complexity of activities involved in social media marketing means that regulators have struggled to keep pace with the industry’s rapid innovations. Questions and concerns have revolved primarily around the appropriate means of disclosing the commercial origin of social media speech and the recommended protections for consumers’ digital data (Hayes, 2013). Overall, Europe’s system of regulating digital advertising is considered much more robust than that of the U.S. (Delo, 2012). European policies tend to limit the kind of information companies can collect and use to deliver hyper-targeted social media messages. Moreover, Europeans are more likely than Americans to opt out of online behavioral tracking and block advertising in those spaces (Sloane, 2015). In the United States, by contrast, marketers are afforded more leeway to self-regulate; as such, privacy watchdogs believe that the nation “has lagged behind other countries when it comes to protecting consumer privacy rights” (Arbel, 2016). In 2016, the Federal Communications Commission proposed a series of rules that would constrain the ability of internet service providers to share customer data with advertisers; perhaps not surprisingly, the projected plan generated significant backlash from broadband networks (ibid).

Guidelines governing the appropriate means of disclosing the commercial nature of social media messages—such as the earlier mentioned “native advertising”—also vary by country. In the United Kingdom, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the industry’s self-regulatory organization, has aggressively pursued cases of surreptitious marketing. In 2014, the ASA ruled that vloggers must clearly disclose the paid nature of their relationships with brand sponsors; the decision came in the wake of a social media promotion for Oreo cookies that involved several British YouTube stars. Though some of the social media celebs nodded toward the company’s involvement with elusive statements thanking Oreo “for making this video possible,” the ASA ruled that such acknowledgments were “insufficient to make clear the marketing nature of the videos” (Sweney, 2014). Two years later, the ASA banned the *Buzzfeed* listicle, “14 Laundry Fails We’ve All Experienced,” which was actually a paid advertorial by British fabric care company Dylon (Sweney 2016). Also in 2016, the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland announced its own set of directives for sponsored blog content; the guidelines hold bloggers to the same ethical standards as other forms of “media,” in part by ensuring that “consumers know when they’re receiving marketing material” (Cullen 2016).

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is the key regulatory body responsible for overseeing social media marketing in the U.S. In 2013, the FTC issued a report stressing that advertising embedded in online spaces needed to disclose itself as such “clearly and conspicuously” to prevent consumer deception; moreover, claims had to be truthful and substantiated, as has been mandated—albeit, if not always upheld—for offline content (Commission, 2013: 6). The updated FTC rules also required bloggers to disclose any products, services, or samples they received for free. Of course, by requiring that a posting be identified as advertising via an #ad or #sponsored hash-tag preface, the FTC cuts against that which marketers and clients value most about social media in the first place: the fact that its messages can *avoid* seeming like advertising (Serazio, 2013). Although the FTC has only punished a handful of violators (see, for example, Learmonth, 2012; Morrison, 2014), one of the most high-profile cases involved luxury department store Lord & Taylor. As part of a promotion for their new spring clothing line, the retailer paid fifty fashion influencers to showcase a new dress on their Instagram feed; however, none of the bloggers (who reportedly received between $1,000 and $4,000 for the post) disclosed their compensation. The FTC ruled that this slickly produced promotion was misleading to consumers, and Lord & Taylor subsequently got a “slap on the wrist” before a settlement was reached (Coffee, 2016; Moran, 2016). Other examples include a music instruction software company that was punished $250,000 for paying for fake online reviews, and Sony settled with the FTC following charges that its advertising agency enlisted employees to boost Twitter buzz about a new PlayStation device without disclosing their affiliation (Learmonth, 2012; Morrison, 2014).

To be sure, any review of the legal oversight of these efforts that can be offered here will have to be temporary and certainly subject to revision as new codes are written (and new platforms inevitably take shape confounding the clarity of those codes). At the same time, there are certain spaces where marketers routinely err on the side of caution, particularly concerning children. Indeed, despite the massive growth of the youth market for social networking and gaming sites —including Moshi Monsters with its tens of millions of members worldwide—many remained surprisingly ad-free, given the perceived risk of minors’ privacy (Slutsky, 2011).

**Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, the meteoric ascent of social media has altered the promotional landscape of the advertising world in profound and complex ways. Industry professionals, once bound by the temporal and spatial constraints of analogue formats—newspaper column inches, radio spots, and TV commercial lengths—now have a dizzying array of channels through which to communicate with potential consumers—seemingly anytime, anywhere. On the surface, at least, the staid era of mass persuasion has been eclipsed by a networked era of individualized, interactive communication. And contemporary advertisers have swiftly become deft (and insidious) experimenters as they jockey for consumers’ eyeballs in the aptly named “attention economy.”

These changes dovetail with a new—or perhaps renewed—industry vernacular that centers on the much-hyped ideals of authenticity and engagement. What underpins these ideals is the realization that brand communication is increasingly dialogical—a shift which cannot be understood apart from the ostensible “democratization” of brands. Beginning in the aughts, as more media content could be conceptualized along a scale from “open” to “closed” in terms of the degree of participation elicited from audiences (versus control maintained by corporations), advertising professionals began to scoff at the “myth” that they “owned and orchestrated” their own brands (Deuze, 2007a; Hanna et al., 2011: 266). And, to be sure, the social media marketing ideal seems much more populist: It stresses “grassroots” dialogue over mass media monologues; hails a consumer who is “in charge” of the brand; and venerates ambitions like genuineness, spontaneity, decentralization, and egalitarianism. Further, by taking a more polysemic approach to the brand (in that it is dependent on diverse interpretations fostered in social media), marketers ostensibly relinquish tight control of the message in favor of hoping to see a variety of messages spread further and, presumably, more credibly. For these reasons, scholars have variously theorized the brand as an “open-ended object,” a “platform for action,” a “building block,” and a “cultural resource,” because “brands work by enabling consumers, by empowering them in particular directions” (Arvidsson, 2006: 8, 68; Holt, 2002: 83; Lury, 2004: 1, 151).

For example, some of the activities profiled in this chapter testify to such rhetorical and operational openness and serendipity: the letter from a (very) young consumer that prompts a product rebranding or the spontaneous product review from an uber-hip social media influencer. In other cases, though, marketers have been able to effectively harness consumer “control” and interactivity in more deliberate ways. Among the best examples is the deployment of “real people” as un- or under-paid brand ambassadors in user-generated content schemes: marketers leverage the *earned* buzz of these programs while capitalizing on the laboring activities of co-creators. To critical scholars, these practices exploit participants in the digital labor system (Andrejevic, 2008; Scholz 2012) and tend to exacerbate existing industrial hierarchies, including those related to gender (Duffy, 2010; Duffy, 2013c). Accordingly, we close by raising the possibility that the infectious rhetoric of “lost control” is in many ways a convenient myth that helps to conceal the extent to which traditional players still exert their influence. While the breakneck clip of social media technologies continues to reshape the relationship between marketing producers and consumers, the power ascribed to the latter might perhaps be more illusory than currently hyped.

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