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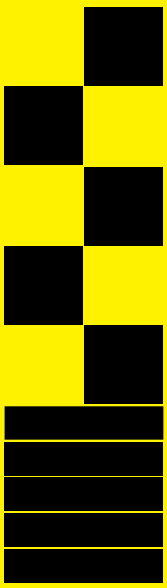
Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty



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James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S VOICE

ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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7 THE NATURAL HISTORY OF ADVERTISING

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ASK a child who is just beginning to read: "What is a newspaper? What is a magazine?" He will speak of news and fiction and advertising as integral parts of the same thing. Explain and argue as much as you like, you will not be able to disturb his primitive conviction that the advertising is not just as much a part of the paper as the news, and that, if the thing is to make sense, it has to make sense as a unit. Tell him that the news and editorials represent one thing, one responsibility, one ethic, one function, one purpose; that the advertising represents another thing, another responsibility, another purpose. He nods vaguely and gives it up.

In other words, the child's instinct leads him to precisely the same conclusion as that set forth and documented in the preceding study of the magazines.

Advertising, in the broadest sense of the word, is as old as trade. The definition offered by Frank Presbrey in his *History and Development of Advertising* would seem to be sufficiently broad and accurate. To quote it again: "Advertising is printed, written, or graphic salesmanship deriving from oral salesmanship."[1] The modern spread and intensified use of the instrument in America is made possible by our almost universal literacy. But ancient graphic and written advertising exhibits a functional relationship to the then current nexus of economic and social fact which is strikingly similar to the contemporary set-up.

[1] [Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929).]

The Babylonian temples were built of sun-baked bricks. Each brick was stamped with the name of the temple and the name of the king who built it. The temples were advertising, just as the Woolworth and Chrysler Buildings are advertising. There is even some justice in Presbrey's observation that these temples represented "an institutional campaign conducted by the kings in behalf of themselves and their dynasties."

The Rosetta Stone is a eulogy of Ptolemy Epiphanes, dating from 136 B.C., in three languages: Coptic, hieroglyphs and Greek. It was erected by the local priests in gratitude for a remission of taxes. The

priests were, in effect, the local satraps of Ptolemy and the Rosetta Stone was functional with respect to the discharge of their responsibility. It was necessary to "sell" Ptolemy to the people, and probably the priests acted at the suggestion, certainly with the approval of their overlord.

When President Roosevelt was inaugurated he proceeded more directly. Using the modern instrumentality of the radio, he sold the American people on the closing of the banks and the incidental wiping out of perhaps $6,000,000,000 of their savings. The priests—the radio broadcasters—contributed free time, and the other priests—the newspapers—contributed enthusiastic approval and applause. With the evidence of this and later triumphs of government-as-advertising before us, those primitive Babylonian practitioners seem hopelessly outclassed.

Since literacy was the privilege of a minority, the Babylonian tradesmen used barkers and symbols. Later, inscriptions were employed. Lead sheets found in ancient Greek temples affirmed the rights of property by cursing the sacrilegious people who did not return lost articles to their owners. In ancient Greece the arts of elocution and music were functional with respect to trade; the Greek auctioneer was an elocutionist and was usually accompanied by a musician.

The word "libel" is Latin. In ancient Rome a libel was a public denouncement of an absconding debtor.

It seems probable that advertising was more or less professionalized in very ancient times. For example there is some reason for believing that the walls of ancient Pompeii may have been controlled by a commercial contractor. Early posters were inscriptions announcing theatrical performances and sports, and commending the facilities of commercial baths. Presbrey renders one such advertisement as follows: "The troop of gladiators of the sedil will fight on the 31st of May. There will be fights with wild animals, and an awning to keep out the sun."

With the break-up of the Roman Empire, advertising shared the general obscuration of the middle ages. Says Presbrey, "For nearly a thousand years, following the decline of Rome, advertising made no progress. Instead, it went backward, following the retreating steps of civilization."

When the profession re-emerges, it is under the changed conditions of the medieval church-state. A decree of Philip Augustus in 1280 proclaims:

"Whosoever is a crier in Paris may go to any tavern he likes and cry its wine, provided they sell wine from the wood and there is no other crier provided for that tavern; and the tavern keeper cannot

prohibit him. If a crier finds people drinking in a tavern he may ask what they pay for the wine they drink; and he may go out and cry the wine at the prices they pay, whether the tavern keeper wishes it or not, provided always that there be no other crier employed for that tavern."

The "just price" for which the crier served was four *dinarii* a day. It was further provided that if the tavern keeper closed his door against the crier, the latter might cry wine at the price of the king's wine, and claim his fee.

Perhaps the last proviso gives a clue to the motivation of Philip Augustus' proclamation. The king was in the wine business, too, and was accordingly interested in the education and expansion of the market. The king's wine was to be sold at a given price, which provided a measuring stick for competition and was doubtless a factor in price maintenance.

As one might expect, the re-birth of advertising coincides with the expansion of trade in Western Europe made possible by the suppression of piracy and banditry by the Hanseatic League. In the sixteenth century the chief form of advertising was the poster. It was called a *si-quis* (if anybody), the derivation being from the Roman lost article posters. Most *si-quis* were want advertisements. The chief billboard in London was St. Paul's Cathedral, which was crowded with lawyers, seamstresses, etc., seeking clients. Like the modern office building or railroad terminal the sixteenth-century church also contained tobacco shops and bookstalls. Tobacco, coffee and books were among the first products advertised. It is in connection with the exploitation of literature by advertising that one encounters, with a glow of pleasure, no less a person than Ben Jonson, in his usual rôle of objector and satirist.

In *Every Man out of his Humor*, one of the characters is Shift, who haunts St. Paul's "for the advancement of a *si-quis* or two, wherein he hath so varied himself that if any of them take he may hull himself up and down in the humorous world a little longer." By 1600 handbills and placards in behalf of books became so common that Jonson enjoined his bookseller to use his works for wrapping paper rather than promote them by the sensational methods then in use.

The objection is particularly interesting as coming from Jonson, who, although he had been successively a bricklayer, a soldier and a playwright, was by nature a scholar-poet, and an intellectual aristocrat. He probably felt, like the modern historians Morrison and Commager, that advertising had already "elevated mendacity to the status of a profession." He tolerated the noble patrons to whom he dedicated his works because they helped to support him; but he clearly despised the "new people," the middle-class business men,

who, having tasted the sweets of profit in the expanding market, were marshaling their forces for the later conquests of manufacturing and commerce.

Art was conscripted into the service of trade when Hogarth was employed at making inn signs and illustrating handbills for tradesmen, including one advertising himself as an engraver and another for his sisters, who were designers of frocks.

By the end of the seventeenth century the apparatus of poster and handbill advertising was functioning at full blast within the limits set by the still primitive facilities of transport and communication. Practically all the stigmata of the modern practice of advertising were present. The greed and social irresponsibility of the advertiser expressed itself in sweeping claims and cheerful misrepresentation; his tastelessness in bad art and worse English. The seventeenth century trader was a go-getting fellow—a low fellow coming up, with nothing to lose in the matter of social status and a world of profit to gain. The nobility and the princes of the church denounced him; city ordinances were passed in London threatening with severe penalties tradesmen who were so immodest as to advertise the prices of their wares. But the advertiser met scorn with scorn and drove the logic of his acquisitive opportunity always harder and higher. A French visitor to London in the middle of the eighteenth century comments on the huge and ridiculous ornamentation of the shop signs. As some of the early prints made us realize, the streets of seventeenth century London were scarcely less vulgar and commercial than the Great White Way of modern New York.

Business, however, still lacked its major tool, the press. It is upon the evolution of this instrument that we must now concentrate our attention.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the press begins and ends as an instrument of government, whether official or unofficial, actual, or potential and aspiring. What it is today it was in its earliest beginnings. The invention of printing approximately coincided with the early struggles for power of the rising middle class. In this long chess game, with its shifting alliances, its victories, defeats and drawn battles and its unstable truces, the press is the queen without whose support the king, the official ruler, is helpless: a most bawdy, promiscuous and treacherous queen, whose power is today threatened by a new backstairs mistress, the radio. The press has played virtuous, even heroic rôles in the past, and still does. But on the whole, she is like Archibald MacLeish's poet in his *Invocation to the Social Muse*: She sleeps in both camps and is faithful to neither.

Although the press is and always was an instrument of government, it is even more important to point out that the press came to

birth as an instrument of trade, which was aspiring to be government. From her earliest memory the infant Messalina was rocked in the cradle of business.

In 1594 the French philosopher Montaigne published an essay entitled *Of a Defect in our Policies* in which he urged the establishment of exchanges for tradesmen and buyers. As a result a "Bureau D'Affiches" was established in Paris. It functioned for only a brief period and was followed by a quite obvious technical advance, the publication of a *Journal D'Affiches* (Journal of Public Notices) which is said to be the first periodical in the history of Western Europe. The first issue appeared Oct. 14, 1612. It was a want-ad medium, no more and no less—newspaper of, by and for trade, and this it has continued to be for more than 300 years. It is now called *Les Petites Affiches*, and is still a periodical of want-ads and public notices. An humble and virtuous creature, *Les Petites Affiches*—the Martha of newspaperdom. Let us keep her in mind when we come to study the careers of her successors and rivals, the Marys, Ninons, Carmens and Messalinas who have relegated her to her present comfortable and respectable bourgeois obscurity.

Trade, then, was news, and trade plus printer's ink became advertising, but still news. Abortive public registers were chartered by James I and Charles I in England. Henry Walker published his *Perfect Occurences* in 1649—this being a house organ for his Public Register or *Enterance*. But government was jealous of the emergent fourth estate. *Perfect Occurences* was suppressed in 1650 and Walker's Public Registry, being deprived of advertising, soon died.

But the forces of the trading class, with God, as usual, conscripted under their banner, were marching toward the conquest of power. In 1657 Marchmont Needham, Cromwell's official journalist, was publishing the bi-weekly *Mercurius Politicus* and *Publick Intelligencer*. He established eight offices of "public advice" in London and in 1657 obtained permission from Cromwell to issue, in addition to the news letter, a weekly sheet called the *Publick Adviser*. All the advertisements, then called "advices," were of the same size. The fees were four shillings for a workman, five for a bookseller and ten for a physician. Needham had a monopoly advantage and used it ruthlessly. When, a little later, he raised his prices, the indignant tradesmen denounced him as "The Devil's Half-Crown Newsmonger."

Since the news letter was a medium for the literate exclusively, it was natural that booksellers were among the earliest advertisers. But the medicine man and the realtor were also early on the scene. Since the mass market for food and clothing was not yet literate, such advertisers do not appear until later. At this point it is merely important to note that trade, for its full development, required universal literacy,

and that the later use of public funds for school purposes was conceivably motivated less by idealistic considerations than by the needs of trade.

Cromwell's Ironsides were business men out for power and marching under the banner of God. They needed spiritual food, and when Cromwell marched into Scotland, a newsbook was published for distribution to his army of "Saints." Here are some specimen titles of the books advertised in that publication, all of them obviously good selling copy for the Puritan conquest of power, just as, nearly three centuries later, Bruce Barton's *Man Nobody Knows* became the bible of our modern Rotarian saints, marching under the banner of "Service":

Hooks and eyes for Believers Breeches
A Most Delectable Sweet Perfumed nosegay for God's saints to smell at.
The spiritual Mustard pot to make the Soul Sneeze with Devotion.

Upon the restoration in 1660 Charles II quickly put a stop to that. He recognized the growing power of the press by suppressing it. Instead, a two-page publication was issued called the *London Gazette*. It refused to carry advertising on the ground that commercial announcement had no place in a "paper of intelligence," that is to say, a newspaper which presented non-commercial news. As a matter of fact the *London Gazette* was an official government newspaper and is still published as such. Later in the reign of Charles II it did publish advertisements, but in a separate sheet. The monarchy continued to regard the press as a government function and privilege. In 1665 Roger L'Estrange was given a patent as "Surveyor of the Press" which included the exclusive privilege of "writing, printing and publishing advertisements."

The amiable monarch was not averse to making a little money out of trade, although he doubtless considered the upstart tradesmen as permanently objectionable. The poet, Fleetwood Sheppard, who was one of his favorites, doubtless expressed the royal view when he wrote the following criticism of current advertising practice:

> They [the current newsbooks of the year 1657 when this was written] have now found out another quaint device in their trading. There is never a mountebank who either by professing of chemistry of any other art drains money from the people of the nation but these arch-cheats must have a share in the booty, and besides filling up his paper, which he knew not how to do otherwise, he must have a feeling to authorize the charlatan forsooth, by putting him into the newsbook.

Yet Charles II himself, shortly after his accession, was obliged to turn advertiser, as witness the following plaintive appeal to his rascally subjects:

> We must call on you again for a Black Dog between the greyhound and a spaniel, no white about him only a streak on his breast, and tayl a little bobbed. It is His Majestie's own dog, and doubtless was stolen. Whoever finds him may acquaint any at Whitehall, for the dog was better known at Court than those who stole him. Will they never leave robbing His Majesty? Must he not keep a dog?

By the middle of the eighteenth century a considerable press, whose principal support derived from advertising, was established in England and on the continent. The essence of the modern phenomenon had been achieved and its essence was clearly recognized by contemporary commentators. We may therefore conclude this outline of the early history of advertising with the following quotation from Dr. Samuel Johnson, writing in the *Idler* in the year 1759:

> Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promises and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic. Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement [Promise them everything and blow hard, said my early tutor, the sea lion]. The true pathos of advertisements must have sunk deep into the heart of every man that remembers the zeal shown by the seller of the anodyne necklace, for the ease and safety of the poor toothing infants and the affection with which he warned every mother that she would never forgive herself if her infant should perish without a necklace.... The trade of advertising is now so near to perfection that it is not easy to propose any improvement. But as every art ought to be exercised in true subordination to the public good, I cannot but propose it as a moral question to these masters of the public ear, whether they do not sometimes play too wantonly with our passions.

Dr. Johnson wrote as a good liberal of his period and his phrases have a familiar ring. He might almost have been reviewing a volume by Stuart Chase or applauding the demand of Messrs. Schlink and Kallet for a new law to restrain the iniquities and hypocrisies of advertising. In justice to these writers one must acknowledge both the value of their exposures and the even more significant fact that all three have moved steadily leftward in their political orientation.

What the good doctor did not see—and contemporary liberals seem scarcely more acute—was that, given a literate population, the press *becomes* one of the instruments of government; that if the press is financed by the vested property interests of business, then in the end business becomes government. Finally, the good doctor should have realized the futility of introducing moral and ethical values into a trade relationship. The concepts of "good" and "bad" suffer a sea change in this relationship; good advertising is advertising which makes profits and bad advertising is advertising which does not make profits. Neither the "regulative" attempts of government

nor the idealistic campaigns of reformers in and out of advertising will seriously affect the economic determinants which operate in this relationship. At least they haven't for over three hundred years.

Dr. Johnson felt that the art of advertising had reached approximate perfection in the middle of the eighteenth century. In a sense he was right. The archetypes of contemporary technical practice are almost all to be found in the newspaper and handbill advertising of that period. The later developments have been chiefly those of speed and spread, with, however, this qualification: these developments have brought into being a series of interlocking vested interests, which, while entailed *effects* of the underlying economic process, have also come to function as important causes, influencing and even determining to a considerable extent the subsequent evolution of our civilization.

The point of view adhered to in this book is that of regarding the instruments of social communication as *instruments of rule, of government*. In this view the people who control and manage our daily and periodical press, radio, etc., become a sort of administrative bureaucracy acting in behalf of the vested interests of business. But every bureaucracy becomes itself a vested interest; it develops its own will to expansion and power. Bureaucracies are likely to be what governments die of. In Russia a bureaucracy was set up, theoretically, to solve the tasks of socialist construction, and gradually, with the coming to birth of the classless society and the elimination of the conflicts which the state power must adjust or suppress, to "wither away." The Russians are frank in confessing that they are obliged to fight the tendency of their bureaucracy to propagate itself verdantly. This struggle in fact has been and is one of the most difficult tasks of the socialist construction.

In the following chapter we shall consider two other instruments of rule, namely education and propaganda, and show how the use of these instruments is frequently combined with the use of advertising.