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Critical Studies in Media Commercialism

edited by Robin Andersen and Lance Strate
reviewed by Bohdan Jung

Chapter structure

- Part I: Human Need and the Commercial Imperative
- Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse
- American Advertising
- The Social Effects of Commercial Television

- Part II: Conglomeration, Synergy, and Global Media
- The Global Media Giants
- Global Ethics in the Age of Behemoths
- Sold American: US News Consultants and News Issues Abroad
- From Flick to Flack: The Increased Emphasis on Marketing by Media Entertainment Corporations

- Part III: Advertising and Culture
- US Voices on UK Radio
- Intoxicating Consumptions: the Case of Beer Commercials
- Road to Ruin: the Cultural Mythology of SUVs
- Starbucks Coffee: Cultivating and Selling the Postmodern Brew
- Scalable Hype: Old Persuasions for New Technology

- Part IV: Commercial ‘Diversity?’
- Image Culture and the Supermodel
- Light Makes Right: Skin Colour and Racial Hierarchy in Television
- Advertising
- Talking Back to Calvin Klein: youthful Targets’ Confront their Commercial Image

Book Reviews

Theoretical Approach/Methodology

Has the book a theoretical approach? Is the applied methodology useful for the author’s objectives? Is the context of the information clear? Is the publication positioned within existing literature? Are the terms clearly defined? Is the information consistent?

Structure

How does the chosen structure help to understand the information?

Depth of the Analysis

Is the content sufficient to explain the described phenomenon?

Contribution to New Knowledge

How does it contribute to existing knowledge? Does it use up-to-date data?

Applicability

Is the content useful? Does it help in solving practical problems?

Clarity and Style of Writing

Are the ideas presented in a clear and comprehensible way? Are specific and illustrative examples given? Is the information concise?
Part V: Politics, Citizenship, and Fragmentation
Segmenting, Signalling and Tailoring: Probing the Dark Side of Target Marketing
The Commercial Politics of the 1996 US Presidential Campaign
Commercial Media and Corporate Presence in the K-12 Classroom
Commodity Fetishism: Symbolic Form, Social Class, and the Division of Knowledge in Society
Part VI: Resisting Persuasions
KFC into India: a Case Study of Resistance to Globalization Discourse
Media Literacy and the Commercialization of Culture
The Public Interest in the Twenty-First Century

Authors

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Robert W. McChesney is a research associate professor in the Institute of Communications Research and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Marshall McLuhan was professor of English and director of the Centre for Culture and Technology (now known as the McLuhan Center) at the University of Toronto, as well as holding Fordham University’s Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities 1967-8.

Rev. Everett C. Parker is a senior research director of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Telecommunication at Arizona State University. He was a reporter on Beyond Computing magazine.

Dan Weisberg is an associate editor of the Donald McCannon Communication Research Center, which he founded in 1984, and adjunct professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University.

Neil Postman is University Professor, the Paulette Goddard Professor of Media Ecology, and chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University.

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Overview

This collection of 22 articles divided into 6 parts (each preceded by an introduction) brings together a distinguished set of authors, media researchers and professionals, the names of many of whom are ‘milestones’ in media research. Such a collection could best be described as an extremely comprehensive and versatile presentation of the subject. The book is edited by Robin Andersen, Associate Professor and Director of Peace and Justice Studies in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University.
University and by Lance Strate, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, who managed to solicit contributions on topics ranging from concentration of the media industry to resistance to media globalization and advertising. These articles convincingly point to the “growing complexity, range and reach of media commercialism in today’s world”. The topics are discussed mainly from the perspective of sociology, cultural anthropology and social psychology, many from the position of a post-modern discourse.

“Critical Studies in Media Commercialism” must be highly praised for providing the reader with a very wide spectrum of critical approaches to media commercialism from a range of reputed scholars and practitioners in the area of media and communication. This wealth of knowledge can be guessed from the chapter structure presented above. This very impressive collection also has a few drawbacks, which do not undermine its undisputed outstanding quality.

All considerations (with one exception for India) will mainly appeal to readers interested in the North American and UK media cultures. The focus is predominantly on development of US media, with occasional considerations also given to the UK situation. Those from other countries and cultures will find much food for thought, but little appreciation for the specificity of their own media environments. While the predominance of American media on world markets is obvious, the book cannot claim its observations to be universally applicable.

The second point relates to the disciplinary balance: at the heart of media commercialism lie the same economic processes which promote commercial logic in a number of other areas of social and cultural life hitherto adhering to different values. With one exception, this book focuses on manifestations of these processes in the social and cultural sphere, rather than on the underlying processes. The micro and macro-economics of media commercialization are underrepresented in this collection, which makes it a study of the effects of commercialization, rather than its causes.

Another point to be raised in the context of disciplinary imbalance is the lack of institutional and regulation perspective, such as the ongoing changes in legislation on media concentration (discussed only in the context of the FCC urge to liberalize US communications in the 1990s), quick changes in the institutional and legal framework of the electronic media, digital satellite broadcasting, global/transborder media, the Internet etc., as well as international developments in the liberalization of media turnover (WTO round of negotiations, France’s struggle for ‘exception culturelle’, UE’s ‘E-Europe’ project, US projects to combat digital divide). Media policy and its relation to media commercialism are also missing from the picture (which may be the consequence of the predominance of US perspective).

This collection is also not very focused on the resistance to media commercialism and cases of ‘best practice’, where media quality is not visibly impaired by the pressure to commercialize (this issue is treated in the last part of the book, but only in general terms). In this context, there’s little focus on the co-existence of private and public media (yet another consequence of the American focus) and the hypothesis on convergence of these two types of media under the pressure to commercialize.

While the declared objective of the editors and of the authors was to take a critical view of commercialism, the presented picture might be more vivid if some positive aspects of media commercialization could be pitted against their drawbacks.

These comments do not undermine the great value of “Critical Studies in Media Commercialism”, which is doubtlessly a highly desired reading among academics and students interested in the area of the media, communication and cultural studies.

Rating

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<th>Rating Criteria</th>
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<td>Theoretical Approach / Methodology</td>
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<td>Structure</td>
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<td>Depth of the Analysis</td>
<td>++++</td>
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<td>Contribution of new Knowledge</td>
<td>+++</td>
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<td>Applicability</td>
<td>+++</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity and Style of Writing</td>
<td>++++</td>
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Rating Points: excellent: ++++ poor: +


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