The Advertising Invasion – drawing the line in a new media age

(article from *Market Leader*, Winter 2002/3)

Paul Feldwick

During the past fifty years, we have got very used to the idea that the greatest part of the steadily increasing tide of expenditure on publicity has been channelled between the neatly tended banks of network TV. To a remarkable extent, this channel has in most important markets been regulated and controlled in a number of ways:

- Licences were controlled by governments, creating until recently monopolies or near monopolies for buyers to deal with.
- The amount of commercial time was regulated, and viewers understood the nature of the *quid pro quo* – in return for free TV channels, they would put up with five or six minutes per hour of advertising, which they could choose to watch, or not (because the breaks were predictably sited it was a good chance to make a cup of tea). This created an added incentive for advertisers to make their ads interesting or entertaining, in order to encourage people to stay with them.
- Audiences were measured, if not entirely accurately, at least by using standard methods which in practice everyone has accepted as a basis for negotiation.
- Content was closely supervised by the media owners, such that there were normally very stringent requirements for TV ads not only to be honest, but to avoid giving offence to anyone.

Although some aspects of this are now beginning to change, we have lived with this well-ordered state of affairs for so long that we tend to talk as if all publicity is under

someone's benign control. Lobby groups, for example, blithely talk of banning or restricting advertising for things they disapprove of, in the belief (generally mistaken) that this would reduce people's consumption of things that are deemed bad for them. Whether we're for or against it, we believe we're in control of the advertising genie, and can always push it back in the bottle if we wish.

But network TV, while still a powerful medium attracting a large share of promotional budgets, is not what it was. Thirty years ago, peak spots in the UK could reach 50% of households; the top figure is now more like 10%. From one commercial channel, we now have hundreds to choose from, and we are as likely to be watching a DVD, playing or a computer game or surfing the net, as to be watching the programmes. And even when watching, we have an increased range of technical options for avoiding the ads without having to leave our seats.

All this has led to an increased interest in developing other channels of communication. And as the great river of advertising money, far from diminishing, continues despite the occasional recessionary pause to swell, it increasingly threatens to burst its banks and flood uncontrollably into areas where no-one pretends to control its content or its quantity. It spreads into all sorts of outdoor and ambient sites where it more and more covers trains, cars, buildings and tee shirts. It courses through all the little channels of electronic media, getting into your mobile phone, your e-mail, and all over the internet. It spills out into product placements, into sponsorships and 'ownership' of events. It pours into customer relationship marketing, where modern database technology is used to target individuals. It stops you on the street and asks for your money. It even trickles into toilets, and continually seeks new channels in order to gain a momentary advantage in what the media agencies are already calling the 'battle for attention'.

Most of these forms of publicity have of course been around for long time. (Even the new technologies mostly re-invent older forms.) But traditionally they were seen as

peripheral to the mainstream of TV, which was both measurable and demonstrably effective. The difference, today, is that we are encouraged to think of them as central. And what most of these channels have in common, compared to TV, is that they are all relatively unregulated. Even to get reliable estimates of the sums of money involved in most of these activities is surprisingly difficult.. Few powers exists to limit their extent, or to supervise their content. Network TV may have been limited to six minutes per hour – non-terrestrial channels are not (UK Gold recenly announced they were cutting ads and promos back from 15 minutes per hour to 11, because, surprise surprise, they were losing viewers). But there is no limit to how much product placement may be in a Hollywood blockbuster, nor to the scale and extent of outdoor advertising.. No copy committee oversees whether a film posted on the Internet is decent, responsible or truthful. (BMW have created films that break every BACC rule; VW have a viral commercial where little girls say 'Bollocks' a lot.) There's little real control over what you can put on a poster site, and virtually none over what you can put on a T Shirt. No monopoly legislation exists to prevent a brand owner signing up an exclusive deal with a rock festival, a school, or even a city, so that only their product is allowed for sale. Add to this, that it's not always transparent whether a message is paid for advertising or not, and you can argue that network TV as we knew it, for all its power as a medium, was a tame and well controlled beast.

How much of a problem is this? Any discussion of what is unacceptable – what is considered intrusive, offensive, or even dishonest – can be very subjective. I personally thought the 'Slag of All Snacks' campaign for Pot Noodle funny and right for the brand, but others have found it objectionable. (Being on UK TV, it was swiftly removed after complaints –rather surprising it ever appeared at all.) If it's OK to have ads on bus sides, why not paint whole busses, or whole trains? Then why not whole streets? Where do you draw the line? I don't know. But I do think we in the business, advertisers and agencies and all sorts, should at least be asking ourselves these questions:

- at what point does our 'battle for attention' become aggressive or intrusive, and when it does, what are the consequences?
- if we are increasingly going to use media channels that are not subject to any effective codes of restraint, where will we set our own standards as to what is 'decent, honest, and truthful'?

I know that the Advertising Association, for one, will have concerned itself with these issues. But among all the talk of new media, media neutral planning, integrated campaigns, channel planning and the like, I don't think these questions feature often enough.

These questions are important for two reasons. The first is what we might call the ethical issue: as responsible providers of goods and services (and more and more companies have a deliberate policy of some kind of 'corporate responsibility'), ought there to be limits we set ourselves in terms of intrusiveness and offensiveness? The second is more self interested: to consider the possible consequences if limits are never set, or regularly ignored. Some consequences might be general: consumer or government pressure for better means of regulation; other expressions of general anti business or anti brand feelings; diminishing returns from publicity, as every surface is convered with a message and every device to attract attention already over-used. There might also be specific consequences for individual brands whose behaviour is found objectionable, ranging from a simple disinclination to the brand, to active 'brand terrorism'.

One symptom of the new media climate is the rise of flyposting. Flyposting is nothing new – there are many nineteenth century pictures showing walls in London covered with a palimpsest of posters. As 'bill-stickers were prosecuted', and perhaps more as other media became more attractive, so the outdoor industry was channelled into regulated poster sites. But illegal posting is now growing, not just for the traditional

advertisers of rock bands and nightclubs, but for such brands as Levi's, Sony, and Harvey Nichols. The Tidy Britain group (as reported in *The Guardian* on October 16th), complain that flyposting has similar negative effects to graffiti – their spokesman linked 'flyposting, graffiti, litter and the fear of crime'.

But perhaps more worrying are not the *illegal* invasions of public space, but those that are endorsed and controlled by legal authority. Local governments, hospitals, schools, and other institutions that in many markets are struggling to make financial ends meet, are increasingly open to offers from advertisers. For a mere £2,000, the National Trust allowed Channel 4 to paint an enormous Big Brother logo on the turf next to the White Horse of Uffington, an ancient sacred site on the Wiltshire Downs, and a spectacular part of the national heritage that the National Trust supposedly exists to protect. Schools in the USA routinely do deals with brands such as Coca Cola that not only grant them advertising opportunities in the classroom, but also guarantee them a monopoly of sales within the school. On a larger scale, the Mayor of New York City recently celebrated a $166m deal with Snapple, which will involve vending machines placed in schools and "other city properties, including office buildings, police stations and even sanitation depots". NYC's Chief Marketing Officer said, "this is the start of a select number of really high-quality partnerships."

Trains, buses, even whole streets can be converted into advertising messages if the price is right. Battersea Power station has been used for a number of publicity stunts, including one for Duracell Batteries. Naomi Klein describes how in 1996 Levi's 'took over' Queen Street in Toronto – 'For one year… Chesney [of media agency Murad] painted his beloved strip silver. He bought up the facades of almost every building on the busiest stretch of Queen and turned them into Levi's billboards… When I spent a day with him at the tail end of the SilverTab bonanza, he could barely walk down Queen Street without running into someone who was furious about the invasion.'

Each case is debatable. There has always been advertising in public spaces, and in many ways the world would be a duller place without it. Sponsorship fulfils a valuable function in making artistic and sporting events more accessible. Having spent my whole career in the world of publicity, I am not one of those who would happily see it banned. But when it begins to feel like 'invasion', is it really what we want?

As well as the intrusive placing and potentially inappropriate scale of publicity as it moves out of TV, we have to consider the question of content. Here there seems to be an increasing tendency for advertisers to behave like naughty children as soon as the teacher's back in turned, by indulging in what Keith Reinhard has callled 'schlock, shock and pee-pee humour' . There seems to be an underlying belief that the best way to get noticed is to be 'controversial', 'edgy' or maybe just plain offensive. 'The Spitfire Ale campaign is shifting to press advertising to sustain its edgy approach…The ads draw their inspiration from the humour of the Blitz and mock the Germans' (*Campaign*, 24.10.03) – though it's questionable whether this campaign is more offensive to the Germans or to the memory of the fighter pilots who died in the Battle of Britain. As Bill Bernbach said, 'all of us who create professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.' However witty, post modern or in your face it is, which is FCUK all down your high street more likely to do?

This is not just about restraint – it may also be a case of marketing behaving more intelligently. Perhaps it is time to adopt some different, and more appropriate models, of how advertising and publicity actually work

So many discussions of media start from an assumption that to be effective, advertising has to attract attention. Hence, as the volume of ads competing for the attention of your target audience expands, the temptation is to shout louder, to become harder to avoid, to create more and more ingenious opportunities to catch people unawares –

'Made you look, made you stare!' Looked at this way, it is of course going to become a zero sum game, and every added shock tactic subject to diminishing returns.

But is attention really what it's all about? This myth has become dominant in advertising because since the 1930's it's been a relatively easy one to measure – first Starch ratings did it in press, and then Millward Brown did it in TV. We suppose that 'impact', 'cut-through', must automatically be good things. But think about the metaphors we are using here. To create 'impacts' on a 'target' sounds like something an army wants to do to its worst enemy in a war zone. Is it really all we want to do to those dear customers with whom we keep saying we want to have a 'relationship'?

- The other day I tried to look up a news item on the Brand Republic website. Every time I opened a new window, an unasked-for frame popped up right in front of what I wanted to look at, asking me 'if I was interested in buying a new Audi'. I was not interested in buying a car of any sort: but after this had happened three or four times, I had decided that if I ever did, I would make a point of never, never buying an Audi.

- At this year's Reading Pop Festival the main arena was sponsored by a brand of lager. This was, therefore, the only beer on sale, while the audience (who had already paid handsomely for their tickets) were prevented by security guards from bringing any other drinks in 'in the interests of safety'. What, I wondered would I have felt about a brand that asserted its right to control my choice in this way?

- Mark Barden, of San Francisco ad agency Black Rocket, spoke at last year's US APG Conference of the moment when his partner Jelly Helm decided he'd had enough: 'Sitting in one of those airless beige conference rooms, drinking his mandatory caffienated, carbonated beverage with 20 grams of sugar, he nearly

choked when the Coke executive leaned in close and said, "Jelly, this year we're *going to own Ramadan*". Shortly after that he did quit advertising.'

Whatever its motives, a brand that sets out to 'own' public spaces, (or religious festivals), to 'get under the radar' of its consumers, and generally to carpet bomb them into buying their stuff, should not be surprised if it's misunderstood as arrogant and a bully.

Conversely, recent (and not so recent) research on how communications work, suggests a number of rather different perspectives:

- that people notice what's relevant to them, not just what shouts loudest
- that much of the effect of advertising takes place without it being consciously noticed or recalled (Low Attention Processing, implicit memory)
- that the purpose of advertising is to create positive brand relationships. (All communication is about relationship as well as about content: we do not, for the most part, talk about the weather or ask after each other's health because we have urgent information to give or get. Gregory Bateson suggested that most, if not all conversation, is really a way of saying 'We are not enemies'. It is probable that most advertising does something similar.)

In which case, advertisers need to ask whether shouting at people, offending them or interrupting them is going to create the kind of relationship they want. Why should brands make friends, if they behave like louts?.It would be in all our interests to consider whether a bit of charm, courtesy or respect might be more effective.

Advertising has always had the potential to annoy, to irritate, to disfigure the landscape. In 1930's America the growth of billboards along US Highways became a cause celebre - even David Ogilvy claimed that when he retired his ambition was to drive around at nights destroying billboards. Since TV became dominant, issues like these have largely

receded from public debate and industry concern. We have forgotten even to ask whether our 'dominance' of this and our 'ownership' of that, our no-hold-barred 'battle for attention', is justifiable or responsible, whether it respects our customers and our society, and indeed whether it is in our own best interests. The fifty years hegemony of network television has lulled us into a cosy sense that all advertising is somehow under someone else's control, and we are therefore free to push at the boundaries as much as we like. But increasingly, there *are* no boundaries other than those we create for ourselves; we – advertisers and agencies - must learn to be responsible for our own actions.

And finally, legislators and lobby groups might also want to consider the implications of what they do. EU-wide, and in the US, legislators are briefing their lawyers to create new restrictions on advertising, and since they cannot / don't know how to restrain the unregulatable new/ ambient media, they simply come down harder on the traditional sources of commercial communication. Whether their intentions are soundly based is not the point of debate: the irony is that the results of their actions may be to shift more and more of the marketing budgets out of relatively well-controlled channels into those that may be impossible to control.