

Fifty years using the wrong model of advertising¹

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This paper investigates the dominance of the information processing model in TV advertising. Despite theoretical and empirical evidence that supports the importance of factors such as emotional content and creativity, the authors show that a rational information-based persuasion model, which pre-dates the development of formal marketing, persists in its domination of almost all TV advertising development and evaluation. It is postulated that this persistence derives from a sociological desire to maintain a positivist worldview of simplistic, well-ordered value systems operated by rational and predictable consumers. The authors suggest that both advertisers and researchers need to adopt a Critical Realism perspective in order to move beyond the philosophical straitjacket of this information processing model, and they summarise the implications that this has for current research practice.

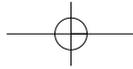
Introduction: the information processing model of advertising

In 1999 a launch TV commercial for a snack food product aimed at teenagers was pre-tested. The commercial consisted of a pop song with meaningless gibberish lyrics, accompanying a series of surreally linked and sometimes bizarre scenes. In each scene someone is eating the product, but the ad contained no information as such about the product.

The research was conducted among teenagers using familiar 'impact and communication'-type questions such as 'Did this commercial give you enough information about the product?' and 'Do you think someone would find this commercial easy to understand?' From such questions, average scores were produced for constructs including 'ease of understanding', 'believability', 'relevance', 'branding' and 'persuasion'. On all these, scores were below norms.

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The report drew the following conclusions:

This route does not seem to have worked very well ... it hampers understanding and comprehension of intended message.

The song acts as the biggest hurdle – there is a strong element of dislike which overrides message takeout, and impressions about the product.

... the taste, or other details about the product are hardly mentioned spontaneously.

The ad ... is seen in terms of its format rather than communication, which results in relevance, believability and persuasion being low. This is also supported by the low ease of understanding score.

We feel it may not be appropriate to use this ad as a launch vehicle, given the above concerns. Probably a more simplistic route (a simple story line) which emphasises the brand name and benefits clearly would work the best.

What is unusual about this case is not the research methodology or the constructs measured, which are typical of those used and indeed mandated by many multinational corporations. What is unusual is that, for reasons of timing, the advertiser went ahead and ran the ad. The results were exceptional. It became the most recalled and liked ad among teenagers and adults for three months in a row, in an independent survey of all advertising in its geographical market. It achieved high spontaneous recall, with 93% liking the ad very much – especially the song. In fact, the campaign became ‘the talk of the town’ with many mentions in the press, on TV shows, etc. Most importantly, the brand took a substantial share of the market.

It is not difficult to see why the research got it so wrong. The research report repeatedly concerns itself with constructs that have no relevance to an ad that deliberately contains no information. Furthermore, the fact that the song that was so disliked in the research later proved hugely popular suggests an important disconnect between the research environment – a teenager being played a song once or twice by a researcher who is probably the same age as his parents – and reality – the same teenager hearing the song repeatedly in social situations among peers (cf. Gladwell 2005, Chapter 5).

In hindsight it seems hard to believe that responsible marketers could have invested their money in such a misconceived piece of research. Yet in our experience this type of behaviour is far from atypical. It serves to demonstrate the extraordinary power of a mental model so deeply



embedded in organisational practice that it routinely overrules judgement. We call this the information processing (IP) model, an umbrella term commonly used in academia in the US (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya 1999).

The core assumptions and beliefs of the IP model, as it applies to the case study above, are as follows:

- For any ad to be effective, it must communicate a clear (i.e. verbally describable) message about the product or service.
- Success in advertising is indicated by 'recall' of this message, which must also be 'believed' and 'understood'.

In addition, it is commonly held that:

- the advertising process is essentially a one-way communication from the advertiser to the consumer
- the role played by creativity and emotional elements is to support this communication, either by fostering liking of the advertising, which transfers to the brand, or by increasing attention, which aids memory of the key message
- advertising is most effective when processed with high levels of attention and the active involvement of the viewer.

It should be noted that, in the context of this model, it is seen as perfectly acceptable, indeed advisable, for advertising to be tested in an environment in which individuals are encouraged to give their full conscious attention to the advertising stimulus being tested.

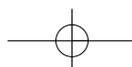
The universal presence of this model in UK advertising is confirmed in a research study by Hall and Maclay (1991) into beliefs about advertising among UK advertisers and agencies. They found the most common model in use was a hierarchy of effects *persuasion* model, which relied on impact, noticeability, branding and communicating a message (1991, p. 17). They also identified a *saliency* model, which prioritised the creation of awareness, and an *involvement* model, which stressed the role of advertising in creating relationships through affective means. But all these models strongly endorsed the need for a 'unique selling proposition to be clearly established'. Their research suggests that most practitioners simultaneously hold beliefs that represent different underlying models. It is not that people in advertising don't believe there is a role for creativity, or that building brand relationships is unimportant. It is that, in practice, these 'softer' values are regarded as *less* important than, and subservient



to, the communication of information. Thus 'creativity' is fitted into the IP model using the argument that it improves levels of attention or memorability, or in some other way makes the 'message' of the advertisement more powerful.

The current authors can testify from personal experience that various versions of this IP model have been in common use by practitioners and marketers for at least the last 50 years, and that it underpins the beliefs of the vast majority even today. They can also testify that, for much of the advertising produced by mainstream brand communications agencies, the model is of limited importance and in some cases completely irrelevant. Most advertising practitioners intuitively believe that advertising influences behaviour not simply through the conscious processing of verbal or factual messages, but by influencing emotions and mediating 'relationships' between the consumer and the brand. This leads to a benign conspiracy between client and agency in which creativity and communication are able to coexist (Heath 2004). To support this conspiracy, huge resources of corporate ingenuity are squandered in retrofitting successful campaigns to 'information processing' strategies. So we are led to believe that Heineken's famous 'Refreshes the parts ...' campaign worked mainly because it communicated the 'benefit' of refreshment, that the Guinness 'Surfer' ad is merely a dramatisation of the 'benefit' that Guinness takes a long time to pour, and that the Andrex 'Puppy' is no more than a branding device that improves recall that its toilet paper is 'soft, strong, and very long'. It is a bit like saying that *King Lear* is a great play because it is about families.

The IP model is continually reflected in the language that marketers use. For example, Duncan and Moriarty, writing in *Advertising Age* described advertising as 'one-way communication: creating and sending messages' (1999, p. 44). And these same ideas are supported in academia. Jones describes advertising as an activity that 'increases people's knowledge and changes people's attitudes' (1990, p. 237), and Meyers-Levy and Malaviya, writing in the *Journal of Marketing*, consider 'only theories that adopt an information-processing perspective' (1999, p. 45). Ambler, writing about the dominance of informational persuasion in the US, goes so far as to suggest that 'a challenge elicits much the same reaction as questioning your partner's parentage' (2000, p. 299). Even Ehrenberg and Jones, who have popularised the terms 'strong theory' for information processing and conversion and 'weak theory' for emotional reinforcement (Ehrenberg 1974; Jones 1990), load the argument in the same way as the earlier expressions 'hard sell' and 'soft sell'. In an instrumental, modernist



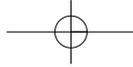
organisational culture, the concepts 'strong' and 'hard' will inevitably be valued, while 'weak' and 'soft' are rejected.

But the most convincing evidence of the dominance of the IP model comes from the study of agency or client creative briefing forms. Almost all require a statement of 'proposition' or 'message'; and those that do not, use language such as 'What is the one thing we want to *say*?' or ask for 'benefits' and 'support'. These formulas are perpetuated in corporate manuals – for example, Unilever's *ABC* (Attention, Branding, Communication) guide to advertising, and the UK Account Planning Group's *How to Plan Advertising* (Cooper 1997, pp. 53–56). The IP model is also enshrined in marketing textbooks and business schools – for example, 'Advertising strategy covers two major elements: creating the advertising messages and selecting the advertising media' (Kotler *et al.* 2005, p. 766) and 'The message will usually emphasise the key facts that an advertiser wants to communicate' (Adcock *et al.* 1998, p. 275). The IP model is, in effect, hard-wired into so many aspects of modern advertising working procedures and so much of the language used in dialogue between agency and client, that it has taken on the status of a Kühnian 'paradigm', in which advertising people 'never learn concepts, laws and theories in the abstract and by themselves. Instead, these intellectual tools are from the start encountered in a historically and pedagogically prior unit that displays them with and through their applications' (Kühn 1996, p. 46).

One might argue that, if great and effective advertising continues to be produced, one should let well alone. As Tom Peters eloquently said, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' But it seems to us that the dominance of the IP model is increasing, and that it is market research that is driving this increase. Advertisers, aware that their advertising might appear ineffective, respond by applying more control, more analysis and more measurement, in the process strengthening the hold that the IP model has over the outcomes. The attempted solution exacerbates the problem in a vicious circle that can only be broken by adopting some radically new assumptions.

In proposing a new way forward, we do not claim that it represents ultimate truth. Nor do we suggest that advertising *never* works through giving information, or through conscious attention. But we do maintain that our recommendations fit much more closely the observed realities of most successful advertising, and are likely to be infinitely more useful in practice.

Our paper is set out in four parts.



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1. First, we trace the history of the IP model, show how it has been supported by an academic tradition based on cognitive processing, and review some of the attempts to challenge it.
2. Second, we present some empirical evidence from psychology that highlights the inadequacy of the model.
3. Third, we consider the cultural beliefs and structures that support the dominance of this model, and relate these to scientific philosophy.
4. Finally, we show how advertisers and researchers need to change their philosophical stance, and summarise some of the implications this has for practitioner and research practice.

Origins of the information processing model

The information processing model may appear to be derived from ‘common sense’, but it is in fact a construction with deep historical roots. The ideas and the words that dominate advertising’s professional discourse – *attention, recall, proposition, benefits, message* – are mostly taken for granted as simple descriptions of an objective reality, absolute truths beyond questioning. Yet in every case their ancestry can be traced back to influential practitioners or academics of the past.

All we have space for here is to point to two major strands in the archaeology of advertising thinking. The first influential idea we examine is the analogy of advertising to personal selling, which also provides the original genesis of the highly influential ‘hierarchy of effects’ models. The second, which also derives in part from the first, is the model of advertising as ‘message transmission’.

Salesmanship in print

In 1903, John E. Kennedy told Albert Lasker that advertising was ‘salesmanship in print’ – a formula that helped Lasker make Lord and Thomas the biggest agency in the world (Gunther 1960, p. 58).

Equating advertising with face-to-face selling was a simple and powerful idea. It especially made sense – and still makes sense today – in direct-response advertising, where Lord and Thomas built its reputation. The split run had been available since the 1890s, and coupon responses were analysed and used to fine-tune ‘mail order’ advertising. The learning from this – the idea that Taylorian efficiency could be applied to advertising – must have seemed hugely impressive to clients. Claude Hopkins, Kennedy’s successor at Lord and Thomas, wrote ‘Advertising, once a



gamble, has thus become ... one of the safest of business ventures' (Hopkins 1998, p. 213).

What did 'salesmanship in print' mean in practice? For Hopkins, it meant 'hail a few people only' (the prospects), give them as much information as possible, and then the opportunity to place the order (1998, pp. 220–225). Selling through advertising was for Hopkins a rational, information-based process, with no room for humour or eccentricity. Selling itself had only recently evolved into a replicable process that could be taught, the first sales manuals appearing in the 1880s for companies selling calculating machines (Friedman 1999). E. St Elmo Lewis, a salesman for the National Cash Register Co., invented a four-step formula for selling – get *attention*, provoke *interest*, create *desire*, and then get *action* by closing the sale. A new opera by Verdi provided a topical acronym: AIDA (Barry & Howard 1990).

It is interesting to note that all this took place before 'marketing' was enshrined as a recognised activity distinct from sales. The first recorded university marketing course was not taught until 1902 (Bartels 1951), and even then it was an economic discipline, concerned mostly with the targeting of goods to the most profitable groups. And advertising as a rational, fact-based sales activity fitted well with the economic imperative of order and control.

AIDA was only the first of a number of 'hierarchy of effects' models concocted by practitioners or academics. Among the most influential are those of Daniel Starch in the 1920s ('advertising must be seen – read – understood – remembered – acted upon') and Russell Colley in 1961 ('advertising moves people from unawareness, to awareness, to comprehension, to conviction, to desire, to action') (Barry & Howard 1990). The huge variety of possible formulas makes it clear that these are all assumptions without any solid empirical basis. But when presented with the authority of successful practitioners and academics, they sound intuitively appealing and commonsensical. They also provide simple templates for research, and once research methodologies are adopted to measure attention or recall, research practice and theory become mutually supportive.

The power of these models had further implications. The sales analogy envisages the advertising task as the conversion of a prospect from non-purchase to purchase. But this image is quite inappropriate in repeat purchase situations, which most advertising is about. Ehrenberg (1974) has shown that buying behaviour is complex, and that it is often misleading to think of people as neatly divided into buyers and non-buyers of a brand.



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The popularity of Starch ratings from the 1930s onward in the US – a syndicated reading and noting study that was sold as a proxy for measuring ‘attention’ to press ads – represented a major redefinition of ‘attention’. It was no longer a case of ‘hailing a few people only’, as Hopkins said: to get the high Starch ratings that clients demanded involved attracting the attention of *all* readers of a publication, prospects or not. To do this, agencies started incorporating all the things Hopkins had forbidden: eye-catching pictures, funny headlines, white space, or the proverbial ‘gorilla in a jock strap’ (Ogilvy 1983, p. 161). This practice earned the contempt of old mail-order copywriters such as John Caples (Mayer 1958, p. 249), but helped develop a belief within agencies, especially in creative departments, that maximising attention at all costs is of paramount importance. Bill Bernbach said, ‘You can’t sell to a man who isn’t listening’, and in this remark we can see how the creative drive towards attention-getting advertising is legitimised for the client’s ears by linking it back to the model of advertising as face-to-face selling (Bernbach n.d.).

Advertising as message transmission

Rosser Reeves, head of the successful Bates agency, published an influential book in 1961 called *Reality in Advertising* in which he forthrightly stated his own, updated version of Kennedy’s definition: ‘ADVERTISING IS THE ART OF GETTING A UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION INTO THE HEADS OF THE MOST PEOPLE AT THE LOWEST POSSIBLE COST’ (Reeves 1961, p. 121, author’s capitals).

The word ‘proposition’ is another direct derivation from the selling model. But with this new emphasis, Reeves changed the underlying model of selling from a four-step process to a single, reified object: the proposition. He justified this by asserting (without evidence) that ‘The consumer tends to remember just one thing from an advertisement – one strong claim, or one strong concept’ (Reeves 1961, p. 34). In Reeves’ metaphor, the proposition occupies the consumer’s brain, where it is assumed to influence behaviour.

In practice, a proposition is a verbal construct, therefore success in advertising was measured by whether the consumer could correctly repeat the proposition when asked. The privileging of verbal communication over everything else is reflected in the language of advertising, in words such as *copy* (often meaning the entire content of an ad) and *message*. For advertisers, reducing the power of advertising to a simple, verbal, proposition makes it appear simultaneously rational, replicable, ownable



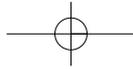
and controllable. It therefore fits the culture of most organisations more comfortably than the advertisement itself, which is a complex assemblage of visuals, sounds, patterns, and non-verbal cues. Meanwhile, the idea of the 'single-minded' proposition is another, like *attention*, that has embedded itself firmly in agency creative departments, which continually demand briefs that are simple, sometimes even ideally a single word.

Reeves' basic concept of communication is 'message transmission', and success is measured by the accuracy with which what leaves the sender arrives intact at the receiver. This was an important concept in communications theory when Reeves was writing; in 1948 Claude Elwood Shannon, a mathematician working for Bell Laboratories, defined the problem of communication as 'to reproduce at a given point in an exact or approximate way a *message* selected at another point' (Mattelart & Mattelart 1998, p. 44, emphasis added). Shannon's work may have been useful for telephone engineers, but it proved a blind alley in human communication. A few years after *Reality in Advertising*, Paul Watzlawick *et al.*'s *Pragmatics of Human Communication* would turn communications theory on its head by recognising that human communication was a matter of continual social exchange, involving a number of behavioural modes besides words, and that as well as being about content, it was perhaps more importantly about relationships (Watzlawick *et al.* 1967). These ideas offer valuable alternatives to the message transmission model, but up to the present time have been almost entirely ignored by advertising practitioners and academics.

Support for the IP model from academia

The activities of practitioners are influenced by academia through the market research industry and through what is taught in business schools. It is unlikely that the IP model would dominate as strongly as it does without the support of an academic discourse, which works within the same fundamental paradigm – dominated by cognition, with emotion relegated to a secondary role. Professor John Phillip Jones, for example, speaks of 'the rational idea enclosed as it were in an emotional envelope ... The commercials should be likable – but the *selling message must be unmistakable*' (2002, p. 36, emphasis added).

It isn't that other ideas have not been proposed. A substantial body of work in the 1950s (e.g. Gardner & Levy 1955; Martineau 1957; Dichter 1964) argued for the importance of emotions, symbolic and non-verbal communication under the banner of the 'motivation' or 'depth' school of



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advertising research. But the most influential model forthcoming was that of Lavidge and Steiner (1961), who devised a three-stage sequential model based upon contemporary psychological thinking. Their hierarchy, Cognitive → Affective → Conative, left no doubt that the 'realm of cognition' was the key to successful advertising, and emotion was a *consequence* of cognition whose influence was strictly limited to the decision-making areas of liking and preference.

Emotion was not seriously addressed again until Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982) produced their hedonic experiential model, but even they demurred to the dominance of the IP model, saying 'Abandoning the information processing approach is undesirable, but supplementing and enriching it with ... the experiential perspective could be extremely fruitful' (1982, p. 138).

Meanwhile, cognition thrived, as witnessed by the popularity of Brock and Shavitt's cognitive response model (1983). The CRM held that, for advertising messages to be effective, they needed not just to be received, but to be reinterpreted into the individual's own thoughts and rehearsed before being stored (i.e. analysed). This rehearsal of one's own thoughts was seen as 'a more important determinant of persistence of persuasion than ... rehearsal of message arguments' (1983, p. 91). These ideas led directly to advertising academia's 'most influential theoretical contribution' (Beard 2002, p. 72), namely Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model. In the ELM there are two routes for persuasion – central and peripheral – which differ according to 'the extent to which the attitude change that results ... is due to active thinking' (Petty & Cacioppo 1996, p. 256). The central processing route is:

controlled, deep, systematic, and effortful ... When conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the 'elaboration likelihood' is said to be high. This means that people are likely to *attend* to the appeal; attempt to access relevant associations, images, and experiences from memory ... (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, p. 128)

In other words, central processing is attentive, and it is evident from the word 'systematic' that this is what psychologists term goal-driven, or top-down, processing. Peripheral processing, on the other hand, is 'automatic, shallow, heuristic, and mindless' and 'based on affective associations or simple inferences tied to peripheral cues' (1986, p. 191). And although the ELM does not use emotion as a primary construct, the statement 'based on affective associations' (1986, p. 191) shows that emotion is at work within peripheral processing. But Petty and Cacioppo make it clear that they see



peripheral processing as a weak advertising route, effective only if tied in to high levels of repetition. The high-involvement 'active thinking' central route is favoured, because 'Attitude changes via the Central Route appear to be more persistent, resistant, and predictive of behaviour than changes induced via the peripheral route' (1986, p. 191).

Challenges to the IP model

There has been no shortage of challenges to the IP model. Critics 40 years ago were pointing to the lack of evidence for recall (Haskins 1964), creative practitioners such as Bill Bernbach made the case that advertising should be considered as 'warm, human persuasion' (Bernbach n.d.), and research conferences such as those of the MRS and ESOMAR have seen numerous award-winning papers challenging aspects of the IP model (e.g. Lannon & Cooper 1983; Heath 1999; Tasgal 2003; Gordon 2005). Despite these assaults nothing much has really changed. One challenge of particular note was made in the 1960s by leading members of the UK account planning movement, who articulated a coherent model of advertising that challenged the conventional model on several key points: the dominance of the verbal proposition, the idea that advertising was solely about sales or conversion, the privileging of rational content-based communication models over the symbolic or emotional mediating of relationships. These were repeatedly argued against by King (1967, 1977), Joyce (1967), Pollitt (in Feldwick 2000), Hedges (1974/1998) and others. And yet at a fundamental level the belief systems embodied in client organisations and research protocols never shifted away from the conventional IP model, as witnessed by the APG *How to Plan Advertising* document referred to earlier.

Academic challenges to the IP paradigm have likewise failed to make an impression on the world of advertising practice. Herb Krugman, as early as 1965, pointed out that much of the content of TV advertising was 'trivial and sometimes silly' and did not fit the traditional persuasion models prevalent at the time.

Does this suggest that if television bombards us with enough trivia about a product we may be persuaded to believe it? On the contrary, it suggests that persuasion as such ... is not involved at all and it is a mistake to look for it ... as a test of advertising's impact ... (1965, p. 353)

Working with Norman Mackworth in 1968, Krugman noted the 'relatively motionless, focused, or passive eye characteristics of TV



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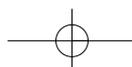
viewing' (1977, p. 8), and went on to test the brainwaves of a subject watching TV and reading press advertisements (1971). But his conclusion that television is a medium of 'low involvement' compared to print encouraged advertisers to expend even more energy on getting viewers to pay attention.

A second attack by Andrew Ehrenberg proposed that advertising 'is not as powerful as is sometimes thought, nor is there any evidence that it actually works by any strong form of persuasion or manipulation' (1974, p. 25). His 'reinforcement' model advanced a theory that 'Advertising's main role is to reinforce feelings of satisfaction with brands already being used' (1974, p. 33). Ehrenberg saw reinforcement advertising working by taking 'an emotional instead of an informative tone' (1974, p. 27), but his most controversial assertion was that attitude change was not a mandatory precursor to purchase; in this respect he was constructing a model similar to peripheral processing in Petty and Cacioppo's ELM. The difference of course was that Ehrenberg saw this type of advertising as being highly effective, and Petty and Cacioppo regard it as being relatively ineffective.

In later work Ehrenberg focused more on the role that advertising has in creating 'creative publicity' (Ehrenberg *et al.* 2002), expressing the view that 'advertisements can be effective ... simply through publicising the brand memorably, without having to "persuade" consumers that the brand is better than they thought before' (2002, p. 11). But it is significant that, nearly 30 years after his reinforcement model was first published, he still in his opening paragraph feels the need to challenge the persuasive IP model: 'Many people seem to believe that advertising has a primarily persuasive function' (2002, p. 7).

Others have attempted to contest the IP model. Ambler puts the blame for the dominance of cognitive persuasion on the measurement process: 'When you get marketing and advertising research showing that logical persuasion (cognition) is important, probably the reason is that they did not measure anything else' (1998, p. 501). Later he proposed a memory affect cognition (MAC) model based on findings by Damasio, in which he suggests that cognition can operate as an influence only if affect is in agreement (Ambler 2000).

Heath (2001) published a formal 'low involvement processing' model (later known as low attention processing model), which set out a number of psychological principles that underpin the operation of advertising at low levels of attention. His model is based on three basic ideas:



1. Damasio's contention that emotions underpin decision-making, not cognition, and that emotion is processed without the need for active attention to be paid (1994, 1999).
2. Schacter's research, which shows the power of implicit memory and its ability to interact with semantic memory (1996).
3. Dennett's evidence that conscious thinking is a function of subconscious mental processes, not a driver of them (1993).

Heath's model has been widely publicised (e.g. Bullmore 2001; Kaess 2002), and his thinking has been supported and developed by others (e.g. Cramphorn 2004; Gordon 2006). But a typical reaction by research companies has been to attempt to negate Heath's findings by attributing a 'lesser' level of influence to low attention processing and a 'greater' level of influence to high attention processing (Hollis & DuPlessis 2002; Mundell *et al.* 2006). In effect, as Ambler predicts, these attacks use measures derived from the IP model as evidence to support an assertion that the IP model is more important than any other interpretation. Like the man searching for his keys under the streetlamp, it assumes if you can't see it then it can't be very important!

Another response by research companies is to assume that the context in which advertising is consumed – in the case of TV, most often comfortably seated in the evening following a long day at work – doesn't matter. Cramphorn, for example, diligently applies regression to construct a very convincing 'integrative model', and supposedly shows that 'level of attention ... contributes directly to increase purchase intention' (2006, p. 268). But he takes no account of the fact that his test advertisements are exposed three times in *isolation* in 'numerous environments, including private homes, shopping centres, offices, and hotels' (2006, p. 259). He also ignores the fact that his measure of attention is self-reported, oblivious of the fact that people are quite unable to assess how much or how little attention they actually pay towards advertising (see Heath & McDonald 2007, discussed below).

Why this matters so much is that it is advertising research that underpins the IP model, and reinforces and perpetuates its dominance among marketers. As David Penn observes 'the model that still implicitly (and often explicitly) underpins much of contemporary advertising research ... assumes a rational consumer who *cognitively and consciously* processes information received from advertising and is able to play it back to interviewers, through the medium of recall' (Penn 2006, p. 516). He concludes that this model probably made sense in the 1950s and 1960s,



but suggests it is 'improbable' that it explains how modern advertising works.

The authors can sympathise with these defensive reactions. After all, if advertising *were* to be shown to work without the need for a message, and without the need for high levels of attention and recall, then many of the metrics that have dominated advertising research over the last 25 years, which have become enshrined in databases and norms throughout the industry, start to come under threat. So what hard evidence is there that the IP model is wrong?

Empirical evidence that the information processing model is flawed

In the past there has been little in the way of empirical evidence to support the idea that advertising can work without imparting a rational informational message. Partly this is because advertising evaluation has historically been dominated by metrics that measure cognitive thinking rather than feeling (Wiles & Cornwell 1990). The problem is compounded by the difficulty of isolating and measuring the impact of non-cognitive elements on the feelings and behaviour of the target market. As Vakratsas and Ambler observe, 'cognition usually intervenes in measurement. Asking about feelings brings cognitive processes into play and induces cognitive bias' (1999, p. 32).

But in the last few years empirical evidence contradicting the IP model has been forthcoming from psychology. For example, experimental work by Kathryn Braun has confirmed Ehrenberg's claim that advertising can operate as post-purchase reinforcement. Braun (1999) created samples of orange juice of varying quality and gave it to subjects to taste, claiming it was a trial for a new brand. Following a distraction task, half the subjects were exposed to advertising for the brand. It was found that the advertising confounded the subject's ability to judge accurately the quality of the juice, leading to substandard product being highly rated. She concluded that 'advertising received after a direct product experience altered consumers' recollection of both objective sensory and affective components of that experience' (1999, p. 332).

The need for attention to be paid for advertising to work has also been challenged empirically. D'Sousa and Rao (1995) exposed subjects to repeated radio advertising for a mature market in a divided-attention situation. Small but significant increases in top-of-mind brand awareness, predicted brand share and brand choice resulted from increased repetition,



showing that advertising can influence choice when repeatedly exposed at low attention. And Shapiro *et al.* (1997) provided evidence that advertising can work when processed without *any* attention. They used a computer-controlled magazine in which previously unexposed test advertising was placed in a column to one side while attention was constrained on the centre column via the performance of two tasks. A test group worked on material where the ads were present and a control group on material where the ads were absent. The results showed that consideration of the advertised product increased, despite subjects being unable to fixate on the advertising. They concluded that ‘Advertising has the potential to affect future buying decisions even when subjects ... do not process the ad attentively and ... do not recollect ever having seen the ad’ (Shapiro *et al.* 1997, p. 102).

Shapiro’s conclusions depend on the application of implicit (i.e. non-conscious) memory in advertising processing. Goode (2007) has investigated the role of implicit memory in a real-life case study of Virgin Trains advertising. Using a technique known as ‘process dissociation’ he has shown that ads can work at a subconscious level, and this can explain why creative ads often fail in conventional qualitative research. He concludes that ‘it is likely that one potent way an ad can exert an effect is at a “sub-conscious” level, driven by implicit memory’ (Goode 2007, p. 110).

Recent research into attention

Krugman’s assertion that TV advertising is low involvement compared to press has recently been verified (Heath & McDonald 2007). Level of attention, defined as the amount of cognitive resource being used, cannot be measured through self-report – people have no idea at any moment how much ‘thinking’ they are or have been doing – and attempts to get real-time measurement of attention merely serve to increase it. Heath and McDonald therefore used a head-mounted gaze-tracking camera, which tracks and measures minute autonomic eye movements, which indicate very accurately how much attention is being paid at any one time (Kroeber-Riel 1979; Deubel & Schneider 1996; Corbetta *et al.* 1998; Underwood *et al.* 2003). Gaze tracking measures only visual attention, but visual and auditory attention are well linked unless distraction occurs (Schmitt *et al.* 2000). So provided that subjects are reading newspapers or watching TV in a normal comfortable environment without external distraction, the two systems will be well linked. However, attention is very

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sensitive to influence. If you are told that you are going to be looking at some advertising, you will automatically pay more attention to it. For this reason, Heath and McDonald's research was carefully designed to give no indication that advertising was the main focus. Instead, subjects were told they were taking part in a pharmacological study to test the effect of TV watching on the eyes. Real newspapers were used and a real TV programme was shown. The newspaper reading was introduced before the TV watching, ostensibly as a way of allowing the subject to get used to the equipment, and current editions of *The Times* and the *Sun* newspaper made available. After 10–12 minutes, respondents were asked to watch an episode of *Frasier* containing three ad breaks, each with five ads. So during neither TV watching nor newspaper reading were subjects aware that advertising was the focus of the research.

The results, shown in Table 1, were very revealing. Note that attention is expressed in fixations per second relative to the TV programme (FPSr).

This suggests that the average attention paid towards TV advertising is between one-third and one-half that paid towards newspaper advertising. In other words, Krugman's findings were right, and TV advertising is indeed low attention compared with press advertising.

But what was even more revealing was the *nature* of processing observed. With newspaper reading the processing was clearly systematic, with ads sometimes briefly fixated, sometimes carefully read. Rarely did the eyes wander over the paper aimlessly, and subjects did not look away from the newspaper except when they changed to read another newspaper. With TV, processing was completely different. A few subjects started by watching the screen carefully and followed the action, but most watched in a 'lazy' way, exactly matching Krugman's description of 'motionless, passive eye characteristics'. Some looked directly at the screen, but others continuously scanned from side to side across it, never looking directly at the screen at all. At least one subject fell asleep just before the centre ad break, despite it being 11 o'clock in the morning. What this suggests is that TV watching is nothing like as systematic as the information processing model assumes it is, and certainly nothing like the focused, goal-driven behaviour one would get in an artificially contrived research situation with

Table 1 Results of Heath & McDonald (2007)

	TV ads	Newspaper ads	Ratio
Maximum advertising attention	1.7 FPSr	3.7 FPSr	0.46
Minimum advertising attention	0.5 FPSr	1.4 FPSr	0.38

an ad being exposed on its own. And why should it be? As Tellis observes, people 'do not yearn for ads' (1998, p. 121), and when bombarded by advertising they use selective attention to 'simply ignore most messages that reach them' (1998, p. 120).

Recent research supporting the power of emotional content over information

The information processing model is, not surprisingly, based upon an assumption that brand choice is driven largely by information, and that recall of information is therefore a critical factor in determining whether advertising has been successful. This contradicts the findings of experimental psychology, where decision making has been shown to be driven as much by emotions as by knowledge and reasoning (Damasio 1994, 1999, 2003). Research has also shown that advertising with high levels of emotion is discriminated against by recall metrics (Heath & Hyder 2005; Heath & Nairn 2005).

Even more compelling evidence for the power of emotion in driving brand choice is presented by Heath *et al.* (2006). This study started by testing online a total of 43 currently on-air TV ads (23 in the US and 20 in the UK) for their emotional and rational content using a research technique called the CEP™ Test (Cognitive Emotive Power Test). This quantifies two constructs: Cognitive Power™, which measures the potency of the message and rational information in the advertisement, and Emotive Power™, which measures the potency of the emotional content or creativity in the advertisement.

A second independent sample was then recruited to evaluate the effect that the ads had had. Respondents were asked their favourability towards each brand using a 10-point scale, and were then shown selected video clips of each of the advertisements to ascertain whether they had seen them before. The brand favourability scores were then split between those who did and did not recognise the advertisement. The difference in favourability was taken as an indication of how much the advertising has influenced perceptions of the brand while on air.

With these two data sets it was possible to examine the correlation between the three different constructs: Emotional Content (Emotive Power™), Rational Content (Cognitive Power™) and difference in Brand Favourability. Despite differences in advertising styles across the two countries, the results, shown in Table 2, are consistent. Emotive Power™ showed a significant linear relationship with the shift in favourability, but Cognitive Power™ showed no significant relationship at all.



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Table 2 Results of Heath *et al.* (2006)

(a) US data

N = 23	Correlation against favourability shift	
	Cognitive Power™	Emotive Power™
Pearson correlation	0.29	0.53
Significance (2-tailed)	0.18	0.009*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

(b) UK data

N = 20	Correlation against favourability shift	
	Cognitive Power™	Emotive Power™
Pearson correlation	-0.27	0.59
Significance (2-tailed)	0.24	0.006*

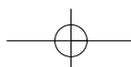
* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

So the experimental results show clearly that it is the emotional ‘creative’ content in advertising that builds favourability, not the rational message. This again contradicts the idea in the information processing model that it is the communication of the factual message that gives advertising its power.

The results of these various studies leave no doubt that the assumptions made in the information processing model – that advertising is a mechanism for the transmission of factual information, best processed at high attention, and facilitated by emotional creativity – are flawed. How, then, is it that this model has survived for nearly a century?

Why is the IP model so resistant to change?

It is evident from the number and variety of challenges that the IP model has resisted that this is not simply a disinterested and transparent debate about the best way to create effective brand communications. It seems as if the IP model must be satisfying unrecognised needs that in practice outweigh its failings as a means to its ostensible end. These are not instrumental needs, because the IP model clearly doesn’t work very well. This fact is frequently obscured by success in advertising mostly being defined by intermediate measures based on constructs from the IP model (Heath & Nairn 2005) – a self-fulfilling and self-sustaining situation that places the IP model itself outside the possibility of criticism. Additionally, it can be argued that tacit support has been lent to the model by claims



that it is impossible to measure the effect of advertising on sales (Colley 1961, pp. 10–12; Reeves 1961, p. 4; Lucas & Britt 1963, p. 16).

This however does not fully answer why the model has been so appealing and enduring. We hypothesise that at a deeper level it answers social or cultural needs: first, within the organisations that are involved in creating advertising (advertisers, agencies and researchers); and, second, in society as a whole and the relationships that it has with advertising. These are of course complex matters and our ideas here must be considered as speculative.

The IP model in the organisation

Postmodern theories of management point out that organisational cultures are substantially based on modernist principles of order, control and rationality, with a strongly realist ontology and a positivist epistemology (Alvesson & Deetz 2005, p. 61). In other words, organisations tend to work on the basis of argument, analysis, measurement and factual proof (however illusory the practice of these may be). Within certain limits, such cultures can be highly effective in making the right decisions and efficient in implementing them. However, they can be very badly adapted to dealing with creative processes, with emotional decisions, or in general with anything that cannot explicitly be verbalised and/or measured. This has always created a tension in the creation and judgement of advertising, familiar to anyone who has ever been involved in the process: a contest if you like between intuitive judgement and the organisational need for measurement and logic.

In this context the powerful attraction of the information processing model is that it appears to translate a chaotic, intuitive process into one that can be pinned down in words, analysed with logic, and measured. It does this by projecting on to the consumer's choice behaviour the same sort of rational, fact-based approach that is recognised and valued in the organisation.

As we have already observed, most practitioners believe they have incorporated the importance of emotions and of creativity into their mental models, but it is the IP model that gives them permission to do this without transgressing the notion of a fundamentally rational organisational worldview. The IP model persists precisely because it keeps creativity firmly in its place, as the servant of a process that can be presented as fundamentally subject to rational analysis and control. 'Creativity' comes to assume the same role in the corporate worldview as



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the spiritual world does in Cartesian dualism: it is allowed to exist and be talked of as if it were important, but because it has no measurable reality and cannot be subject to analysis and control it is for all 'scientific' purposes non-existent (Midgley 2001). 'Creativity' itself, then, becomes a field in which nothing is rational, nothing can be articulated, no authority allowed except that of the creative genius, just as the spiritual realm is imagined as a space in which science has no sway. All this creates an alternative power base for the creative priesthood, comfortably separate from the rationalist corporate culture, with its own criteria for success embodied in peer approval and the all-important creative awards.

For the marketing organisation, then, the IP model fulfils a need to remain consistent with the organisational myths of rational decision making, replicability and control. It does this by reducing the essence of the creative content to a single proposition or idea that can be owned, replicated and controlled; by envisaging the communication process as a mechanistic transfer of this unit of information whose efficiency can be measured; and by projecting on to the consumer's choices the same myth of rational decision making that the organisation values internally.

The IP model in society

The IP model, and its origin in the idea of 'salesmanship', also plays an important role in the way advertising is viewed by society at large, and in its 'licence to operate'. As long as advertising presents itself as offering essentially factual information to consumers who make conscious and rational decisions, it is seen to play the role of the 'honest advocate' and will therefore be allowed a considerable amount of freedom. If, however, advertising is seen as operating on the emotions, or on a non-conscious or non-rational consumer, it may be criticised as manipulative, or brainwashing. Note, for instance, the hysterical responses to the story of 'subliminal advertising' that took place in 1957 (Robinson 1998). Such anxieties are founded on the belief that human beings are essentially rational, *homo economicus*, and yet at the same time at the mercy of their 'lower nature', whether this is named as 'the passions' or the Freudian 'unconscious': part of a long cultural history stretching through the Enlightenment and back to the Ancient Greeks that 'reason' is a sound and virtuous guide, while the 'passions', or emotions, are dangerous, foolish and evil.

In the 1950s the so-called 'motivational researchers' attempted to make sense of consumer behaviour in terms of emotional needs, symbol and



metaphor, and the Freudian unconscious. This approach enjoyed considerable success, and is well represented in Martineau's (1957) book *Motivation in Advertising*. Just as this appeared, however, so did *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957), which presented much of the same material to the general public as sinister brainwashing. The title of Rosser Reeves' book, *Reality in Advertising*, was clearly chosen as a riposte to Martineau. As he anchors the advertising process firmly back in the realms of the 'selling proposition', Reeves includes a chapter called 'The Freudian hoax', in which he makes his position very clear: 'there are no hidden persuaders. Advertising works openly, in the bare and pitiless sunlight' (1961, p. 70).

So it is in part the fear of being seen as manipulators of the unconscious that keeps advertisers and agencies from admitting even to themselves the power of low attention processing, or the emotional effects of advertising. *The Hidden Persuaders* shows that their fears are not entirely groundless. But the idea that low attention processing and the emotional effects of advertising equate to something sinister, irresistible and evil is, we suspect, a social construction based on a myth about how human beings communicate and choose.

In summary, we believe that the IP model has retained its dominance not because it works, but because it appears to make the advertising process verbal, rational, measurable and subject to conscious control. It fits both our organisational value systems and the fiction of a rational consumer, as part of an Enlightenment worldview. Any other model is regarded as dissonant with these deeply held values, and is therefore either rejected as 'soft' and ineffectual, or as excessively powerful in a sinister way.

Philosophical perspective

The fact that these two positions are mutually contradictory should perhaps warn us that we are dealing here with deeply entrenched mythologies rather than logic. Students of scientific philosophy will recognise a clear analogy between the positivist stance of marketing, in which 'no statement is meaningful unless it is capable of being verified' (Crotty 1998, p. 25), and the humanistic Constructivist approach proposed by Hirschmann (1986). The Positivist view is that only things that are 'apprehendable' and 'perceivable' have any real meaning, and all theory should be based upon constructs that are directly measurable. The extent to which this attitude pervades marketing is illustrated by the adoption of awareness as a proxy measure of attention (Brown 1994). The



Constructivist view is that all things are relative, a consequence of the individual, and that all research therefore has to explore beyond the directly measurable. Constructivist epistemology sees factors such as feelings and emotions as critical to the understanding of ontology, and, as personal constructs, it classifies them as being researchable only via qualitative methods. The Positivist epistemology, on the other hand, sees feelings and emotions as irrelevant to what is a fundamentally 'realist' ontology, and finds meaning only in quantitative research.

The solution to this standoff was provided by Shelby Hunt, who developed an approach he called 'Contemporary Empiricism' (Hunt 1993). This in effect drew on the beliefs of the school of Critical Realism, which is credited as being founded by Roy Bhaskar (Collier 1994). It is the Critical Realism philosophical approach that we see as providing a way out of the straitjacket of the IP model.

The way forward

Critical Realism proposes an epistemology that Bhaskar describes as 'transcendental idealism', defined as 'Beyond the limits of possible experience and knowledge' (Bhaskar 1975). It accepts the idea of a fundamentally realist ontology, but sees it as comprising multiple levels not all of which are fully comprehensible. The important thing about Critical Realism is that it allows a scientific approach but at the same time frees up thinking and hypothesis generation to include 'that which cannot necessarily be observed or verified'. As Robson observes, it is a pragmatic approach which acknowledges that 'positivism has been discredited but avoids the divorce from science' (2002, p. 43).

Roberts (2001) identifies one of the strengths of Critical Realism as its ability to satisfy 'a strong impulse ... to explore how the ideas we might hold about society are in fact contradicted by underlying structures' (2001, p. 668). This is exactly what we find in new learning from psychology, where the workings of the mind have been exposed by the work of Zajonc, Damasio, Dennett, Le Doux, Schacter, Wilson and others. What they have shown is that we are continually influenced by subconscious perception: we cannot function as human beings in any other way. It is because of this that the decisions we make are *always* influenced by and sometimes *entirely* driven by emotions and feelings (Damasio 1994, 2003). These truths are not sinister new techniques dreamt up by evil scientists, but the way we are, and they apply to our buying behaviour just as to anything else. This thinking is brought into sharp perspective by Watzlawick *et al.*



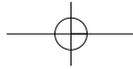
(1967), who found human communication to be a continuing process of maintaining or modifying relationships through all aspects of our behaviour. In this process, what appears to be content (in the sense of verbal message) is frequently of very secondary importance. It is the 'metacommunication' – the signals that are responded to without conscious attention – that influences feelings and relationships.

These ideas offer a more plausible explanation of how 30 seconds of apparent nonsense, watched through half-closed eyes, can affect brand preference and buying behaviour, than the old idea of the 'selling proposition'. It is true that informational content and conscious processing have important roles to play in *certain* types of advertising, but in the bigger communication picture they are always going to be secondary to the context in which they occur. What Petty and Cacioppo dubbed as 'peripheral' is in fact the main story, because in most cases *what* you say is less important than *how* you say it (or show it, or sing it, or imply it, etc.).

Implications for advertisers

If advertisers are to start to operate within a Critical Realism framework, what will they need to do? Certainly abandon some of their comfortable Positivist beliefs, such as the notion that advertising operates mainly as a rational communication vehicle. They will also have to accept that visuals, sounds, symbols, music, gestures, context and a host of other things are not aids to recall or attention (or 'engagement'), but exist in their own right as central elements in communication. They will have to understand that people can be powerfully influenced by communication that is processed with low attention and of which they have no conscious recall, and that decision making is always rooted in the emotions and is often influenced by associations below the level of consciousness. And they will have to accept that communication operates across a spectrum of responses, and must be planned and executed not just on the level of explicit content, but on a holistic basis that includes implicit communication.

These principles have major implications for the relationships between advertisers and agencies. For example, clients and agencies will need to take on board the obvious but oft-denied truth that advertising that contains no 'message', 'proposition' or 'benefits' is not necessarily deficient, and that attempts to impose them or post-rationalise them generally *reduce* effectiveness. And creative departments will have to



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abandon their obsession with simple, functional briefs and creating ‘impact’, in favour of creativity that influences emotions and brand relationships – which in truth is what the best creative work has always done, normally in spite of prevailing theory rather than because of it.

Implication for market research

The implications of Critical Realism for the research industry are if anything more extreme, because it is research that addresses directly the issue of comprehending the reality. And if, as Critical Realism suggests, reality exists on multiple levels, then research, quite simply, must take account of these levels.

Here are some key observations.

- At the moment, advertising research focuses mostly on what can be directly verified. Awareness and recall can be verified by asking the respondent to confirm what they have learned. But, on another level, it is patently the case that people also learn and are influenced by things they forget, possibly *in toto* to a greater extent than things they remember. So research has to stop focusing on what people remember and start focusing on how they behave. Increased preference for or favourability towards brands is, after all, what advertising’s true objective is, not recall.
- In the same vein, research also has to stop using just what people ‘think’ as the basis for judgement, and start measuring what they ‘feel’. Feelings and emotions may be hard to ‘apprehend’, but they are there nonetheless. Whether people smile, laugh or chat animatedly about an ad tells you a lot more than a question about whether they think something is interesting or amusing. And it should not be forgotten that there are a multiplicity of new physiological research systems coming online that are able to measure directly emotional reactions.
- This is particularly the case with constructs such as attention and engagement. It is facile to use self-report to assess how much attention someone will pay to something, when attention (other than at the highest active level) operates entirely beyond people’s will. People have not the *least* idea how much attention they are paying at any moment in time: you can ask them if they find something interesting, but that does not necessarily equate to how much attention they will pay.



- Perhaps the most far-reaching change is that Critical Realism requires minimum 'abstraction', defined as the extent to which research is removed from the reality of real-life experience (Sayer 1992, pp. 86–87). Unlike Constructivism, Critical Realism allows the use of experimental research, but since the philosophy encompasses unobservable and indeed potentially unexperienceable causal effects then the extent to which the research context is 'abstracted' from reality becomes especially important. In the case of TV it is unarguable that showing advertisements three times in a row out of programme context, to people in a hall or shopping mall or on the internet, is an abstraction from reality. People mostly watch TV in their own homes in the evening when they are tired and sleepy and sometimes surrounded by distractions. Making the assumption that this doesn't matter is just bad science. What researchers should do is design practical and effective ways of disguising their intentions and getting accurate findings. It can be done, as evidenced by Heath and McDonald (2007).
- Finally, it should be stressed that Critical Realism does not simply mean a wholesale switch to qualitative research. Critical Realism endorses the idea of causality, believing that 'The world consists of mechanisms, not events' (Bhaskar 1975, p. 47). This means that it also endorses, indeed demands, quantification in measurement.

In summary, research in advertising must become more intelligent and sensitive, remembering that human communication is not simple stimulus-response message transmission, but a complex system. Advertising has become adept at exploiting emotion: O₂, for example, has emerged at the top of the mobile phone market with totally forgettable blue bubbly TV ads containing no message (Cox *et al.* 2004). Research has to be clever enough to judge emotional campaigns like this. It has to be clever enough to evaluate campaigns like the Marlboro Cowboy, which never had a propositional message, yet still dominates the minds of almost every young person in the western world. It has to be clever enough to tell that policemen wiggling their feet (Heineken) and surfers waiting for a wave (Guinness) might give birth to two of the most famous beer campaigns of all time, and that an urchin freewheeling down a hill to the strains of Dvorak's 'New World Symphony' (Hovis) might create an extraordinarily potent food campaign; that a Princess Diana look-alike jettisoning her furs (VW Golf) and two idiotic oversexed French aristocrats (Renault Clio)

might decide the two brand leaders in the small car market for over a decade. And that a Puppy (Andrex) might rewrite the rules of the toilet paper market (Baker 1993, pp. 53–74, 75–99, 234–253).

To do this, research needs to embrace and understand psychology, and develop techniques that are grounded in a proper understanding of how human beings conceptualise and make decisions. It must ensure that any research technique is fully consonant with the assumptions made about how that particular campaign will work, and it must also make sure those assumptions are soundly based.

Researchers have a choice. They can continue to serve up what the market wants, continuing to sell traditional remedies that they must recognise are inadequate. Or they can take the responsibility for challenging traditional thinking in clients and agencies, and work with them to develop new methodologies that will offer advertisers a real competitive advantage. We hope that, instead of continuing to defend the status quo, enough researchers will take the latter route, otherwise the next 50 years may well continue to perpetuate the errors of the last.

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