

Advertising in the area of information. A perfect symbiosis around consumerism

MARÍA TERESA PELLICER JORDÁ¹

Abstract

This text reflects on the role of advertising and journalism as means of communication and as a complementary pair regarding the formation of models of learning and behavior. It is questioned by the effects of both cases on the re-construction of social imaginaries that both create a consumption-dependent mass culture through the support of advertising (sell-inform). Journalism and advertising, as mass media, become actors with power that have an effect on the production process of contemporary culture to influence the daily lives of individuals.

Keywords: advertising, consumerism, journalism, means of communication

Preamble

Journalism and advertising are two of the great powers in Western societies. Powerful powers, including the press that became the fourth power when the printing press allowed its mass dissemination. A cultural device of socialization that is extended to other media that have appeared later (radio, television, internet, social networks), as media to do journalism (to inform) and to advertise (sell). For its part, advertising plays a preponderant role in society, since as a mass media it has an immense scope, perhaps, if possible, increased with the support of the Internet, the great and most powerful means of communication at present (Scope and unlimited potential).

Of all these media of which we speak, in which journalism comes alive, and of the advertising inserted in them, depends, to a large extent, what we think and buy. They determine the canons of beauty, the prevailing stereotypes (successful and desired by all who aspire to happiness), values, patterns of behavior. In short, they mark what we are or what we must be to be accepted socially. It is really important its effect on society and on each individual that conforms, given the processes of communicative interaction that culture carries. There are several social behaviors that are prevalent (as some people say) as a result of the models transmitted by the circulating information through the communicative means, in the exercise

1 Graduated in Journalism, as well as in Advertising and Public Relations by the University of Murcia. In the same way, she has the rank of doctor of the Faculty of Communication and Documentation of the University of Murcia, obtaining her doctoral thesis the qualification of outstanding cum laude. It also has the DEA in the doctorate 'Current Techniques and Methods of Information and Documentation' of the University of Murcia, as well as the Course of Pedagogical Adaptation. Email: maite.pellicer@um.es

of journalism itself and through advertising. Anorexia, bulimia, vigorexia, and an increasingly long list of adaptive responses brought about by unprecedented social pressure.

In particular, the press, understood not only as newspapers but as means of communication (journalism), and advertising as a medium of information, have, as we suggest, much to do in these social processes, since they play a significant role in generation of the values, beliefs and attitudes that are shaped in each culture and in each historical landmark. Before, the family and the school, main centers of learning and exhibition, main tools of socialization, were the cultural devices in charge of determining all these parameters. Today, the media and advertising are exposed as cultural tools with great power over individuals (exposure of any individual to them is much greater than we can think). Some studies speak of 300 impacts (positive or negative) daily and others impact up to 1,000.

The point is that they are now the ones who determine and build a good part of the personality of any citizen. For this they build a common and immaterial symbolic universe, which is recorded in society in a silent, but very effective, and that revolves around consumerism. That is the word: consumerism. Consumerism is the reason why so much advertising and media - great allies - have so much interest in marking our steps, writing our way, the way to the stores that they mark us and to ideals that translate into more stores, products and services. If it were not for that powerful reason, neither of us - neither media nor publicity - would spend so many millions on knowing the last trauma we have each of us, until our last aspiration, the food we eat or the hobbies we have. Although it sounds sad, that is the only reason we are so interesting, because we are consumers, whether potential or real.

What is curious is that this consumerism is also what has united advertising and journalism, until they become two inseparable disciplines, essential for each other and with similar mechanisms and tools. Reig recalls that: "Journalism is not really a public service, but above all, and ultimately private" (2011, p. 297) and this is precisely the reason why journalism succumbed to consumption and was allied with advertising. It has to finance and earn money, like any company, and for that it uses advertising. The media does not make a profit with the audience itself. The cost of any newspaper is well below the real cost of producing it, television and radio are free and the cost that any user pays for internet is also below the actual cost of the network. It is the advertising inserted in all these means that allows us to buy the newspaper at an affordable price, turn on the television at no cost - except in the case of pay-TV's, which are payable because they minimize their publicity -, listen to Radio and surf the internet for less than 10 euros per month. It is therefore not surprising that the media take care of advertising, regardless of the effects on an audience that is not prepared or for so much advertising pressure.

A trilogy: advertising - consumerism - journalism

Advertising is the great ally that allows television, radio, journalistic information, etc. to achieve its business objectives and profits (more than we can imagine). And although more and more are those who speak of the dangers to journalism of its narrow and necessary relationship with advertising, such as "the loss of freedom" in Reig's words (2011, p. 291),

the truth is that this relationship intensifies every day. Economic and business objectives are much stronger than informative goals and profit has far exceeded the interest in ethics. The media have distorted its essence and its duty to inform and even form (that is what the law collects as duties, obligations and functions of Spanish Television - TVE 1 and TVE 2- and is the reason why the Government finances the media of public communication). We could point to a sociology of advertising that: "(...) deals with the effects of advertising on personal culture and on the cultural and social context of the consumer and not on the influence of advertising on consumer buying decision" (Codeluppi, 2007, p. 150).

In the context of thinking about the effect of advertising on society, dependence on it is, as we say from other interests, that, in fact, with the emergence of the Internet and its new ways of making advertising more effective and segmented, many are posing - with fear and no clear answer - how would finance journalism would end if advertising will stop using the media as support? Those who argue that one day advertising will set aside their fellow travelers, the media, to advertise in other more effective alternative means, in the price-reach ratio, is causing headaches to many, who are already seeing how the advertising quota of conventional media is falling, in favor of alternative media such as social networks, street furniture and the like. That is, perhaps, the reason why we constantly see changes in the way we advertise in the media: shorter blocks, isolated ads, covert advertising, sponsored programs, etc. (everything to keep the Golden eggs). Advertisers are the reason for being and being of the media and we are conceived as mere consumers. The audience or readers only matter in terms of how many new consumers there are among them.

When we talk about advertising, nobody is surprised to relate it to consumerism. In fact, advertising is the fundamental tool of the capitalist system. It is responsible for promoting consumerism. It makes visible the trillions of products and services that exist in the market, highlighting one over another, as Durán explains:

If we do not know the existence of the same, we cannot go to buy them, we cannot consume and without consumerism there is no capitalism. That advertising function is clear and, in fact, its very essence. If that essence were changed, it would cease to be publicity to become something else, we do not know what but another thing (1992, p. 88).

Nor is it any wonder when we relate advertising to *persuasion*. In fact, in Soria's words: "Advertising must be aimed at persuading and capturing the will of man" (1999, 157). That is, in fact, the essence of the advertising profession. Persuasion, whether emotional or rational, allows you to achieve in a simpler way your goal, which is to better reach the consumer so that the consumer consumes what is told. It has to convince us to buy a product - or rather, many products - from the billions of goods on the market. I, as a consumer, have to choose a brand of shampoo from among the tens that I find in the supermarket and the advertisement has to persuade me to buy one and not another. Without persuasion there is no publicity. Not only is it enough to report the existence of a product or service, it also has to convince us that that product and service is the best for us, make us promises - many times unfulfilled - that make us choose them.

The truth is that journalism today, tries to persuade with cross-information and other journalistic techniques to achieve its objectives, in these cases related to ideologies or even to the promotion of consumerism itself. Little is left of those illustrated newspapers of the second part of the eighteenth century where the press had a large informative and social critic component, alien (or almost alien) to other interests (Seoane and Saiz, 2007, p. 31). The press has been losing that innocence to let itself be perverted by a system that ends up being the one who finances them and makes them earn money. Everything is aimed at favoring a system, which translates into money for them. Each medium has its ideological orientation, according to which reality counts. In fact, if we saw how the different newspapers, televisions and radios tell a single fact, we would be surprised how the omission of data can change the meaning of a story. That omission of relevant data or manipulation - as we call it - is produced to favor ideological and therefore economic interests.

In this way, the media have put themselves at the service of advertising, consumerism and governments to convey unified ideas, which end up creating a mass culture. They do it for economic interests, but the truth is that they end up creating culture, to the point of being considered cultural and creative industries. Lario Bernal recommends an interesting article by Noam Chomsky, where the author emphasizes that advertising:

(...) takes a historical tour of the different propaganda strategies that governments have made with the help of the media in the modern era. Behind this, obviously, are the interests not only of a political nature, but those that matter most for the survival of the system: the economic ones. [The author adds that the means are not the only] ... responsible for promoting the perpetuity of the system, but are configured as issuers of messages that legitimize them. That is to say, we find competitive, consumerist societies that highlight the value of money as one of the most important in the short life of a human being. The media are only in charge of transmitting these ideas, of feeding back the existing approaches and helping us to not forget what the best thing to do is to continue thinking about material paradises. The means we have today, in short, fit perfectly with the society we also own (2006, pp. 15 and 24).

Now journalism, like advertising, consider the reader as one more consumer, something that for Lopez:

(...) is not good for the business of communication. He is asked to buy and accept what is given, but he is barely allowed to intervene in the decision-making process, in the process of deciding what issues are to be or should be left out of the journalistic agenda (2004, p. 43).

That is to say, this attitude or, rather, media business policy, which can never be linked to them because they are mostly private, can have negative consequences for them. In fact, it has already brought them, but they do not interest at all. There are still millions of people who consume the media and the business continues to be profitable. When viewers, readers and listeners stop being spectators, readers and listeners, because they have become tired of being puppets of an increasingly cruel consumer market with all of us, only then, the media

will look for new alternatives - if there were - to continue to make the business profitable. Until that day there will be no change, more than those derived from continuing to benefit advertising, to reach more people.

Once the reader, viewer and listener is treated like a consumer of products, it is when we must know the maximum, so as to know how to construct messages more effective to the interests of the particular business group and to create that social imaginary of which we spoke in previous lines. López explains that "Meeting the public is the main problem and concern of journalistic companies, but also of the political and social segments currently in power or in their anteroom" (2004, p. 44). They want to satisfy him because a satisfied consumer returns to buy and it is not only that they buy a product or a newspaper, but also - when buying the two previous ones - buy an idea. That's the key. That is why, as the author points out again, there is a lot of research aimed at getting to know the consumer. "(...) their appetites, their manias, their affiliations and phobias" (López, 2004, p. 45).

If we know the consumer's miseries, problems, complexes, dreams, desires, etc., we can reach them much more easily, both informational and ideological and commercial, and we can create a social imaginary, a culture and more habits effective and shared, faithful to commercial and ideological interests. We have already said in previous paragraphs that this is the only reason we are important to media and advertisers. They want to know us in detail to manipulate us better, to know how to build advertising messages that come directly to our heart, since they are a determining part of our consumption by influencing our emotions. Advertisers know this and that's why there is more and more emotional publicity - there are also more and more emotional television shows. Reason, the rational, has been left in the background. It is much more difficult to accede to us in this way, because the reason puts barriers that the emotion does not put. It is not surprising, therefore, that advertising is used every time in disciplines such as psychology, sociology or market research to know, as accurately as possible, our motivations and breaks in the consumption. We would be surprised to know the amounts that companies invest to obtain this information, key to their advertising and marketing campaigns.

One of the main ideas of this article, in which we analyze the relationship between journalism and advertising, is that: "The media exist as commercial products and earn money. And, at the same time, they exert elements of pressure and persuasion to guide public opinion and gain prestige and influence", as López points out (2004, p. 47). Advertising is, therefore, your tool to achieve your business goals. There's no more. No, love, no loyalty. Both will stop being interested in each other when they cannot profit. It is a relationship based on interest, interest in money, not by consumers, spectators or whatever they want to call us. In order to establish this relationship and to be effective in each of us, both are responsible for creating that sphere of values, desires, dreams, stereotypes, and so on, which we have already mentioned before and also named Lopez in previous lines.

Journalism and advertising - as well as public authorities and pressure groups - create a specific society, with certain habits and beliefs in which it becomes necessary to consume the products and ideas that are sold by both journalists, advertisers and politicians. Kapuscinski explains that:

The average citizen who works and returns home tired and wants to just spend time with his family, receives only what comes to him in those five minutes of news. The main themes that give life to the news of the day, decide what we think of the world and how we think. It is a fundamental weapon in the construction of public opinion (2002, p. 60).

It is not by chance, as we have seen, that advertising uses media as an advertising medium. Viewers, readers and listeners eliminate our barriers when we think that what we are receiving is information or entertainment without more. We lower our guard so that the publicity launches its rocket, direct, as we say, to our emotion, in the majority of the occasions. Kapuscinski, adds that:

The problem with televisions and, in general, of all the media is that they are so big, influential and important that they have started to build a world of their own, a world that has little to do with reality. But, on the other hand, these media are not interested in reflecting the reality of the world, but in competing with each other (2002, p. 61).

True, media and advertising determine our conception of reality and thoughts. We receive information biased from journalism, while from advertising we create needs that can only be satisfied through the products and services that are advertised. Journalism and advertising destabilize us, frighten us and show us that their consumption (media and publicity-products) will be the solution to our ills (most of them non-existent in practice), to the ills that make us believe to have fight.

All this panorama, the less worrying for all in general and especially for those who, as parents, want to leave our children a better world or, perhaps, less bad, has led to authors like Ramonet asking themselves "What is the present today? It is what television says is topical. And here is another confusion about the truth. How could the truth be defined? Today the truth is defined at the moment when the press, radio and television say the same thing about an event" (1998, p. 38). It would be unthinkable a few centuries ago that we could or we should raise a debate about what is true or false. It is curious to see how the media, so influential in our minds, have succeeded in getting the line that separates both positions so fine that sometimes it is not even seen. In this sense, Lario emphasizes that the means are:

(...) a specialized elite that dominates and imposes values considered correct to a majority of the population (...). This minority is now the owner of the media, of those channels by which values and slogans are transmitted that keep the situation unchanged through the control of public opinion (2006, p. 15).

We talked about consequences before. What are the consequences for the media and society in general of such similar ways of proceeding between journalism and advertising? The first is the creation of a climate of social mistrust. If this already existed in the field of advertising, where a large part of the public believes that what the ads promise is a lie, although they let themselves be guided by the symbolic universe that it creates, with its values and social habits, has now been installed, and seems to stay in the field of journalism. Reig (2011, p. 293) and

Ramonet (1998, p. 35) speak of this as the main problem facing current journalism and which must be stopped. In this sense, Reig, in particular, considers that:

(...) if we do not achieve a true professional journalism, rigorous, we will jeopardize the very existence of a more solid democracy. It can be assumed, then, that there are elements of structural power that prefer this to be so, but then we shall call journalism and democracy in another way (2011, p. 298).

In summary, following the thinking of Eguizábal (2009), advertising, historically speaking, has evolved along with culture itself. We see that its creative and free emergence in the last century, concentrated in the product, transcends evolutionary moments of monopoly that, paraphrasing the thinker, shows a “mutation of communicative strategies” to place itself today in an amalgam with communication. In other words, to assume a perfect “symbiosis around consumption” which leads to insertion in everyday life and assume a transcendent role in building social awareness.

By way of conclusion

Throughout this article we have seen how journalism and advertising have become great allies who share common goals, and who base their relationship on consumerism. It is the only reason they work together, since that consumerism translates into economic benefit, both for journalism and the media, as for advertising. It is no longer distinguishable from informative genres. No matter how much we talk about information or entertainment programs, theory and practice are the same for everyone. The technique is the same, it does not matter the content. The audience of all media spaces, important to emphasize the all, translates into consumers. Only that matters. We have also seen that it is a committed relationship on both sides, which will cease to exist when they no longer care about each other. Explanations would not be given. One of the two will not return home without saying goodbye and the relationship will be terminated. So be simple.

But the truth is that this relationship and the consequence of it, in terms of content and messages that reach the audience is not too beneficial to society - say better than it is harmful, since this is forced to a massive consumption and until sickly, not only of products but also of information. The media want to attract audiences to sell more advertising, creating what defines Lario as:

(...) infotertaining, a new way of doing journalism that distorts information through a light treatment of data and a clear approach to themes and genres considered more of a taste of a public that consumes a quick news, which also fades to a vertiginous rhythm (2006, p. 18).

All this, coupled with the clear repercussions it has for the reputation of journalism, increasingly maligned, also has serious effects on society. No matter how sick we are, let's not make it to the end of the month, or let's face it. That does not matter as long as we are consumers. Buy, buy and buy, without asking much why our behavior. If the day comes when

we stop buying, then maybe media and advertising wonder why and decide to take care of us a little more, if only to continue selling. The clear example has occurred in recent years in banking, which has never bothered to give an image of honesty and ethics until the crisis appeared and, with it, financial scandals in banks. It was then, after the distrust created in the population that made them lose customers, began to appear “ethical” banks that looked after and watched over the well-being of their clients. It is rather sad and disappointing to think that this is the reality, but we must accept it.

Perhaps there could be a more ‘healthy’ relationship between advertising and journalism, in which one and the other could be more independent, although it is true that seems unthinkable in modern times. Moreover, it seems unthinkable that healthier relationship without an economic benefit for both parties. This leads us to think that, perhaps, we, spectators, consumers, etc., we can do something to make us respect more by media and advertising. Perhaps we are so accustomed to this reality that we would not know how to live otherwise or we are too tired to try. I do not know exactly. What I do know, is that we should all reflect on this issue and the real consequences it is having in the life of each and every one of us.

Following this reflection, in which other authors’ thoughts converge, I think the best way to end these lines is with a question or, rather, advice from Lario: “Learn why it is useful and necessary to study those who control us” (2006, p. 13). This article gives a good account of the reasons why it is necessary to know them. Reasons, all of them, very powerful.

References

- Codeluppi, V. (2007). El papel social de la publicidad. En *Pensar la publicidad*, vol. 1, Nro. 1, pp. 149-155.
- Durán, A. (1992). *Psicología de la publicidad y de la venta*. Barcelona: Ceac.
- Eguizábal, R. (2009). *Industrias de la conciencia: una historia social de la publicidad en España (1975-2009)*. Barcelona: Península.
- Kapuscinski, R. (2002). *Los cínicos no sirven para este oficio. Sobre el buen periodismo*. Barcelona: Anagramas.
- Lario Bernal, A. (2006). *Comunicación, periodismo y control informativo*. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- López, M. (2004). *Nuevas competencias para la prensa del siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Ramonet, I. (1998). *La tiranía de la comunicación. El papel actual de la comunicación*. Barcelona: Editorial Debate.
- Reig, R. (2011) *Los dueños del Periodismo*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Seoane, M.C. Saiz, M. D. (2007). *Cuatro siglos de periodismo en España*. Madrid: Alianza editorial.
- Soria, C. (1999). Perspectiva ética en la información publicitaria. En Bonete, E. *Ética de la comunicación audiovisual*. Madrid: Tecnos.