Book Review: Digital Advertising- Palgrave, London, 2010 (ISBN: 9780230222410), 288 pp.

This is a book in a hurry; perhaps necessarily so. The range of activity the author is seeking to make sense of is developing apace. Exotic to some readers (*Second Life* for instance) the titular *Digital Advertising* refers to burgeoning arrays of new communications phenomena which together constitute much of the familiar and ubiquitous architecture of everyday living and working: Google, Facebook and so on. The digital sublime confronts the supermarket shopper. McStay sets the stage well.

Soon, we learn, the fridge will be networked, no doubt reminding us now and again via digitally mediated systems of provision of newly urgent needs for forgotten milk. Perhaps prompting a milk-oriented re-emphasis in the media 'cocoon' surrounding the home-coming commuter. The consumer envisioned in this book is one well used to pop-up ads across her mobile phone edition of the *Evening Standard.* She can expect an instantaneously PR-placed feature on the health pages recommending natural sources of calcium for women in their 40s; product placement emerging at the dynamically data-mined cross reference of 'absent milk' and the home-coming commuter's virtual profile. Digital advertising seeks to engage the reassembled behavioural quirks and genetic predispositions of consumers' digital doppelgangers. Who remembers and who forgets in such a world?

As McStay makes clear in his expositions of scholarly and industry sources, algorithmic technologies increasingly connect buyers and sellers: mediation of and by bytes and terabytes. This 'miracle' is gradually supplanting past media wonders, refiguring and re-contextualizing print, radio waves and television. Mobile devices supporting promotional interactivity further disturb relations between 'real' and 'virtual' consumption. Making sense of it all is the challenge set by and for *Digital Advertising*.

In the main McStay's text manages to avoid too much 'Big Brother', *Brave New World* hyperbole. *Tomorrow's World* style commentary is minimized in favour of an informative whistle-stop through some contemporary developments related to digital advertising. Good examples and discussion of viral marketing accompanies a suitably comprehensive listing of emerging regulations in the US and the EU and some useful inventories of the types of promotional digital communication make for a helpful addition to the range of resources available for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

McStay does not spend too much time wrangling over definitions of his objects of analysis. 'Digital advertising' extends to encompass much brand and promotional communication and in many ways indistinguishable forms of digital marketing. This leads to a degree of imprecision. The distinctly 'advertising' part of the digitally mediated world traversed in the book is sometimes obscured further, because of an occasional tendency to include *everything* (digital data sets from hospitals, tracked-email traffic and so on) in the book's purview. On balance this approach is fair enough, however. One of the anxieties posed by digitization of data ('data-mining') is the fear that (exponentially) the commensurabilities of digital information permit, even encourage, the byte-by-byte vanishing of 'sacred' and commonplace boundaries, institutional walls that protect and compartmentalize: public and private, medical identity and consumer identity, friendship and commerce.

The book is based on little systematic empirical research, but it does a good job in collating numerous surveys and statements from industry sources. Some interviews appear to have been conducted, including one with *Adbusters*'s Kalle Lasn. These excerpts provide some insightful points – if somewhat generalized. McStay calls upon an eclectic mix of theoretical resources: Bauman's liquid modernity, Foucault's panopticon, Giddens's ontological insecurity, de Certeau's everyday life. The implicit question for cultural sociologists – and sociologists of assertively *digital* culture – is in the extent to which such ideas are flexible enough to provide insight and critique in the face of a new media-consumer environment.

The book seeks a creative blend; a precarious balance of critique and admiring exposition of recent developments in the industry. The introduction states two main aims: first, to describe key trends in the area of digital advertising; second, to reflect upon and explore arguments surrounding conceptualizations of digital media. These aims are broadly achieved. Indeed a narrower focus might have offered a less useful survey of the phenomena under discussion – while delivering more consistent answers to the reflective and demanding questions that hang over each chapter.

Information, relationships and commerce are transformed as analogue media give way to digital variants – as new media are born. How to think about these emergent environments and new relations? These media interconnect, and connect us, re-connect and disconnect; friends reunited, loneliness redistributed and amplified across networks (old, new and renewed). It all appears to amount to a (virtual and global) 'society' and new 'cultures' – but without a sociology to help us understand and reflect. The relatively stabilized typologies upon which social analysis of advertising has been based (media, audience, research, creativity, critique) confront the

dynamic morphologies of the digital media environment. We have a version of what one ad industry commentator has called 'Chaos 2.0'. On the other hand, we hear little about what has *not* changed.

A single book cannot readily make sense of 'it all'. Indeed the book struggles to contain the rich wealth of interesting examples that pile up, chapter by chapter. The questions for discussion are at times enormous in scope – and hard to answer. Perhaps these questions are the best alternative to the assertion of a too confident analytic point of view. The book is primarily a textbook but would certainly have a place in providing reading material for seminar discussions opening up connections between cultural theory and media practices, and as recommended reading, alongside, for instance, Spurgeon (2008) and some chapters in more recent general discussion of advertising (such as in Powell et al., 2009). As such, it does well to open up examples and stimulate reflective considerations. The immediacy of the book is its major strength. Appropriately the book's tone is, at times, a bit 'bloggy' (if that's a word). But given the size, implications and dynamism of the phenomena McStay seeks to capture, the at times semi-finalized, rich and provisional feel of the book is no bad thing.

References

- Powell H, Hardy J, Hawkin S and MacRury I (eds) (2009)The Advertising Handbook. London: Routledge.
- Spurgeon C (2008) Advertising and New Media. London: Routledge.