

# A Little Lifetime Confession: What I Detest Most<sup>1</sup>

By  
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You don't have to climb into the Catholic confessional to confess. Admitting what you have carried with you for a long time is not always easy, but it can have a liberating effect. Confession, with or without God's blessing, is also supposed to have that effect. You can also do it publicly and make a small confession of your life. On the internet, you can now get your sins off your chest in front of hundreds of thousands of followers on the Twitter feed @fesshole, even if absolution is not forthcoming.

In the little confession of life, the focus is not on sin and forgiveness, but on understanding and comprehension, also, and especially, in sociological and socio-political terms.

What do I detest most? I detest advertising-- "the more beautiful form of lying", as Swedish journalist Per Grankvist called it, because its consequences turn it into deception. In addition to advertising, I also detest violence the most because violence degrades people.

## Playing with Fire

An advertising lie can become a game with fire, as demonstrated by the drug cannabis, which has now left the dark corner of illegality in many countries. As a result, many companies are now asking how this product can be advertised, especially since it is still a drug. Promoting the product goes along the lines of enjoyment, because enjoyment is associated with pleasure and reward. The repetition of advertising for this product promises pleasure because it changes people's perceptions.

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<sup>1</sup>This *Musing* was originally written in German in a slightly different version and published in the journal *soziologie heute* 80 (December 2021): 26-30 in which a series on little life confessions is starting. Although the version of the musing published here has been translated into English, the punctuation remains in German format.

Today, regarding alcohol, for example, alleged prevention measures by breweries turn out to be actual advertising for alcohol. Constant repetition transforms the advertising message into *apparent* truthfulness and makes the reward catch the eye of potential consumers in a positive way. You don't have to think of the *Warsteiner* beer right away. One advertises the alcohol-free Pilsener with the slogan "The only true" – in German "Das einzig Wahre" – and makes not only advertisement, but also money from spelling mistakes. Or take the *Tiroler Felsenkeller Käse*, which is advertised in the supermarket as "Cheese of the Month"; even if it can be understood in a completely different way. Just total cheese! Not even the advertising slogan of the federation of German cemetery gardeners, "We water, you enjoy", comforts, as it could wake up with the understanding for spelling mistakes even deceased and make the cemetery to a trouble place.

## Advertising as a Force to Grow

Consumption and advertising enter into a seemingly indissoluble partnership because demand must be generated and promoted. The old department store, in which customers were generated and goods distributed, already testifies to this. Just like demand in general, advertising in particular becomes a structural compulsion of the consumer society, which is geared to growth. The Deutsche Bahn also demonstrates this when it announces in a press release that it has decided *not* to advertise on trains because, with fewer passengers, it is not worthwhile – at least in Corona times. For sociologists such as Hartmut Rosa, this decision is also due to the economic conditions that make us dependent so that growth has to become more and more. In other words, we are confronted with the question of what kind of society we live and want to live in (Fuest/Rosa 2020).

The American PR manager Edward L. Bernays, a relative of Sigmund Freud, understood public relations and advertising as "psychological warfare". Among other things, he worked for the tobacco industry that seduced the women of New York's upper class to smoke by sending smoking beauties down Fifth Avenue. In his 1928 book, purposefully titled *Propaganda*, Bernays wrote, "Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument of productivity and can help bring order to chaos" (Bernays 2011). How mendacious this was to show what he was really about: making cigarettes the "torch of freedom" for women, socially acceptable, and, thus, a profitable business model. Unfortunately, that didn't stop his wife from becoming a chain smoker and it didn't stop him from snatching the cigarette out of her mouth and throwing away the pack of cigarettes when he caught her smoking.

No wonder, one might think, that there are now so-called adbusters who manipulate advertising posters, the figureheads of capitalism, by pasting over or redesigning them. Suddenly the poster says, "A heart for child labor – H&M", and one is very surprised. The fact that H&M and a number of other companies, like Levi's, are now adopting the slogan "Black Lives Matter". Adding that slogan "Black Lives Matter" will *not* make such ads any more credible. On the contrary, as Lobe (2020) says "First slogan, then packaging".

Even the ban on tobacco advertising on billboards is unlikely to change much. After all, this ban will come into force in Germany in 2022 – with Germany being the last EU country to adopt it. Point-of-sale advertising at gas stations, supermarkets or tobacco shops will continue to be permitted and will become all the more intense in those places.

In the U.S. – the country with the highest tobacco harvest in the first decades after World War II, tobacco advertising on radio and television was banned on January 2, 1971. In the Federal Republic of Germany, consideration of a ban on advertising tobacco products came in 1974, albeit with fierce opposition. For example, Hugo Hamman, a CDU member of the German Bundestag, argued entirely in line with the tobacco industry: "Advertising is an information tool, not one of manipulation." Advertising can also lead to quid pro quos. Just as is true of lobbying in politics and business, when influence is dovetailed with bribery or blackmail.

For years I have wondered whether the hired stars of product and service reviews in the internet haven't long since landed us in a digital society of lies. Online reviews of items with a five-star rating are commonplace as much as a business model to boot, because both writing

reviews and placement online are remunerated. It's not just Amazon Basics that shows these products with five stars. There is star inflation because most reviews on the internet are positive (cf. Britzelmeier 2021). The Basic Data Protection Regulation has mutated into a *decision fiction* and, in conjunction with tracking cookies, has long since become the "biggest lie in the internet". People now only look annoyed at the cookies notice and almost automatically click OK. Data protection is business.

### The World Wants to Be Deceived

Through advertising slogans like "Be yourself", we consumers have lost our identity with the consumption of mass-produced goods. Thus, the advertised idea of a product triggers reactions in the human brain via reference group, price or seal of approval that influence taste perception. Helmut Quack (2019) was able to show this effect, among other things, in a *blind* test and an *open* test of a sausage from the butcher and from the discounter. Although the sausages were identical in taste, appearance, consistency, and seasoning, the butcher's sausage received a significantly better rating in the open test.

Not even the spiritual teacher and visionary Laura Malina Seiler, "the Oprah Winfrey of Berlin", is exempt from this advertising trick when she advertises her bestsellers with the promise "100 percent Laura, 0 percent advertising" to lure more people into signing up for her online course, "Rise Up and Shine Uni", for 400 Euros. However, if you use flattery to achieve success, then it seems that the world and its consumers want to be deceived.

So I also find myself committing a sin, I thought I would never commit: Looking for a bargain when I shop for a product. For example, there are offers for wine in the supermarket with a price for one bottle and a considerably cheaper price per bottle if you buy two bottles. The consumer may judge the price for one bottle as relatively high, but the price for two bottles acceptable. To the consumer's mind, this extra bottle comes unexpectedly and turns out to be an opportunity to acquire a gift.

Advertising is media pornography. And not only in the internet travel agency, where the "best price guarantee" becomes a lying customer catcher through "dynamic pricing". In the meantime, advertisers even want to use the placebo effect in ads, as the start-up *Air Up* demonstrates by offering drinking bottles with rings "which simulate to contain flavored drinks, although

only regular water is in them" (Steffens 2021). The "chocolate effect" is also achieved by *smelling* chocolate without eating it.

On digital social networks, like Facebook and Youtube, the public degenerates into a kind of "surveillance capitalist byproduct" (Lobe 2018). The supposedly omnipotent consumer-entrepreneur becomes an advertiser and "free" the "most expensive business model", as judged by Tristan Harris, the former Google employee, and Robert McNamee, the investor and former confidant of Mark Zuckerberg. Digital capitalism functions like "the reward system of a gambling machine" because "the algorithm looks for anything that triggers reactions". Thus, it controls and monitors our attention (Harris/McNamee 2020). "Addictive design" has become the key term used by the advertising industry to capture users' attention.

The customer advances to the kingmaker, as illustrated by Likes and ranking lists. Purchased Likes and the dubious ranking game are not only overrunning supermarkets, hotels, and travel routes in the internet with avalanches of laurels. Doctors, lawyers, universities, and scientists are also on a ranking spree. Success, however generated, becomes an achievement and thus a secret (cf. Kramer 2021). This would not be possible without a society that participates.

The social networks are social in a dubious way at best, because they bring together information worldwide and establish contacts between people, but also bring like-minded people together for anger, hatred, and war. This makes contact users in particular overlook the fact that they distribute intellectual garbage en masse and offer political influencers an advertising platform to gain power. But the networks' driving force is the skimming of information used for advertising.

### **From a Carousel of Lies to Fully Automated Surveillance**

Almost all media live from advertising revenue. By that, I don't just mean *Hörzu*, *Woche Heute*, *tina* or *das neue*, but also socially critical newspapers like the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Even they don't miss the opportunity to overwhelm the reader, who has just read one or the other critical article about overconsumption, the climate catastrophe, real estate sharks, and car scandals, a few pages further on with advertisements for fashion and cars, jewelry and real estate, and even current travel destinations in Corona time. Time and again, they circumvent the obligation to separate advertising from editorial content. It is not uncommon

for editorial environments to be created in order to place paid advertisements. This is also the case in the health sector, as demonstrated not only by pharmacists' magazines and the pharmaceutical industry. You can't do without side effects!

Of course, without advertising revenues, there would be no newspaper. From local papers to national women's newspapers and from men's fashion magazines to women's fashion magazines, all have literally become advertising agencies on paper and on the internet. Even the parish newsletters of the churches are no longer exempt. Or do the advertising fuzzies already expect absolution with them? They are no indulgence letters! Nevertheless with the coupling business the angel can become the devil. The advertisement is not only the other side effect, but also a mirror of the society (Ritzer 2021).

It is not only companies that create facts and turn consumer advertising into lies; political advertising via social media has also long since become paid disinformation. The carousel of lies spins even further in the digital world. Advertising has become a global, "fully automated surveillance system" in the internet, with advertising software assigning ads to each user that match the spied-upon personality profile.

The result is an "internet of the rich", because on the one hand only they can and want to afford internet access without data abuse. On the other hand, the collectors of Facebook, Google, Amazon & Co exploit the data fed to them by the bugs on apps and websites and become rich through capital theft (Brühl 2019). For the French philosopher Gaspard Koenig (2021), the apps and accounts of social networks therefore turn out to be a form of serfdom.

Not just politics, we all find it difficult to recognize the extent of mass surveillance and to make it public. This is also complained by Nils Zurawski (2021) in his book on monitoring and consuming. He sees the reason above all in the fact that the importance of consumption as a basic building block of society is not taken seriously. He too speaks of a re-feudalization of our life worlds through digitalization, which makes surveillance a part of consumption and thus of our identity.

### **The Customer: King or Product?**

Advertising is undoubtedly caught in a dilemma between economics and morality. Customers, manipulated by "micropersonalized advertising", turned into the actual product.

If the enjoyment of the product becomes a habit, it

can become an addiction and turn one's perception into tunnel vision. Relaxation and enjoyment of life can also turn alcohol into pleasure rather than poison, as studies on nutrition and consumer behavior show (Bartens 2021). With the help of advertising, no: of marketing tricks, the Danish beer brewer J. C. Jakobsen, for example, managed to "save the Danish people from schnapps with his bottom-fermented, Carlsberg". Thus, beer became the "medicine for the addiction-prone people" and, as an "original Danish tradition", the "healing way out of alcoholism" (Strittmatter 2021). Even though the Carlsberg story was a long time ago, the problematic alcohol consumption of the Danes has not stopped. In no EU country is drinking as excessive as in Denmark, according to a 2020 report by the EU Commission.

Meanwhile, German courts no longer see a violation of competition law if influencers on the internet do not give a warning about advertising, since "the consumption-steeped society" does not need such a warning at all (Hanisch 2021). With regard to influencers in social networks, critics speak of a "triumph of dumbing down in a world that wants to be screwed over" (Rest 2019). Perhaps we should finally realize what the German word for advertisement "Reklame", which comes from Italian, actually means: contradict! The influencers already do not contradict at all, because they have made the sneak advertising to the self-promotion. They don't sneak, they drum.

Market value or social value? Or is man an advertising drummer anyway, especially since in daily life he is always concerned with esteem and the avoidance of disrespect?

Whether it's chocolate, potato chips, cannabis or alcohol, we treat ourselves to something good when the day has been exhausting or we've had trouble, and come up with "permission-giving thoughts", as addiction physician Tobias Rüter (2021) calls it. We give the body what it asks for. This is exactly what advertising conveys, especially to children and young people. The good doesn't always have to be healthy, just as the healthy doesn't have to be good. Of course, advertising would not exist without the clientele, just as organized crime would not exist if it did not find buyers for its products (Schweer 2003).

But buying can be like cocaine, as consumer researcher Carl Tillessen suggests in his podcast. Or as clearance salesman Steffen Sigg (2021) said: "Discounts work like cocaine in the mind." They turn the price into a commodity, similar to what is happening in the art world today. Not to mention, the true price of a product

is rarely paid by the consumer, but by the environment or the people in the countries where it is produced. For Tillessen, these are "modern slaves" who made it clear that the environmental and social compatibility of our consumption is primarily a task for politics.

No matter what you look at, whether it's the city, the media, educational institutions, department stores or sports fields, our living environment is permeated by advertising. However, not all advertising has to be lying and bad. But less would be more, much more!

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