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The Commodification of Audience Attention, 1865-1920

When Nathaniel Fowler wrote an encyclopedic guide to the business of advertising in the closing years of the nineteenth century he had several purposes in mind. He wanted to make money from the sale of *Fowler's Publicity*; he wanted to make money from the sale of advertising space in the book; he wanted to make money by promoting his own services as an advertising agent through the book. He also wanted to engage in two rhetorical struggles: a war of aggression against periodical publishers and a pitch to persuade advertisers to rely on advertising professionals.

Over and over throughout the book he insisted that advertising space "is a commodity that has the same commercial value as other articles of commerce" (Fowler 1900, p.352). The purpose of purchasing advertising space was to reach an audience. This being so, it struck him as a moral outrage that publishers would, as they were universally understood to do, dissemble about the circulation of their periodical publications (Fowler 1900, pp.360-362). A joke popular among advertising agents at the time concerns a publisher on his death bed who, when he hears the doctor comment on his weakened circulation, rises from the bed to insist that his circulation is as strong as it has ever been and then falls down dead. Typical publisher, advertising agents chuckled (or sighed), lying about circulation to his dying breath (Laird 1998).

Fowler's insistence that advertising space is a commodity was a case of rhetoric running slightly ahead of reality – and helping to create the new reality he claimed. His focus on circulation made clear that the commodity in question was not exactly the column space in a newspaper. The commodity was the eyes of the readers. Advertisers were keenly interested in knowing how many people, and what sort of people, would see their ad. The purchase of advertising space was (and is) the purchase of audience attention. Fowler wrote during a period when the institutions and practices necessary for an organized audience attention market were rapidly developing. Accurate newspaper circulation numbers were essential to the standardization and quantification of the audience attention commodity, which was, in turn, a crucial component of the maturation of the audience attention market.

Fowler also insisted that the creation of advertising content should be left to the communications professionals, and this was similarly both a symptom of and a contribution to the creation of a new commodity rooted in audience attention. "Don't write your own advertisements if you can find somebody else to write them for you," he warned. All the expense of putting your advertisement before the eyes of the public is wasted if the advertisement is not attractive enough to catch and hold the public's attention and to convey your message (Fowler 1900, pp.40, 261, 344-5, 694-6). Fowler wished to convince his readers not only that column space was an item of merchandise, but that content, too, was better bought than self-produced.

Audience attention as a fictitious commodity

Markets are always embedded in a society that also includes non-market realms; what happens within the market depends in part on what happens without (and vice versa). Karl Polanyi argued that ours is a market society in which the market realm has a tendency to expand into more and more areas of social life, but this process of market expansion runs into contradictions. The self-regulating market ideal requires that every element of industry must be treated as a commodity, "subject to the supply-and-demand mechanism interacting with price." However, industry's needs include land and labor, which are "no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists." That is, they are not produced for the purpose of market exchange and yet they become subject to market exchange. Polanyi calls such items, those that are traded on markets although they are not produced specifically for sale on the market, "fictitious commodities." He identified three: land, labor, and money. The self-regulating market ideal can never be fully achieved both because the market would fail – these fictitious commodities will not respond appropriately to market signals – and because allowing "the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment … would result in the demolition of society" (Polanyi 1957, p.71-73).

Audience attention is not produced for the purpose of market exchange – like labor, it is inherent in the existence of a human population. (Although, unlike labor, which is sold by those laboring, attention was not (and is not) sold by those attending; it was (and is) sold by third parties.) By the late nineteenth century, access to audience attention became important to the functioning of industry – and it remains so today. This need of industry created a pressure for audience attention to take on a commodity form and the advertising industry was born in response. A new market in audience attention arose, interconnected with all other markets in the larger market economy. In short, audience attention became a fictitious commodity.

There are three stages of successful communications: The first communicative task is to intercept eyeballs.[1] The second task is to hold the gaze and convey… something – an impression, some piece of information, an emotion. In the case of communication originating with an advertiser, the goal is often to convey some sense of familiarity with a specific product and its use. Lastly, if the first two tasks are achieved, the audience will have received and retained an impression. A brand identity will have become a social fact, an element of social communication, even of communications not originating with the seller. More recently, advertisers and marketers have labeled this impression left by communications "mindshare." All three stages of communications took on commodified forms during the period between 1865 and 1920. The market for newspaper, magazine, billboard, and streetcar advertising space matured, giving us a commodity version of the first part of the communications task. The emergence of specialized professional advertising copywriters and artists gave us a commodity version of the second part. The reform of trademark laws made brand identities into salable business assets, giving us a commodity version of the third.

The impetus to commodify commercial communications came from the emerging large-scale producers and sellers of the late nineteenth century. They had a different selling problem than did earlier, smaller-scale enterprises. Greater and greater distances

[1] Or ears, though in the interim between the decline of street crying and the rise of radio broadcast, ears were less targeted than eyes. The elaborate medicine shows used to promote the wide variety of highly questionable nostrums available in the late nineteenth century were richly multisensory affairs, but they faded away as other avenues for promotion did not. So I will, with a wistful sigh, leave them aside for now.

opened up between those directing production decisions and those ultimately consuming the goods produced – geographic distance, often social distance, and layers of bureaucratic and market intermediation. This created a communications challenge. Consumers needed new ways to make meaning in their material culture and producers wanted to intervene in this altered process of meaning-making in profitable ways, but those at the opposite extremes of the distribution chain were not personally known to one another and did not communicate directly (Strasser 1989). For producers to achieve their desired growth, they needed new ways to communicate with existing and potential consumers of their goods. Sellers of newly invented or newly abundant goods could only sell their output if consumption patterns changed.

Influencing consumption patterns by participating in the meaning-making of popular material culture on a scale appropriate to the scale of production required mass producers and mass retailers to develop a mass communications strategy. The solution that took shape was for large-scale firms to buy advertising space that gave them access to consumers' attention and buy advertising content that attracted and held consumers' attention. A firm could even, by purchasing a trademark, buy the effects of someone else's past advertising. The advertisers' willingness, even eagerness, to purchase audience attention spurred a market response from those who could collect or attract and sell (or resell) it: periodical publishers and billboard owners, advertising copywriters and illustrators, advertising agents.

Though the gains from the sale of any component of audience attention are privately enjoyed, the construction of attention as a salable good requires collaborative and state action. Those within the advertising and related industries established standards of conduct and enforcement authorities. The state recognized and enforced contracts related to the trade in audience attention, thereby establishing new forms of property. The growing ranks of advertising professionals created and benefited from new institutions. Those with the opportunity and ability to attract and hold audience attention found an expanding economic niche and increasing economic rewards.

Commodified attention part 1: Intercepting eyeballs

Early in the twentieth century and late in his career, George Rowell reminisced about his forty years in the advertising business and his several years of employment with the Boston *Post* before that. While working as a bill collector for the *Post* immediately before and during the Civil War he found that, "[A]dvertising space had at that time no recognized measure or standard of value. Practically, within certain limits, it amounted to getting as much as possible and taking what one could get" (Rowell 1906, p.30). When he left his job at the newspaper and went into business for himself as an independent advertising agent, he started a career that made him a pivotal figure in the maturation of the newspaper sector of the audience attention market. He is widely seen as a reformer who, through his rectitude, raised the ethical standards within the advertising profession and the reputation of advertising in the eyes of the general public. His major achievements are indeed characterized by plain dealing, but they can also be characterized as innovations that provided a workable structure for the newspaper sector of the expanding market for audience attention. Other sectors developed more or less in parallel.

There were three main avenues for the interception of eyeballs outside of places that were already considered places of commerce. One was to gather audience attention in the virtual spaces of the media. The second was direct mail marketing seeking to intercept people's attention in the private space of their homes. The third was to gather audience attention in public spaces.[2]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, media meant print (Laird 1998, p.58). There were local daily and weekly newspapers, many with a small local readership numbering only in the hundreds, and there were monthly national magazines with readership in the thousands. The production of all forms of print media grew remarkably quickly (despite a fairly high mortality rate for new publications). Newspapers were already a well-established format with a long history of generating

[2] Though important, for purposes of this study, I'm leaving aside in-store displays and promotions. These practices changed in this period as the relationships between retailers, wholesalers, and manufacturers changed, but point-of-sale marketing was still within the range of merchant activities and did not represent a new form of economic activity centered around the exchange of commodified audience attention.

revenue both through subscription fees and through the sale of advertising space. Although there was no major change to the format of the publications or the business model of the publishers, the number of distinct newspaper publications and the total volume of newspaper production increased markedly. From 1880 to 1899, the number of weeklies more than doubled from 3,232 to 7,600 and growth in the number of dailies kept pace. Meanwhile, the aggregate expenditure on newspaper advertising increased from $39 million in 1880 to $71 million in 1890 and then doubled to nearly $150 million in 1900 (Sherman 1900, pp.119-120). (Expenditures grew even faster in real terms than in nominal; the price level fell almost 18% over the twenty years from 1880 to 1900 (Officer and Williamson 2012)).

The magazine industry, by contrast, was entirely new. It was invented in the late nineteenth century, initially at the impetus of patent medicine manufacturers seeking more places to put their advertisements. What had been a sleepy corner of the publishing world, focused on literary content, paid for by subscriptions, and carrying little to no advertising became a major sector of the industry dominated by religious and lifestyle content and paid for largely by advertising revenues. Successful magazines achieved both national distribution and socioeconomic sorting, which made them very attractive to advertisers of national brands (Fox 1997, Goodrum and Dalrymple 1997, Laird 1998). From 1880 to 1890 the number of distinct magazines increased 93 percent to 2,247 while average circulation per publication increased 44 percent to 11,317. From 1890 to 1900 the number of distinct magazines leveled off, but circulation did not – it continued to grow rapidly (Sherman 1900, p.121).

As the volume of print media grew, the market for media ad placements integrated regionally and nationally. Rowell was an innovator in the integration of the media advertising space market. His first scheme as an advertising agent was to make a niche for himself by selling low-cost advertising space in country newspapers to city advertisers interested in geographic expansion. He established contact with enough country newspapers to be able to offer advertisers a package deal: placement in 100 newspapers for $100 (Rowell 1906, pp.63-69). Advertising agents such as Rowell, and soon his imitators, were able to select from a national array of newspapers and coordinate purchases in many newspapers simultaneously. From the perspective of producers and retailers with national ambitions, this service from advertising agents meant that newspapers in New Haven, New York, Newport News, and New Orleans were now part of a single market for audience attention. In 1900, Sidney Sherman noted an effect of this integration: an increase in the proportion of newspaper ad placements made by advertisers from outside the newspapers' region (Sherman 1900, p.120).

Also, as the market grew and integrated, the nature of the exchange between publisher and advertiser – the relationship between size, page placement, and circulation, to rates – became increasingly standardized. Advertisers and the advertising agents who increasingly saw their interests aligned with the advertisers were dissatisfied with the take-what-you-can-get situation Rowell described. In 1866, Rowell first distributed a list of advertising media in a publication aimed at advertisers. (Other agents considered their lists to be proprietary information and were less than delighted with Rowell's decision to pull back the curtain on the inner workings of their business.) Advertisers clamored for more detailed information and Rowell responded with *Rowell's Newspaper Directory*, first published in 1869. In the *Directory*, the earlier lists of publication names and towns were elaborated with circulation data and other pertinent characteristics of the publications, such as type of content, political affiliation, frequency of publication, and characterization of readers. (Publishers were furious, not least because Rowell's estimates of their circulation were often far below their own claims.) It was published more or less annually from 1869 until 1909. The format leaves no doubt about the nature of the transactions the directory facilitated. It reads as a catalog of the size and character of the readership of each newspaper. Rowell even established a rough grading system, granting a special bulls-eye mark to the listings of those newspapers boasting a large circulation of readers with higher-than-average disposable income (Myers 1960, pp.316-319; Fox 1997).

Despite their resistance to external audits of circulation, the publishers did not really question the premise that they were selling audiences. Rowell allowed publishers to insert paid announcements following the listing prepared by his staff. The 1909 listing prepared by Rowell's staff for the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, for example, is followed by the publisher's paid announcement claiming a higher circulation than Rowell had given him credit for and asserting that the *Boston Daily Advertiser* is "a clean newspaper, and reaches the homes of the best families in Boston and suburbs – a most desirable medium for placing announcements before a large, intelligent and wealthy class of readers" (Rowell 1909, p.446). However, publishers' recalcitrance did eventually make the *Directory* economically untenable: the publication of the directory was dependent on publishers' paid advertisements, but the more carefully Rowell's staff scrutinized the publications, the less willing the publishers were to play Rowell's game. At the same time, the publishers could no longer deny the advertisers' demands for circulation data. The result was the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), an organization formed in 1914 by a collaboration of national advertisers, advertising agents, and a variety of periodical publishers (of whom newspapers were by far the most numerous). ABC had the standing to independently verify circulations. Its legitimacy became so widely recognized that a periodical publisher could not afford to decline an ABC audit; advertisers would not trust a publication's circulation claims without it (Myers 1960 p.310).

With national integration and clear, publicly accessible information about the good for sale (that is, the number and type of people whose eyes were likely fall upon an advertisement in a given publication), the audience attention market was taking shape. The last piece of the market maturation puzzle was to make prices public. Francis Wayland Ayer, one of Rowell's most successful contemporaries, established the open contract which eventually became the industry standard, making the prices for media placements publicly known (Laird 1998, p.167). (Nathaniel Fowler, by contrast, resisted fully public price information. His point of view was that the advertiser need only be concerned with whether the space was a worthwhile purchase at the price quoted by the agent and need know nothing about how much the agent paid for the space (Fowler 1900, p.355).) Open access to price information became the industry standard endorsed by the Associated Advertising Clubs of America (AAC of A) at their convention in 1914. The benefit publishers and agents had derived from their earlier secrecy and lost with the new agreement was compensated for by the provisions of the resolution that forbade price competition. Prices for advertising placements and advertising agents' fees were thereafter publicly known, but they were not allowed to emerge from a market equilibrating process of competitive bidding. Rather, they were set by agreement at a standard rate that preserved profitability for publishers and agents (Myers 1960, p.312).

Similar transformations took place in other sectors of the access-to-eyeballs market. Direct mail marketing increased markedly in the later nineteenth century as the postal service developed the capacity to be the conduit for such a high volume of advertising materials (Laird 1997, p.57). As an essential input for direct mail marketing, accurate, information-rich mailing lists became very valuable assets. For example, in Charles Austin Bates's self-promoting publication *Good Advertising and Where It Is Made*, which was first published in the mid-1890s and reprinted several times through the next decade or more, he indicated that his agency could supply mailing lists for direct mail advertising executed by his addressing department. This allowed Bates' agency to gain revenues from ownership of a mailing list through a fee-for-use arrangement. Alternatively, the firm could use a list supplied by the client; in that case he guaranteed that the client's list would not be made available to anyone else. That is, he would respect the clients' ownership of informational property (Bates, unnumbered pages).

In pursuit of eyeballs in public spaces, the outdoor advertising industry professionalized in the late nineteenth century. The construction of billboards, publicly visible but privately owned infrastructure with the sole purpose of being seen, accelerated and consolidated. Sherman described the prior state affairs: "In the early period of the business it was one in which individual initiative had full scope. The billposter placed his bills where he dared, by day or by night, running his chances of their being torn down by the irate owner or posted over by his competitor." But by 1900, most cities had one dominating billposting company that controlled access to billboards and those local monopolies or, where competition existed, standards enforced by professional organizations allowed billposters to have a reasonable guarantee that their posters would remain on display for an agreed-upon term. The Associated Billposters of the United States and Canada also standardized the relationship of the size of the posters and the population of the area to rates charged for poster display (Sherman 1900, p.126).

Urbanization was a boon to outdoor advertising. A billboard in a city street was seen by many more people than the painted side of a barn on a rural road. City dwellers were more dependent on purchased goods sooner than were rural folk, so they were an audience that many manufacturers very much wanted to reach. Riders of brand new urban mass transit were a captive audience for advertisers; streetcar riders' attention was sold as soon as there were streetcars to ride. The business of placing advertisements in streetcars was concentrated in a few dominating firms who charged rates calculated on the basis of the length of the contract and the number of passengers carried (Sherman 1900, p.127).

Government at the state and municipal levels got involved in a certain degree of regulation: some municipalities required billposters to be licensed; some forbade commercial signs on public property; but the rights of private property owners to lease space to billposters and the rights of advertisers to place whatever content they pleased on those spaces received explicit government sanction. The Associated Billposters lobbied effectively to ensure this state of affairs whenever these rights seemed threatened – as when Progressive reformers tried to establish limits on outdoor advertising. The aesthetic standards of billboards did not match Progressives' city beautiful ideals. Too, the target audience for billboard advertising was predominantly an immigrant population and the advertisers' attempts to shape new arrivals into consumers of national brands was not entirely compatible with Progressives' desire to shape new arrivals into citizens in their own mold. The billposters' political organizing was at least as successful as the reformers', however. Frequently they blocked the Progressives' model bills from even making the legislative agenda. When outdoor advertising was taken up by legislative bodies or by the courts, the outcomes nearly always recognized and helped standardize the business of selling access to the eyes of passersby. Widespread licensing of billposters clearly legitimated their activities in the eyes of the state. With a combination of arguments for free speech and the impossibility of legislating aesthetic values, billposters and their clients successfully evaded any significant limitations on the content of billboard ads (Schultze 1984; Bailey 1987).

The maturing of an audience attention market put a collection of dissimilar activities into competition with one another. Streetcars and billboards competed with newspapers and magazines. On the face of it, these appear to be completely distinct businesses, but they all sold access to audiences' eyes and advertisers made decisions about the allocation of their advertising among all those options. Kodak declined to use streetcars and billboards at all because they believed the "better class" of consumers they targeted could be better reached through magazines and they didn't want to associate their product with the chaotic mingling of the city streets (Strasser 1989, p.102). By contrast, the makers of Sapolio household cleaners thought their target audience, which included domestic workers, could regularly be found on the streets and on the streetcars and their campaign focused predominantly on these public space placements (Laird 1998, p.180).

Chronologically, the eyeball interception phase of communication was the first to begin transforming into a type of audience attention commodity. The change was clearly already underway when the first edition of Rowell's Newspaper Directory was published at the end of the 1860s. The other two phases of communication followed close behind.

Commodified attention part II: Holding attention and conveying the message

Once an advertisement is inserted into the target audience's field of vision, the second component of the communications task begins. This component did not begin to take on a commodity form as early as access to eyeballs did. Even after participants in the market were quite clear about the nature of their trade in gazes and advertising agents were well established as column space merchants, the advertisers themselves continued to write their own advertising copy for several more decades. But beginning toward the end of the nineteenth century, crafting advertising content became a specialized profession. Practitioners of this new profession adopted insights from new academic field of experimental psychology, conducted audience response testing, adapted the language and techniques of scientific management, and sold their services to advertisers whose public face was no longer the face of their founder or proprietor. The new advertising professionals' not entirely spurious claim to communications expertise allowed the creation of advertising content, and not just placement, to become a way to sell audience attention.

The division of labor first yielded a full-time copywriter in 1880 when department store owner John Wannamaker hired John E. Powers to write copy to advertise Wannamaker's Philadelphia store. After several years of personality clashes Wannamaker fired Powers, who then continued to write advertising copy full time as a freelancer. Following Powers's lead, a handful of other full time copywriters made careers as freelancers during the late 1880s and early 1890s. Into the beginning of the

1890s, advertising agencies continued to take little responsibility for content and none had a full-time copywriter, but as 1900 approached more and more of the labor of producing advertising copy moved into the agencies. In the first decade of the 1900s advertising agencies began introducing art departments and took over more and more responsibility for the visual, nonverbal components of advertisements as well. By 1920 the division and shifting of labor was complete: advertising agencies produced the content for the preponderance of advertisements produced on behalf of large manufacturing and merchant enterprises. (Smaller enterprises and owner-managed enterprises continued then to produce much more of their own advertising content and still do so now.) Growing numbers of advertising agents identified their business as primarily the creation of content, with placement as a secondary service – some even advocated keeping the two activities, content and placement, separate (Fox 1997, pp.25-27, 35-38; Laird 1998, p.42).

As long as advertising content was produced by the advertisers, and very often by the founder-proprietor himself, the content was largely shaped by the tastes and egos of these businessmen. They considered their advertisements to be projections of themselves as much as sales tools. Attempts to measure the advertisements' effectiveness as sales tools were rare and haphazard. As firms grew, owner-managers dwindled in number and the day-to-day decision-making was taken over by managers who were salaried employees. This meant that the "I" behind the earlier style of advertisement was now absent, shifting the emphasis to the sales tool function of the advertisements. Those now writing the ads, whether as employees of the advertised firm or of the advertising agency, were under greater pressure to prove the value of their professional services (Laird 1998, p.97, pp.257-260, Chandler 2002).

The argument for professionalizing advertising required defining the purpose of advertising in objective terms that were measurable, at least in principle, and then attempting to measure advertisements' performance according to those metrics. The end goal, of course, was for advertising to lead to sales at least often enough to cover the cost of running the advertisements. This cannot be directly measured, but both businessmen and academic researchers tried. In particular, the use of various assessment tools measuring the more direct link between advertisements and audience attention became common practice. Walter Scott Dill celebrated the scientific turn in the advertising profession in *The Psychology of Advertising* (second edition, 1910). “Advertising has as its one function the influencing of human minds,” he explained, therefore its scientific basis is psychology. Beginning around the year 1900, Dill noted approvingly, advertisers began to study psychology and psychologists began to study advertising (Dill 1910, pp.2-3).

Out in the field, advertising professionals introduced new research practices. They conducted field tests on advertisements by, for example, running different ads in different markets and comparing the resulting sales trends. Variants of advertisements that called for a direct consumer response were keyed so that advertisers could determine which styles of ads and which placements elicited the highest response rates (Dill 1910, p.1). In the lab (or some other controlled research setting), researchers attempted to determine which ads, and which qualities or characteristics of such ads, attracted and held attention and left a permanent impression. Dill devoted a chapter of his book on the psychology of advertising to “Attention Value,” attempting to answer the question of how much audience attention an advertiser gets when paying for an ad placement. His conclusions had to do with the size, position and content of the advertisements (Dill 1910, pp.157-176). Harlow Gale, a professor at the University of Minnesota, made advertising a central concern of his research into attention and reasoning even though he was not a particular fan of advertising (Eighmey and Sar 2007, p.147).

Brains are more complex than eyes, so this facet of audience attention never became as standardized a commodity as did the first. Even now, after an additional hundred years of research in cognitive science, no one quite knows what the response to an advertisement will be. Nevertheless, the professionalization of the creation of advertising content made the portion of the communication process that consists of attracting and holding attention and conveying a message into a commodity, too. The research attempting to systematically describe and quantify was a move to standardize this commodity, much as the attempts to establish accurate newspaper and magazine circulation data were a move to standardize the audience’s-field-of-vision commodity. Indeed, Claude Hopkins was ready to declare the standardization, or at least the potential for standardization, complete when he wrote *Scientific Advertising* in 1923. “The time has come when advertising has in some hands reached the status of a science. It is based on fixed principles and is reasonably exact" (Hopkins 1966, p.213).

Commodified attention part III: Mindshare and the value of the brand

There is a clear economic advantage to enjoying success in components one and two of the communications process. When buyers become familiar with a good and establish a habit of buying that good, that is, when the brand identity becomes widely known and a large number of consumers exhibit some degree of brand loyalty, sales revenues are higher and more predictable than they otherwise would be. If consumers will accept no substitute for their preferred brand, the manufacturer of the brand has a degree of monopoly power, with the price-setting power that implies. Rowell's reminiscences include two tales of business partners who dissolved their partnerships. In both of the cases he discussed, the ex-partner who maintained ownership of the trademark thrived while the other could not achieve similar sales of the identical product without the trademark on it, even when offered at a lower price. "What a commentary it is on the value of a trademark," Rowell marveled (Rowell 1906, pp.81-82). In addition, during the depression of the 1890s, price competition was most severe in industries without product differentiation and most muted in industries dominated by trademarked, nationally advertised goods. Advertising and branding proved to be a better defense against price-cutting than attempts to establish price-agreement pools and in the aftermath of this experience, manufacturers were eager to pursue this less ruinous form of competition (Lamoreaux 1985, pp. 18, 45). All these advantages of product differentiation can only be maintained, however, if brands can be protected from counterfeits.

With the passage of trademark laws (pushed hard by manufacturing interest lobbyists) in the 1880s, then revised and expanded in 1905, the impression made by advertising, the brand identity, became legal, salable property. "The habit on the part of the public of purchasing goods bearing a certain trade-mark is an asset to the producer of such goods," commented Edward Rogers in his book on the subject of trademarks and goodwill (Rogers 1919, p.59). Thanks to trademark legislation, the public's purchasing habits became not just an asset in the sense of a boon, but an asset in the sense of property. Legal decisions of the eighteenth century had explicitly determined that goodwill could *not* be salable legal property because as goodwill is produced by customers, and as the customers are not owned by the business in question, their goodwill cannot be sold by the business. The legal status achieved by trademarks as a result of the new trademark laws meant that goodwill became salable after all. (Though the trademark was not entirely separable from the business producing the trademarked good. It had to be sold in conjunction with the productive facilities of the business or, less often, with a patent for the production process (Rogers 1919, pp.100-101).) This meant in turn that customers, or at least their attention, impressions, cognitive and emotional relations to the symbols associated with brand identity, could be sold. Despite a great deal of ambiguity over how to appropriately price a trademark, estimated valuations of trademarks such as "Uneeda" and "Coca-Cola" became a large component of the estimated worth of their parent corporations (Strasser 1989, pp.43-49). In yet another way, audiences became commodities. Goodwill "[has] as definite a market value as has merchandise," Fowler averred (Fowler 1900, p.521). Not only our gaze, but also our responses to what we gaze upon are on sale.

Converting customers' goodwill into a business asset raised the market value of businesses producing popular brands. In doing so, it also raised the value of the services of the advertising professionals whose work could establish brands. Rogers wrote, "Advertising expenditure is the purchase price of good will" (Rogers 1919, p.116). Because of this, although manufacturers were the main lobbyists for trademark legislation, advertising agents enthusiastically cheered them on. Artemas Ward was a leading example of those agents who encouraged brand-name manufacturers to use all available legal means to combat substitutions. Ward also encouraged newspapers to editorialize in favor of secure property rights for trademarks, reminding publishers that their revenues depended on advertising, and manufacturers' willingness to advertise depended, in turn, on their ability to reap the rewards (Laird 1998, p.162).

Conclusion

Studies of the rise of mass consumer culture typically emphasize the development and integration of markets for the new consumer goods and the new producer goods used to make them. Such studies often attend carefully to the transportation and communications infrastructure – railroads, telegraphs and telephones, postal service – that made it possible. The then-new marketing practices are widely recognized and are seen as necessary corollaries of market development. This is true enough, but I argue in addition that the changes in marketing consumer goods were in fact built on the development and integration of yet another new market: the market for audience attention. Manufacturers of branded goods, periodical publishers, billboard owners and billposters, advertising agents, and others, together with local, state, and federal government brought this new market into being.

We can form a richer understanding of the linkages among a variety of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century marketing activities and their development over the period if we view them all as aspects of the incorporation of audience attention as a fictitious commodity into the orbit of market exchange. In this study, I have outlined the logical structure of the interrelated audience attention commodities and traced the concrete historical process of converting audience attention into a commodity. Standardizing and streamlining the variety of business practices involved in advertising, such as accurate reporting of media circulation, standardized contracts between advertising agents and advertisers, and the conversion of trademarks and brands into legal property converted a wildly heterogeneous resource (people's attention) into a sorted, classified set of commodities with a market price.

The commodification of audience attention meant the creation of new forms of property and new arenas of market exchange. This expansion of the market realm was driven primarily by the large-scale advertisers. Their interests dominated the negotiation of new professional standards and practices in advertising, such as the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Advertisers wanted accurate circulation data; publishers would rather not share that information. Reliable external circulation audits became the norm. Their influence shaped the government's updated definitions and defenses of property. Trademark laws were good for Coca-Cola, but not good for other soft drink bottlers trying to ride along in Coke's cola-marketing wake. With the cooperation of both the legislative and judicial branches of government, trademarks were defined and defended to brand-name manufacturers' benefit.

The activity of advertising has been carried out in some form as long as there has been trade, but in the years from 1865 to 1920 advertising became a new and distinct industry devoted to realizing the new economic value of audience attention. At the micro level, advertising professionals' interests could collide with the interests of their clients – the advertising agencies wanted to be paid as much as possible for their services while the advertisers wanted to pay them as little as possible. At the macro level, however, many advertising agents, and all of the most successful ones, understood that beyond the very short term their economic fortunes depended on the success of their clients. The first systematic attempt to assess and publicize circulation figures came from George Rowell, an advertising agent. Advertising agents such as Artemas Ward heartily seconded the manufacturers' call for trademark protection and the most vocal spokesmen for the advertising industry consistently extolled the virtues of brand name goods sold at steady prices.

As the large advertisers and their allies successfully established a market exchange in audience attention, they found themselves facing the contradiction inherent in fictitious commodities – they are traded in the market, but, since they are not produced for the purpose of being traded, supply does not respond to the market mechanism. The number of people whose attention was of interest to advertisers could grow no faster than the number of people with disposable income. There was no corresponding limit to the advertisers' demand for this attention and there is good evidence that demand consistently outstripped supply. Commentators from outside the advertising profession, especially those of higher socioeconomic status whose attention was most in demand and whose participation in the material culture of the day was least dependent on what they could glean at low or no cost, remarked despairingly on the sensory assault. They complained in particular about the proliferation of outdoor advertising degrading the landscape and the flood of junk mail infiltrating their homes and demanding at least enough attention to distinguish it from personal mail and discard it. (Though it's worth keeping in mind that those with lower incomes published fewer opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and made greater use of advertising ephemera to decorate their living spaces, so the reaction to the explosion of advertising was certainly not univocal.)

Meanwhile, advertising practitioners commented on the difficulty of attracting attention to their message and developed theories and strategies regarding both placement and content to try to increase the effectiveness of their advertising efforts. Since the supply of the raw resource of audience attention was unresponsive to the market (though certainly growing for demographic reasons), all market-driven supply-side adjustments had to take place through efficiency improvements on the part of advertising professionals. Extensive strategies for accessing attention, using only the eyeball-interception form of the audience attention commodity (e.g. more placements in more newspapers, more posters on more billboards) were soon complemented or even overshadowed by intensive strategies making use of commodified versions of both phase one and phase two of the communications task (e.g. carefully targeted placements and carefully market-tested content).

This all had repercussions for the legions of consumers whose attention was so eagerly sought and actively traded. The users of branded goods were never passive in the process of meaning-making in their material culture, and manufacturers' best efforts to stoke demand did not always work as intended. Still, Strasser notes, "[a]s participants in the branded mass market, consumers entered mutually dependent but unequal relationships with large corporations." Especially when paired with rising purchasing power, consumer sovereignty looks like a kind of freedom but unequal power relations remain. Strasser is not the only one to note that identifying as a member of the "class" of consumers pushes considerations of class in the workplace to the background (Strasser 1989, pp.25-26). But people now had a third economic role – not just producers and consumers but also, in part, products. Power was unequally distributed in the audience attention market, just as in the labor and goods markets. The economic value of audience attention was growing, but that value was realized by manufacturers and merchants, advertising agents and billposters, billboard owners and publishers, not by audiences. And, no matter how difficult advertisers found it to get their messages heard, that was nothing compared to the difficulty of being heard without the ability to buy the attention of an audience.

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