

Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c1951-69

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In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Alan Sillitoe's ground breaking 1958 novel, television is a metaphor for mass consumerism and the resulting growth of a more privatised, home-centred working-class in post-war Britain. For Sillitoe, as for so many other commentators across the ideological spectrum at the time, television – especially commercial television – acted as a soporific, debasing popular culture and corroding community life. Commercial television had been introduced, following the fraught passage of the Television Act, in 1954, the same year that rationing of consumer goods finally ended, and in the second half of the decade higher wages and more easily available credit brought the material goods made possible by capitalism's golden age within reach of more and more workers. Commercial television changed advertising profoundly, brought it directly into people's living rooms and heightened anxieties about its purported effects. Given all the heat advertising generated, it is surprising that there is a paucity of good historical studies of the industry and its practices, particularly for the post-war period. Terry Nevett's *Advertising in Britain* (1982) is still, remarkably, the most recent general work and it is superficial and very weak on later developments; Winston Fletcher's *Powers of Persuasion* (2008) is an unscholarly account by an insider.⁽¹⁾ Nixon's book is therefore to be warmly welcomed as a timely contribution to a much-neglected field.

Although he does not cite it, Nixon takes his cue from an essay by Frank Mort on transatlantic commercial culture, which criticised the Americanisation thesis, suggesting that the influence was not all one-way.⁽²⁾

Focusing on the London office of the US owned advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, Nixon argues that the British operation was modified to suit the national context: 'US advertising methods and approaches were, in many instances, adapted, hybridized and indigenized' is how he puts it (p. 3). More straightforwardly, we might say American selling techniques were considerably toned down, and the book would have been better entitled "soft sell" rather than "hard sell", though this might not have proved as attractive to potential readers. Many employees of JWT London were British, male, public school and Oxbridge educated (p. 27). The company had a British senior management team from 1946 and the London office enjoyed relative autonomy from the parent company, though the latter was undoubtedly more powerful (p. 43). Advertising agencies in Britain came to be dominated by American companies in the period discussed in the book, which fuelled fears of an American invasion; by the end of the 1960s six out of the top ten advertising agencies were owned by companies in the United States (p. 30). The overall response of advertising agencies to the coming of commercial television in Britain was ambivalent, which was hardly surprising as many of the smaller agencies were heavily dependent on newspaper and poster advertising and were consequently reluctant to embark on new ventures (p. 97).

British business was also often slow to invest in advertising because it tended to be production oriented, while car manufacturers agreed to limit their use of TV advertising. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the phenomenal growth of the domestic consumer goods industry and the re-invention of the modern kitchen, though the fantasy frequently outran the reality, as Nixon observes, since many lived in sub-standard homes throughout these decades (p. 126). Nevertheless, the ideal home was the chief target for early television advertisers. The biggest spenders on television advertising were multinational corporations such as Unilever and the Beecham Group. Working for these clients, advertising agencies made major efforts to 'assemble' or 'mobilize' the housewife as the archetypal consumer, which meant ITV was 'dominated by the advertisers of packaged goods aimed at the mass-market housewife' (p. 24). More sophisticated ways of tapping into consumers' desires were developed, though Nixon usefully stresses how JWT London drew on different sources of knowledge about the consumer in their advertising campaigns, employing the legacy of home grown documentary film making, as well as sociological approaches that were grafted onto motivation research pioneered in the United States by advertising gurus such as Ernest Dichter. As in other respects, the British operation, 'selectively appropriated and reworked elements of US market research' (p. 70). Nixon focuses on particular campaigns – for the Pin-Up home perm, Brillo soap pads, Persil washing powder ('Persil Washes Whiter') and Oxo cubes – the last of these [I presume] featuring a 'slice of life' series of television advertisements that starred Katie and her perfect suburban family. Katie was supposed to represent the ideal housewife, a domesticated yet still feminine and sexual creature who understood implicitly that 'Oxo gives a meal man appeal' (p. 80). The close discussion of advertising practices and campaigns is a major strength of Nixon's work, though one wonders how he is able to tell the story without occasionally balking at the speciousness of it all.

Commercial television was a disruptive force, generating a protracted debate across both culture and polity. Advertising agencies played a careful game, publically distancing themselves from the brasher forms of advertising that characterised American television and working behind the scenes to further their interests. Thus professional bodies such as the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) backed the commercial subsidy of television rather than the system of sponsored television that had been adopted on the other side of the Atlantic; stations were responsible for producing programmes and creating audiences in Britain (p. 99). The importance of preventing advertisers from having direct influence over programme content was written into the Television Act and the number and length of 'spot adverts' were regulated so that television advertising took up a maximum of 10 per cent of the broadcasting day. As Nixon underlines, the IPA eventually negotiated a deal with the Independent Television Contractors Association that allowed its members to effectively monopolise television advertising; agencies conducted 94 per cent of the business by the early 1960s (p. 101)

The popular press was also divided about television advertising; the *Daily Express* was against, for instance, while the more working-class *Daily Mirror* was in favour. Consumers had mixed feelings too, liking some aspects and disliking others, such as the way advertisements often interrupted programmes at inappropriate

times. Nixon uses surveys and qualitative studies undertaken by advertising agencies, as well as letters from individual consumers, to explore the reception of advertising campaigns, particularly for Oxo cubes. On the basis of the letters in particular he argues that although consumers sometimes had critical things to say, commodities frequently got under their skin and concludes that 'for many of these correspondents, Katie and Philip were real presences in their lives, knowable in the same way that real people were knowable' (p. 156). The increasing salience of advertising prompted attacks from intellectual and political elites and this controversy prompted government scrutiny by various committees of inquiry headed by Sir Harry Pilkington, J. T. Molony and Lord Reith. These made recommendations and managed to curb some of what were perceived to be the worst abuses such as 'advertising magazines', which mixed product promotion with fictional narratives and which were banned following the Pilkington Report in 1963 (p. 111). After the Molony Committee reported, the Advertising Standards Authority was established to further strengthen the policing of television advertisements. Critics emphasised the 'irrationality' of advertising and the way in which it 'trade(d) on human weakness' as the Pilkington Report put it (p. 172). However, puritans underestimated the emotional and symbolic appeal of goods to consumers, according to Nixon, unlike advertising people who understood these aspects very well indeed, which was why their vision won out. By the mid 1960s, therefore, advertisers felt 'that they had the wind of history in their sails' (p. 181). Sounding a cautionary note in his conclusion, Nixon ruefully observes how mass consumerism has generated contradictions that continue to trouble us today, especially the reduction of the idea of the good life and individual freedom to the acquisition of material goods.

Nixon's work undeniably raises many vital issues. However, his treatment of them is somewhat partial and rather slight at times. The influence of the British documentary tradition is a fascinating suggestion, but is not adequately demonstrated in the text. The focus on JWT London is understandable but more detailed consideration of the response of other agencies to commercial television would have been useful. Nixon wrestles with the intractable methodological problem of consumers' reception of advertisements and this is to be welcomed, though the sample of letters on which he draws (35 in total) is too small on which to base any conclusions. Moreover, to properly make sense of them we need to know how they were elicited. Were they sent to JWT London in response to a promotion, one wonders? I find it hard to believe that correspondents were not writing tongue in cheek, and for a purpose – free gifts perhaps or a year's supply of Oxo cubes?

Beyond these particular points, I have two major criticisms of this book. The first concerns its chronological framing. Many of the trends Nixon draws attention to – such as the emergence of the modern kitchen and the modern housewife, for instance – had their roots in the inter-war period, as he acknowledges himself at various points in the text. This deeper context would have been worth discussing at greater length, particularly in light of recent research in this field.⁽³⁾ More importantly, however, Nixon chooses to ignore the influence of the Second World War on advertising and consumption, and this omission is disabling. For sure, the war years do intrude occasionally. For example, a fascinating telegram sent in autumn 1945 by Bill Hinks and Douglas Saunders, chairman and chief executive of JWT London, to Stanley Resor, co-owner of the company in New York, is quoted, emphasising the importance of the London operation keeping their account with the British Overseas Airways Corporation: 'This account vital to us and whole company STOP ... All here have been through much since 1939 and have struggled desperately to keep business going and we cannot build proper cooperation unless all there are made to feel that it works both ways STOP.' (p. 48) One would have liked to know much more about how JWT London 'struggled desperately to keep business going' and how this coloured their later outlook. Advertising was seen by many as deeply unpatriotic during the war, potentially undermining the national interest and the war against fascism. Denys Thompson's damning indictment of the profession and its methods, *Voice of Civilisation* (1943), might be regarded as an extreme view but it was not unusual; after all, only months before its publication advertisers were literally helping to poison people with dangerous quack medicines until the Pharmacy and Medicines Act of 1941 made their sale illegal. The immediate post-war period witnessed a regrouping by the advertising industry but the environment remained extremely hostile until the Conservative Party regained power in 1951. For example, in 1947 Glenvil Hall, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, had been booed when he declared to the Advertising Association at Margate that the week after 'a real conference is being held there' – meaning the

Labour Party conference. Later that year Sir Stafford Cripps, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, threatened briefly to impose a heavy tax on advertising expenditure. The *Daily Express* compared Cripps's proposals to the taxes on knowledge in the early nineteenth century and roundly condemned the plan: 'Goods that are returning to the shops after years of absence must be brought back to the public notice ... Advertising has an immense part to play in maintaining a healthy and hopeful home market'.⁽⁴⁾

My second major criticism concerns Nixon's handling of the politics of 'affluence'. In short, and notwithstanding important recent research on this theme by Lawrence Black, Mark Jarvis and others (duly cited but not engaged with in the text), Nixon presents a generally depoliticised account of the triumph of post-war advertising. There is no discussion of Conservative thinking about consumption or the party's espousal of the discourse and ideology of 'choice', despite its resonance for us today. Bevan's famous attack on the industry at the Advertising Association's conference at Eastbourne in 1953 is quoted – 'one of the most evil consequences of a society which is, itself, intrinsically evil' – along with its rebuttal by advertising practitioners (p. 164). But Nixon overlooks Reginald Maudling's speech at this event (he was Economic Secretary to the Treasury at the time), which emphasised the centrality of choice to Conservative economic thinking. Maudling, a leading mover of the 'bonfire of controls' after 1951, backed the individual consumer over the 'gentleman in Whitehall' and pledged support for the industry as an intrinsic part of a revitalised capitalism: 'Advertising is an essential part of the machinery of competition which, I and the Government believe, is the best protection of the consumer and the best assurance of industrial efficiency'.⁽⁵⁾

Commercial television had strong support in Conservative circles for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it dovetailed with a general belief in the benefits of empowering individual consumer choice. Conversely, the organised working-class consumer, in the form of the co-operative movement, was shut out of commercial television. Nixon notes that the IPA was 'troubled' by rumours that the Co-operative Wholesale Society had been offered recognition by Independent Television companies, but this lead is not developed (p. 101). However, the period witnessed protracted struggles over markets for particular goods; a 'soap war' raged, for instance, between Unilever's 'Persil' and the CWS's brand 'Spel'. Nixon also fails to relate his findings to recent work on advertising and the reconstitution of the political domain and the machinery of political parties in post-war Britain. He notes 'the growing role of marketing people over the presentation of politics' (p. 165), most apparent after the 1959 general election, the first television election but, once again, there is no proper consideration of this issue.⁽⁶⁾ Finally, advertising was bound up increasingly with a 'Natopolitan' world view and this shaped the language and ideology of advertisers. The Advertising Association contested the Reith Report's recommendation to establish a National Consumer Board to protect consumers paid for by a levy on advertising. This they claimed would reduce product range and also 'deny the public the right to exercise adult judgement in spending their money. Even in communist countries, the Advertising Association's statement continued, 'it is now being found necessary to offer consumer choice' (p. 180). As well as the domestic political context, the shaping influence of Cold War politics is also missing from Nixon's account, despite important recent work on this theme.⁽⁷⁾

Nixon does discuss contemporary debate but foregrounds liberal moralists such as Richard Hoggart, who had condemned the presumed enervating effects of commercialised forms of popular culture in his influential work, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and who played a prominent role on the Pilkington Committee. However, there is no discussion of the trenchant critiques of advertising made by New Left intellectuals at the time, especially Raymond Williams. Unlike Williams, Hoggart had no systemic understanding of advertising, no general grasp of capitalism or how advertising might help shore up capitalist social relations and ways of thinking, and his moralistic, high-blown rhetoric was often little more than a thinly-disguised form of snobbishness. Williams in contrast tried to analyse what he called 'the magic system' so that it might be dismantled as a necessary part of making a more egalitarian society.⁽⁸⁾ This overall failure to grapple with the most difficult issues means, for this reviewer at any rate, that (despite its valuable insights) Nixon's work, like many of the commodities it considers, in the end promises more than it delivers.

Notes

1. Terry Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London, 1982); Winston Fletcher, *Powers of Persuasion: The Inside Story of British Advertising 1951–2000* (Oxford, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Frank Mort, 'The commercial domain: advertising and the cultural management of demand' in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home. The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars* (Oxford, 2013); Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Daily Express*, 20 May 1947, p. 2; 27 November 1947, p. 2.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Times*, 2 May 1953, p. 3.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Joe Moran, 'Mass-Observation, market research, and the birth of the focus group, 1937–1997', *Journal of British Studies*, 47, 4 (2008), 827–51.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Stefan Schwarzkopf, 'They do it with mirrors: advertising and British Cold War consumer politics', *Contemporary British History*, 19, 2 (2005), 133–50.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Raymond Williams, 'The magic system', *New Left Review*, 1, 4 (1960), 27–32.[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy not to respond.

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