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Warning: Political Ads Make You Stupid



By Marty Kaplan

This is the disclaimer that Britain's Public Interest Research Centre recently proposed for inclusion on billboards:

"This advertisement may influence you in ways of which you are not consciously aware. Buying consumer goods is unlikely to improve your wellbeing, and borrowing to buy consumer goods may be unwise; debt can enslave."

For this buy-buy-buy holiday season, those words are a spritz of pepper spray.

Imagine, then, that advertisers were required to admit that the underlying premise of consumerism — *Buy this, and you'll be happy, beautiful, desirable and immortal!* — is a con. Imagine that they were also compelled to meta-confess that the craft they ply is actually black magic: *Beware! This ad will end-run your reason and hijack your judgment.*

It's not as farfetched as it seems. After all, tobacco companies have to put this-will-kill-you warnings on cigarette packs. Drug ads are obliged to tell you that their wonder pills may cause hallucinations, impotence, falling asleep during eating, nightmares, compulsive gambling and thoughts of suicide. The sheer length of time it takes to list side effects — often longer than the pitches themselves — is a tacit acknowledgement that something about these ads is nuts. Why shouldn't all ads be ordered to give up the game?

By the time of the 2012 elections, some \$3 billion of campaign commercials will have run on TV. It'd be a new day for democracy if political ads were required to include a disclaimer: *"The scary music, PhotoShopped pictures and misleading sound bites in this ad are tricks intended to manipulate you in ways of which you are not consciously aware. Voting for this candidate is unlikely to improve how awful things are; hope can heartbreak."*

Maybe on some other planet that will happen, but not this one. In the absence of consumer warnings on political ads, we have five things to pin our hopes on.

- Education: Critical thinking and media literacy — understanding the history and methods of propaganda - are part of the school curriculum. An educated citizen can't be fooled by meretricious bull.
- Freedom of speech: The best cure for bad speech is more speech. If ads lie, they can be countered by other ads that correct them. The robust free market of ideas will ensure that truth prevails.
- Transparency: Candidates must appear in their ads and say, "I approved this message." The sources of funding for ads to elect or defeat candidates are required to be disclosed.
- Freedom of the press: The fourth estate is part of our system of checks and balances. [Fact checks](#), [ad watches](#), [financial disclosure](#) sites, "[keeping them honest](#)" segments: the sunlight of journalism acts a disinfectant.
- Social media: Citizens have been empowered by the Internet. Everyone with a laptop can now be a publisher and broadcaster. You don't need a paycheck from a news organization to investigate claims and report abuses.

So how's all that working out?

I'm not betting on media literacy to protect voters from disinformation. Only one in four Americans believes scientists agree on global warming, and 7 in 10 say scientists have falsified climate change research data. Despite what they hear in school, 4 in 10 Americans believe God created humans in their present form 10,000 years ago. Apparently a mind is a terrible thing to use.

Speech may be free, but ads aren't. The marketplace of ideas, like the rest of the economy, is run by the 1 percent. The laws regulating campaign contributions — the few that haven't yet been struck down by the Roberts Court - are a snap to circumvent, and the Federal Election Commission is a joke.

It's easy to conceal the sources of funding for ads. Candidates can hide behind "issue" ads and billionaire-backed "independent" groups, whose messages they don't have to say they approved. In the wake of the *Citizens United* decision, corporations can spend whatever they want on ads and don't have to disclose they're behind them.

As for the fourth estate, the right has so intimidated the press with charges of media bias that mainstream journalism bends itself into euphemistic pretzels instead of calling a lie a lie. When Rick Perry and Mitt Romney each ran ads that brazenly falsified President Obama's words, many prestige outlets failed to label them as liars; instead of holding them accountable, the media instead reported how nimble those campaigns were at evading accountability.

It's true that the Internet has democratized the watchdog role; the crowd online is buzzing about the accuracy of political ads and the sources of their funding. But the disposition of people to segregate into like-minded polarized tribes — to speak and listen only to themselves — makes it easy to inhabit an information bubble where everything reinforces what they already believe.

The origin of the Occupy movement is a Vancouver-based anti-consumerism magazine called *Adbusters*, which since 1989 has been culture-jamming Madison Avenue with satirical tools like "subvertisements" and billboard modifications. When Occupy began, and I learned that an *Adbusters* email was behind the rally to hold Wall Street accountable, my reaction was exactly wrong. Bless their hearts, I thought - it's a quixotic protest that will no more change the political climate than *Adbusters'* "Media Carta" will halt the pollution of our airwaves.

Based on what's happened so far, I'm glad to say that I blew it. Within a few weeks the issues of inequality and injustice vaulted into public discourse. I hope I'm just as wrong about the hopelessness of *Adbusters'* consciousness-raising about advertising to reach critical mass. Political ads may not get Surgeon General-style warnings. But maybe a

public that can so suddenly see itself as the 99 percent can also flush some of the three billion dollars worth of political ads coming at them into the sewer.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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