
REVIEWS

Part of my job as book review editor is searching out new media ethics titles to feature in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. However, some of the best books escape my attention. I am happy to receive recommendations from readers. In addition, I am always on the lookout for thoughtful reviewers. If you are interested in reviewing, please contact me.

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Aronczk, M., & Powers, D. (Eds.). (2010). *Blowing up the brand: Critical perspectives on promotional culture*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. 338 pp., \$34.95 (Pbk).

Branding and the Distortion of Communication and Culture
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Since the 18th century, the practice of the Enlightenment ideal of citizens' participatory democracy has itself been a site of struggle among citizens, the state,

and the representatives of the market economy. The influence of each has ebbed and flowed, often with the economy. In good economic times, business interests have had the upper hand in the political sphere. When economic fortunes sour, however, citizens and the state respond with policies that limit capitalism. In an ideal sense, the public sphere is dependent on the hegemony of critical thinking and reason during public policy debates. Informed, rational citizens argue, mitigate, and resolve disturbances when interests inevitably collide. In the United States, this has always been accomplished within a context of maintaining and protecting the freedom and independence of the citizens, state, and markets. Publicity, that is, expressing one's views in fair competition with others' views in the public sphere, became the hallmark of the modern democratic state with reasoned, critical judgment as its *sine qua non*.

This model of democratic participation has been under heavy assault since the mid-19th century. Waves of economic development and innovation in the communication field have slowly combined to overwhelm the criteria of critical, reasoned debate over public policy. Even after periods of capitalist crisis and reform (e.g., anti-trust challenges to monopolies or financial reforms after the crash of 1929), business still managed to recapture and enhance its influence through advertising, public relations, and lobbying.

The end of the 19th century marked a time when business eschewed word-based news about products in favor of image-based persuasion. The grammatical shift in advertising propositions from "it" (the product) to "you" (i.e., what "you" the consumer gain from the product) points to a new scientific approach to persuasive emotional appeals that visually link products to the fulfillment of human needs and desires. Visual strategies eliminated testable, word-based propositions, replacing them with images whose meanings readers actively inferred. Psychologists concluded that readers would often quickly and uncritically draw irrational inferences about products from pictures, so they encouraged businesses to replace wordy substance with visual style. The concept of brand name products centered on recognizable logotypes, package designs, slogans, or figureheads emerged (think, e.g., Quaker Oats).

If these techniques had stayed within the realm of business marketing and advertising publicity, democracy probably would not be threatened as it is today. But advertising and marketing approaches to publicity have slowly displaced informed, richly detailed publicity in nearly every field. Politically, stylized, and emotional appeals that lack substance—branding—seldom help solve today's problems.

Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture, edited by Melissa Aronczyk and Deon Powers, examines branding's complexities. In doing so, it raises significant issues for those of us teaching political communication and communication ethics. The book is a solid and fair intellectual treatment of branding's role in neoliberal economics, culture, and communication. In their

introduction, the editors review promotional culture's historical development and trace a thread of criticism from the Frankfurt School through Naomi Kline, whose work accents the severed link between brand and production (e.g., Nike has become a symbolic brand without factories to produce its own products, and Maytag lives on as a brand owned by Whirlpool, but its products are no longer produced by the American workers who built the company's reputation for quality). One alarming aspect of the introduction is that it pretty much concedes that branding is a powerful communication tool that is here to stay. Rather than simply caving in to an instrumentalist, how-to-do-it attitude, the book's complexities are designed to develop media literacy skills to help readers learn to interrogate branding.

In their chapter, Celia Lury and Liz Moor develop a complex, nonlinear, topological definition of *future* brand value as "informational capital." It takes into account multiple, interacting variables such as the market in which a brand competes, its potential for growth and stability over time, investment levels, degree of internationality, and legal protections. From the realization that brand is built through communication rather than qualities intrinsic to a product, organization, or individual, Lury and Moor note that a brand can be stored, networked, compiled, and transferred, adding to its value (p. 31).

The idea of a brand as symbolically detached from material content or quality is fraught with ethical issues. In his chapter, John Corner calls this "institutionalized deceit" because it is deceit planned and executed as a routine aspect of corporate and government publicity. His model of deception covers a full range of tactics, including lying, exaggeration, strategic selectivity, withholding information from the public, covert appeals to desire or fear, and visual and verbal strategies that organize and manage inferences not related to the communication content. Corner traces thinking about deception in politics from the Greeks to Hanna Arendt, Glen Newey, and David Runciman, outlining the social and political problems it creates. But in the end he admits that some deception in politics is inevitable and even desirable, and he concludes that it is important to explore the breaking point between allowable and dangerous deception. While acknowledging the difference between material consumer products and political policy ideas, he calls for institutional change in politics similar to consumer protections against dangerous products and for researchers and media to continue rigorously monitoring political deception.

Jefferson Pooley uses his chapter to examine the implications of consumerism on the self. For him, the modern self is trapped between two contradictory ideals, one *expressivist* that encourages the drive for free exploration and development of an authentic self and the other a *possessivist* ideal that demands the self be treated and shaped like an object. Following Warren Susman, Pooley argues that an earlier "culture of character" has given way to a "culture of personality"

where the goal is to brand one's self as unique, distinctive, fascinating, creative, magnetic and attractive (pp. 78–9). Thus, the psyche is trapped in a paradoxical search for authenticity in an inauthentic culture (p. 81). Finally, Pooley notes that because *Facebook* users seldom use privacy features, they find it difficult to stage-manage their identities before the variety of publics who may access their pages. He contrasts this with interpersonal communication, where our messages are tailored to highly segmented individuals and groups. This dilemma may make users more aware of the contradictions between authenticity and self-promotion. On the other hand, corporations, recognizing the divide, develop strategies for avoiding the appearance of insincerity.

Three chapters deal with the branded space and branded citizens. Arlene Davila discusses neoliberal paradoxes in consumerism and the construction of shopping malls in Puerto Rico. Despite having an average annual income less than half of those from Mississippi (the poorest U.S. state), Puerto Ricans seem to revel in a “shop til you drop” identity that corporations parlay into government subsidies for building new shopping malls on an island glutted with them. Declining manufacturing, increasing unemployment with greater demand for social services, and the resulting skyrocketing national debt make Puerto Rico a model neoliberal colonial state where wealth has been transferred to the upper elites from the working and middle classes. However, to challenge the notion of Puerto Ricans as incompetent colonials who cannot manage their money, Davila shopped the malls and interviewed shoppers, finding that many people shop but do not buy unless they discover exceptional bargains. Also, she found that they often parse their shopping over many days, buying only a few items at a time so they can shop every day. Thus, crowded malls that give the appearance of Puerto Ricans shopping indicate more “looking” than buying. Still, the constructed corporate shopper-image continues to fuel illusions of future profits and subsidies for a senseless expansion of an unproductive (nonmanufacturing) segment of the economy. Ironically, the illusion created is that Puerto Rico is an advanced economy. Meanwhile, the construction of valueless, kitsch-based mall architecture supplants opportunities for small businesses that might provide real economic growth.

Miriam Greenberg provides a step-by-step case study of the mutually reinforcing branding of New York City (NYC) and its mayor around two polar strategies: 1) targeting locals, transplants, and tourists by framing the NYC brand as a gritty, diverse, and creative environment, and 2) framing it with utopian imagery as *Luxury NYC* to woo corporations and rich elites. Beneath the glitz and glamour of imaged New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg restructured the city as a vertically integrated, global corporation (pp. 122–123) and then proceeded to use the brand to campaign for a third term as down to earth “Mike NYC.” But did the branding work? The answer is typical of neoliberal restructuring: The number of NYC billionaires doubled; Bloomberg won a third term, although he

spent \$123 million of his own money to win by 5% of the vote; and luxury real estate developments sprung up throughout the city. But New York also attained the most unequal gentrification and highest levels of unemployment of any U.S. city (pp. 139–140). As always under neoliberalism, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and are displaced.

Hongmei Li documents the role of branding in the transition from communist China to neoliberal China, from one authoritarian regime based around notions of egalitarianism (*chengfen*) to another based around promoting a developing capitalism and a wealthy middle class of consumers (*shenjia*). Workers and peasants who were idealized under communism are now marginalized by neoliberal policies that favor permanent urban residents who are subsidized by the government. State media play a significant role in constructing this consumerist brand through stories idealizing wealthy entrepreneurs, entertainers, and athletes. According to Li, such a small portion of the population achieves *shenjia* status that significant class and regional antagonisms are developing. One wonders how the government would fare with the rising middle class in the event of a significant Chinese economic downturn that would threaten newly acquired middle class wealth and status.

Small organizations have also turned to branding. In the chapter “Activism, Branding and the Promotional Public Sphere,” Graham Knight looks at the benefits and problems that arise when activist organizations employ branding. The brand helps people understand the organization’s mission, but it can also decrease an organization’s flexibility and turn constituents into passive donors whose only participation is giving money. In her chapter on branding and universities, Alison Hearn explores the tension between universities’ promotionalism and their pedagogical and research missions. She convincingly argues that the neoliberal turn in education is the underlying cause of many of its current problems: increased bureaucratization; marginalization of faculty and students in decision making; threats to tenure and academic freedom; a view of students as consumers; grade inflation; a focus on industry-defined, grant-gaining, and commercializable research (rather than critical research); the rise of named buildings, stadiums, and food courts; and the selling of exclusive rights on campus to brands. Millions are then spent packaging this corporatized product.edu with the appropriate symbolic garb and regalia to sell it to students in the guise of “knowledge as currency, celebration of the future, and innovation” (pp. 208–209).

People, of course, are also branded. Tiger Woods comes to mind as the most prominent case, both in terms of his rise to superstar brandom and his scandalous decline. In their chapter, Gabriele Cosentino and Waddick Doyle explore a similar example in the guise of billionaire media mogul and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. They document the contradiction between his wealth and brand image as a “people’s man” and show how—after his sex-

scandal, liaisons with teenage girls, and subsequent divorce—he has re-branded himself as a libertine celebrity and transgressor of norms.

Deregulating industry is a core plank in neoliberal policy. Through her chapter, Mary Eberling shows how deregulating the medical device market spawned branding and direct marketing to patients instead of doctors. In some cases, this has led to “off-label” marketing to create a groundswell of support for approving nonmedical uses for some medical devices. She provides a strong case by following how a device for treating AIDS was re-branded for cosmetic surgery, transforming its life-saving function into a cosmetic one.

The book concludes with three chapters that examine promotional practices. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Marita Sturken look at Shepard Fairey, designer of the Obama “Hope” poster. They see Fairey as an activist brand who successfully maintains his radical politics while simultaneously engaging in identities as diverse as oft-arrested street artist, exhibitor in major art museums, successful graphic designer, and fashion designer—all under the brand slogan “manufacturing dissent since 1989.” The authors use Fairey as a trope to explore “the creative economy” and class of radical, creative workers who are both exploited by and exploit neoliberal corporate culture. Jonathan Gray complexifies promotional culture in his essay, arguing that rather than simply dismissing promotional materials (e.g., toys, games, foods, etc. that accompany film releases), we should examine them seriously as art and culture. Finally, Devon Powers also asks us to take another overlooked aspect of communication more seriously. In his article on sonic branding, he makes readers aware of the way brand managers are utilizing music and sound to soothe and even batter audiences with unconscious emotional appeals. His chapter investigates corporate uses of sound within the context of the science of sound. This science outlines sound’s physiological and neuro-cognitive impact on memory and behavior—what one branding company refers to as psycho-acoustics. Like visual communication, Powers points out that it is through the potentially immediate, precognitive, irrational impact of sound that senso-branders are trying to tap mood and set the stage for quick, emotional impact on consumers.

This outstanding collection of essays will help faculty and students investigate recent developments in communication and promotional culture. It is one of the few books in which political economy and ethics intersect to interrogate neoliberal policies and the “ethic” of the unrestrained market. *Blowing Up the Brand* shows that branding is often the unethical distortion of communication to manipulate people for private gain by creating images, styles, slogans, and so forth that put a positive, but ultimately destructive, spin on people, places, ideas, and things with little or no merit. What builds across the book’s remarkable range of cases is the sense that branding’s glossy, global penetration of nation, society, and culture is undermining our ability to make rational choices in everything from consumption to public policy.

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