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Introduction: Commercial Communication in the Digital Age – Disinforming Informed Users?

The lines between different advertising formats and other forms of corporate communication are blurring. Thus, this book is not primarily about advertising or online word of mouth, it is not primarily about PR or native advertising and it is not primarily about e-commerce and viral marketing. Rather, the title and the book as a whole summarize the broad range of formats and types that can be subsumed under the heading "commercial communication". All these formats and types of commercial communication face the same challenges in the digital age and are mainly induced by technological innovation. This rapid technological evolution includes changes in the media usage and the business and revenue models of the communication industry, with the effect of changing the threats to the individual user.

In this book, we proceed from two observations: Firstly, the amount of information available has risen – providing the context in which commercial communication takes place. Secondly, the vehicles and means of commercial communication in general have changed. However, we question whether the amount of information concerning commercial communication has risen correspondingly and whether this information is even readily accessible to consumers. Are digital consumers informed consumers? Does commercial communication in the digital age provide information or disinformation? And what does the answer mean for its effectiveness? The various contributions to this volume consider the question of whether commercial communication in the digital age differs from commercial communication in the traditional offline-world and whether it is disinforming informed users.

Observation 1: The Amount of Available Information in General has Risen

With the rise of the Internet, traditional media have lost their monopoly on mass communication. Digital publication is easy, cheap, and open to anyone with Internet access. By implication, new communicators and publications flood the net: Up to February 2016, 1,900,000 articles had been published on *Wikipedia* (https://tools.wmflabs.org/steinsplitter/Meilensteine/). At the time of writing

this introduction, 28,000 tweets were published every five seconds on *Twitter* and 115 new posts appeared on a *WordPress* blog while ten hours of new content was uploaded onto *YouTube* (http://pennystocks.la/internet-in-real-time/). Individual and corporate publishers, professionals and nonprofessionals, communicators from around the globe, shape this vivid digital-content ecosystem. In this environment users are not just confronted with what researchers call "information overload" (Eppler, Mengis 2004) but also with a variety of new information sources and the challenge of evaluating them.

Among them we increasingly find commercial organizations, expanding their corporate communications departments and producing professional media products to directly target their (potential) customers online – bypassing former mediators such as newspapers, magazines or TV and radio. According to an annual study conducted by the Content Marketing Institute, 76% of B2B marketers surveyed and 77% of B2C marketers in North America say they will produce more content in 2016 than they did in 2015, investing on average 28% (B2B) and 32% (B2C) of their total marketing budget (not including staff) into it (Content Marketing Institute et al. 2016a; Content Marketing Institute et al. 2016b). Today's media shift shows similar dynamics to previous platform transitions, except for one major difference: there's more money in digital publishing than ever before (Altchek 2016). In the battle for users' attention, only those offering the most attractive content win – content is king.

Users face the challenge of distinguishing information from disinformation, trustworthy content from "bullshit" (Frankfurt 2005), and reliable sources from all the rest. This is quite a job considering the amount of information one is confronted with in the digital sphere – and it requires corresponding skill sets: media awareness and advertising literacy in particular. New formats for commercial communication often contain hidden attempts to persuade and are sometimes not immediately recognizable as advertising by the consumer. They challenge the ways we understand and process commercial communication and call for extended concepts of advertising literacy (see chapter 1.2 on advertising literacy). Even when aware of the fact that there are persuasive and camouflaged forms of commercial communication and being in possession of contemporary literacy skill sets, users would still not have the resources to consciously process each and every piece of communication they are confronted with in the digital sphere. Accordingly, one might wonder if the unconscious processing of commercial information sets the stage for the disinforming or even manipulation of consumers (see chapter 2.1 on human processing of commercial information in the digital environments).

Observation 2: The Vehicles and Means of Commercial Communication in General have Changed

While it is becoming harder to differentiate the various forms and types of commercial communication, the conception of communication as a process with a sender, a recipient, a message and a vehicle to transport the message remains the same. We can still see commercial communication as a form of persuasive communication that seeks to inform members of a target audience about products, services, organizations, or ideas. The key drivers that transform commercial communication in the digital environment are interactivity, integration and personalization (Siegert 2013).

Interactivity aims at engaging the users in the various forms of commercial communication, motivating them to produce user-generated content, making them co-creators of ads, motivating them to pass messages on (Daugherty et al. 2008). However, not every product or campaign is suitable for a high level of interactivity and not every consumer is interested in high-level interactivity either. Often the consumer engagement is limited to liking and sharing (Muntinga et al. 2011), but still this is a much more interactive setting than the unidirectional communication that advertising used to be and it is made easier in multi-directional communication networks compared to a unidirectional broadcast distribution.

Integration aims at blurring the lines of journalistic or entertainment content and commercial messages either by integrating commercial messages in editorial content as in the case of product placements (McCarty 2004; La Ferle, Edwards 2006) or by disguising commercial communication as editorial content as it is done in formats such as traditional infomercials (Hawthorne 1997) and advertorials (Goodlad et al. 1997), or more recently content marketing (Pulizzi 2012; Lieb 2012), native advertising (Matteo, Zotto 2015) and branded entertainment (de Aguilera Moyano et al. 2015; Hudson, Hudson 2006) (see chapter 2.4 on brand journalism). Obviously integration is not new, but has been around since the radio soap operas of the 1930s and the *Camel News Caravan* on 1950s television. However, digitization, the decline of linear media, and the rise of ad-blockers made it easier to avoid advertising and thus increase the attractiveness of integrated advertising techniques.

Personalization aims at addressing individual consumers by using one-to-one marketing and behavioral targeting based on all forms of data available (see chapter 3.1 on programmatic ad-tech). In this context digitization promises to reduce the wastage that naturally occurred in mass media based commercial communication when the target audience does not completely match the target group of a marketer.[1] Personalization shall make the (commercial) messages more relevant (Kalyanaraman, Sundar 2006) and intimate (Li 2009) and thus hopefully more successful (Malheiros et al. 2012).

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1 As in the quote attributed to John Wannamaker, William Lever or Henry Ford: „Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half."

Commercial communication always tried to meet its objectives by employing new and different measures. In the digital age and against the background of interactivity, integration and personalization, online and mobile formats are at the center of commercial communicators' attention. By using online and mobile measures, marketers are no longer bound to the traditional media industry in order to reach single consumers, target groups or a mass audience. Online presentations, search engines, computational advertising and in particular social media, changed the ways of getting in touch and communicating with people as well as the ways of publishing and circulating stories. Although professionals have still broader access to the different measures, users and consumers have more possibilities to publish, be informed, communicate and recommend than ever before; and they reach a bigger audience with their own publications, comments, and recommendations. The commercial communication industry makes use of these new possibilities and tries to harvest user engagement in production processes as co-creation and in distribution processes as viral word of mouth distribution. Meanwhile creating buzz (Dye 2000) is an independent objective of most of the commercial communication activities. Altogether, users are increasingly important when it comes to giving meaning to commercial messages. However, the industry has to be aware that users are not only engaging in the way the industry would like but also in oppositional and critical ways, and that they themselves can reach millions of other users and spark a firestorm (see Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004; See-To, Ho 2014; Thompson, Malaviya 2013; Vallaster, Wallpach 2013) (see chapter 4.1 on user-generated internet memes). Nevertheless, social media and personal networks have become new and important vehicles to transport commercial messages. "To involve the brand in conversations and to achieve recommendations, advertisers do not necessarily need journalistic services, because conversations and recommendations (word of mouth) are based on interpersonal and network communication. For interpersonal and network communication they need technologies, platforms or ecosystems, not journalistic media in the traditional sense of the meaning" (Siegert 2013, p. 33).

So there is evidence that there is generally more information available – for good or bad. Of course, not all of this information is new – much of the new content uploaded every minute to *YouTube* is a duplication of what is already there. Besides, not all information has the same relevance for the sender and the recipient. To marketers more commercial information means that it might be harder to cut through the clutter of alternative information, and for recipients it means that it might be harder to identify relevant and reliable information. People have a limited capacity to cope with first-level information so they look

for second level information – that is information about information, – to assess which is worth a closer look, just as data miners use metadata rather than the original data to make sense of a data set. So the question is whether there is enough metainformation available about commercial communication to allow it to be sensibly handled?

Question 1: Has the Amount of Information on Commercial Communication Risen Correspondingly?

Media content, and from our perspective commercial communication is also to be regarded as such, has become a double topic. For one thing, media professionals produce original content and recipients engage with it. However, on top of that media producers have turned to making media content and its distribution the object of their reporting. Today, there are as many articles about which film has the top spot at the box office as there are traditional film reviews (Hayes, Bing 2004). Even recipients who do not visit a film theater might follow these reports since this kind of horse-race journalism creates its own fascination.

A similar trend has long been evident in the context of the Super Bowl (Tomkovick et al. 2001). Ordinary consumers ponder beforehand which companies will be featured during the advertising breaks and afterwards they discuss who had the best spot (McAllister 1999). Commercial communication, marketing and advertising strategies become newsworthy content objects in their own right. Like product designers before (e.g. Jonathan Ive of *Apple*) marketers become celebrities[2] themselves first within the industry (Nudd et al. 2015) but increasingly so even outside of it (e.g. Dietrich Mateschitz of *Red Bull*) (see chapter 1.3 on advertising professionals (failing) attempts to distance their profession from the persuasiveness of advertising).

There are numerous archives that collect, sort and literally present all instances of commercial communication, just as there is some sort of wiki for almost any media content. These archives include commercial platforms aimed at the industry (such as *Coloribus* www.coloribus.com or the *AdZyklpädie* https://v2.adzyklopaedie.com/) as well as publicly funded platforms aimed at

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2 The opposite trend happens at the same time: celebrities are awarded marketing titles as described by Parekh and Zmuda (2013).

historians and other academics (such as *Ads and Brands* run by the Vienna University of Economics and Business http://www.adsandbrands.com/). However, the biggest resource for examples of audiovisual commercial communication, *YouTube*, is aimed at the general public and is also largely fed by amateurs. With the *YouTube* search feature anyone can find almost any advertising spot ever aired and even those in production.

Apparently, marketers today believe that their own industry jargon has become the common standard. During the European football championship, the confectionery manufacturer *Ferrero* asked the consumers to collect "love-brands" coupons, turning a marketing term into a marketing message for fans rather than consumers. Such a strategy suggests that the company expects the consumer to be conscious of commercial communication but apparently still trusts the effectiveness of the marketing approach.

The commercialization of the society as a whole (Schimank, Volkmann 2008) potentially means that any human interaction is interpreted from an economic perspective (Habermas 1985). This becomes evident in everyday language when we "invest" in a friendship or we "sell" an idea (Mautner 2010). From this perspective it is not all that important whether the actual amount of information on commercial communication has risen, because there is a general perception that any communication is at least partially commercial. While there is a difference between whether any communication can be *interpreted* commercially or

Figure 1: Lovebrands by Ferrero

whether it is actually *intended* to be commercially effective, both add to the prevalence of the phenomenon. There is more information available about commercial communication but the rising level of commercial communication is disguised within a commercialization of communication in general. Individuals might no longer be able to identify a commercial message if being asked for a date sounds like a sales pitch. However, the call for more transparency is not new: *Forbes* counted transparency among the eleven marketing trends to watch in 2015 (Dan 2014) and Chris Brandt, chief marketing officer at *Taco Bell* stresses in an interview on what marketing will look like in 2020 that "transparency [will be] the new black" (Beer 2015). Thus, in principle information seems to be available and even the providers seem to acknowledge a demand. However, we still have to ask the question whether information about commercial communication is actually accessible.

Question 2: Is this Amount of Information about Commercial Communication Accessible?

Consumers at all times have had their share of creating brand stories, since branding is just as much attribution (brand image) as it is self-portrayal (brand identity). However, at present the participation of users and consumers seems to be so comprehensive that some authors speak of "co-creation". There is reason to believe that users and consumers might be more informed about the objectives and persuasive tricks of the advertising industry and are more prepared to get in on advertising campaigns than ever before. There is also a good chance that advertisers can inform about products and services without the limitations of time and place of the traditional mass media. But do we really face a time when advertisers and consumers will meet on a level playing field, where they have equal opportunities and power? Or does tracking users on and offline lead to a situation where advertisers have more information about consumers than ever before, often without the user being fully aware of it? Regulation might not help in this context as long as e.g. the European Court of Justice neglects protection requirements of less well informed individuals and simply assumes reasonably well informed and observant consumers (see chapter 2.2. on the European consumer information model). However, even qualitative and exhaustive information cannot guide users through the digital space if they do not possess the skills to "read" (understand, process and apply) it. This makes advertising literacy a core competency in a world highly characterized by commercial communication.

The volume discusses these and related issues in chapters dealing with "information and disinformation about advertising", "information and disinformation through advertising", "information about users" and a chapter on "users' inclusion in the creation of advertising". It brings together contributions from authors of different countries.

Structure of the Book

1 Information and Disinformation about Advertising

The first part of the book addresses the question of what consumers know about advertising: what information or disinformation is available and what do they do about it? The first chapter in this section by Kati Förster and Ulrike Weish deals with advertising critics – individuals or organizations that try to inform the public about potentially problematic aspects of advertising. This can be the reinforcement of stereotypes, the reproduction of a social order that is deemed unfair or the observation of an excessive materialism that is attributed to advertising. The second chapter by Patricia Núñez Gomez and Liisa Irene Hänninen addresses the question of advertising literacy. Do consumers actually have the sovereignty, composure, and reflectivity they are ascribed by the advertising industry? The authors first discuss the advertising literacy of young people and subsequently reflect on the working methodology and some practical experiences for the teaching of "advertising related literacies" to communication students at the university. The third chapter takes a different perspective: Jörg Tropp starts with the observation that there is indeed more information available on commercial communication. He discusses the "Cannes Lions", International Festival of Creativity, to show that much of this information is self-referential, creating a postmodern marketing communication that fails to dissolve the logic of traditional advertising as it provides the audiences with the disinformation that advertising might no longer be advertising. Thus, advertising might not be the best source of information about commercial communication. This aspect is discussed in more detail in the second part of the book where we gather chapters that deal with questions concerning information or disinformation that can actually be transmitted in advertising messages.

2 Information and Disinformation through Advertising

Roland Mangold provides the basis for this part dealing with the question of whether commercial communication can be considered effective in a digital

environment where numberless communicators fight for the users' attention. He presents selected results from active psychological research and discusses the framework of a limited-capacity model of human information processing to answer this question. Gert Straetmans approaches the topic from a legal and consumer-protection perspective. He critically discusses the information paradigm that the European consumer information model is based on, assuming that consumers are benefit-maximising creatures and integrates recent developments in the field. In the third contribution of this section, Brigitte Naderer, Desirée Schmuck and Jörg Matthes approach the matter with a topic-centered perspective. They investigate the advertising practice called "greenwashing" which overstates or even falsifies the environmental impact of commercial offerings. The authors present different types of greenwashing and its effect on consumers. Ángel Arrese and Francisco J. Pérez-Latre open our perspective up in the direction of journalism, discussing the rise of "brand journalism". By managing brand content from a journalistic perspective and applying news media standards, the authors consider brand journalism as a "modern marketing imperative". In their contribution, they describe the effects of brand journalism on user engagement and discuss its contribution to the tension between information and misinformation in markets.

3 Information about Users

In the third section of this volume, authors present different perspectives on the monitoring and exploitation of user data in the digital sphere. Andrew McStay opens the section with his assessment of programmatic advertising. Sensitive to time, users' location and interests, this contemporary form of advertising reaches individuals across a variety of screens. The author discusses related potentials and the underlying interaction concept which integrates developments in finance, liquidity and high-frequency trading and aspires intelligent interactions with users' life context. Rolf H. Weber and Florent Thouvenin approach the development of consumer and citizen tracking from a rather critical perspective, by raising legal and ethical questions. The authors discuss implications for the long-term success of Internet businesses and demand full transparency with regard to the entire process of collecting and using information about consumers. Otto Petrovic closes this section on data collection with his discussion of the Internet of Things as a disruptive innovation. Analysing early implementations in health and fitness, the author presents the first signs of the tremendous impact this innovation will have on the advertising ecosystem.

4 Inclusion of Users in the Creation of Advertising

In the last section, we direct our attention to users' integration into advertising processes. Chris Miles opens the section with a rather broad and critical perspective on the topic: derived from detailed analyses of texts and practitioners' talk, which provides the foundational thinking behind the concept, he identifies serious tensions between the desire of traditional marketing for control over consumers and the principles of marketing co-creation. In his conclusion, he presents co-creation as a form of disinformation that aids marketing in misdirecting attention away from its crisis of relevancy. M. Elena Aramendia-Muneta complements this critical perspective on co-creation with her assessment of electronic word of mouth. Stating that eWOM can disseminate both information and disinformation, she stresses the ambivalent character of eWOM resulting in challenges for users and marketers. Tamás Csordás, Dóra Horváth, Ariel Mitev and Éva Markos-Kujbus close the chapter – and the volume – with another co-creation aspect on a linguistic level: the use of user-generated Internet memes as advertising vehicles. The authors propose a hitherto neglected business perspective on the appearance of branded contents in the expression of personal messages by working with the concept of memetics.

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