

Playlist

Annals of Promotional Culture

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This promotional culture playlist offers a series of takes on a central problem of our era: the steady incursion of market logics into all facets of our lives. Not much fun to listen to, you might protest. If this were mood music, it would be a dirge. But taken together, these articles augur something akin to a paradigm shift in the study of communication—what communication is, and what it is for. And that is worth paying attention to, for it gives us a beat to follow in our own contemporary explorations.

It is not easy to get a handle on what is meant by “promotional culture.” It shares a family resemblance with its peers, consumer culture and media culture, but exceeds both of these. It is not clearly bounded by technological, economic, or bureaucratic structures; yet in its contemporary form it emerges out of their integration. It is perhaps most tellingly expressed in the “structures of feeling,” in Raymond Williams’ (1961, p. 65) terms, that arise from the experience of fundamental transformations in the discourse that patterns our habits of thought and action in everyday life.

To this end, the articles featured here attempt to bring to the surface a way of speaking and acting that displays managerial authority masquerading as individualized and liberatory potential. The authors evoke a lingering sense of loss—it could be termed nostalgia—mourning the decline in the collective provision of the public good. They document the spectres that have arisen in its place: commodified, commercialized, and marketized regimes that regulate personal and professional modes of expression and interaction.

At the same time—and this is key to unlocking the value of this list—these articles symbolize a growing recognition of the role of advertising as a cultural form and a political force. And in this capacity, these authors show how advertising is worthy of study as communication rather than merely as a fetter upon it.

This paradigm shift is critical for contemporary scholars to heed, if for no other reason than that we continue to make the same categorical error in our scholarship today. Advertising and its cognate industries—marketing, branding, public rela-

tions—are still too rarely treated as cultural industries in their own right. They are instead characterized as a manipulative and destructive gale wind tearing down institutions of education, public service, journalism, art, music, book publishing, and gaming, among others. This ignores the practical structure of the cultural institutions and industries, which are deeply integrated with promotional formats and practices. It also discounts the cultural value of promotion to so much of our contemporary mediated lives. It is simply not possible to dismiss promotion when it forms the basis of so much of our sociality: online communication, digital platforms, labour patterns, home and work environments, the gig economy—we are all promotional selves now.

This is not to say that all communication is de facto promotional communication, or that critique is no longer possible. On the contrary, these articles also help us consider strategies of response by pointing out which conditions have persisted or expanded and which have fallen away—or, conversely, become so normalized as to appear unexceptional—and which strategies of critique have been more or less effective for clear-eyed understanding and, ideally, explaining the nature and dynamics of human relations.

Of all the relevant articles from the robust archives of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (CJC), five were selected for their capacity to be both historical enough to make the familiar a little strange and prescient enough to be relevant to current concerns. The articles date from 1974 to 1998, still a fairly pre-digital moment (Left, 2002). The articles represent a diversity of authorial voices and a variety of objects of analysis. Articles with a strong sense of the context surrounding the problems they raised were privileged. In some cases, this meant the authors balanced Canadian features among international exemplars, demonstrating the global import of the problem; in others, it meant offering their own historical or political legacies to the discursive patterns they observed.

The upshot is a strange sense of déjà vu: many of the issues and anxieties raised here are reflected in those my colleagues and students raise questions about today. This is a sign of the value of thinking historically about seemingly of-the-minute problems, but it is also a credit to the authors' ability to diagnose some of the most trenchant and far-reaching conditions of promotional culture.

In order to demonstrate the utility of the articles for writing and teaching, a brief synopsis is provided, alongside a suggested “pairing” with contemporary themes.

Playlist

Article 1



Beattie, Earle. (1974). “Saturday Night as a Casualty of the Advertising “Santa Claus,”” *CJC*, 1(3). <https://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/114/20>

Former CJC editor Earle Beattie's lament-slash-schadenfreude for the death of *Saturday Night Magazine* in 1974 covers it all: national identity politics, the hazards of U.S. cultural imperialism, and the elephantine impact of advertising on cultural production. An ironic coda: the magazine was resurrected a year later with Imperial Oil money and private investment, and it would go on to suffer more deaths and rebirths at the hands of private and commercial owners until it finally shut down permanently in 2005.

Pair this with recent work on journalism's future in the era of digital advertising.

Article 2



Jhally, Sut. (1985). "True Confessions: Subliminal Strategies in Teaching Advertising and Surplus Value to the New Conservatives," *CJC*, 11(1).
<https://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/327/233>

Now a well-known educator, filmmaker, and advertising critic, Sut Jhally was a new professor in 1985, apprehending the challenges of teaching media literacy to what he called "the new conservatives," university students in the era of Thatcher and Reagan. His approach belies a creative energy that is no less valuable today in helping students to discover for themselves the vagaries of the capitalist system.

Pair this with recent work on the gig economy, Amazon labour, and influencers.

Article 3



Rutherford, Paul. (1988). "The Culture of Advertising," *CJC*, 13(3).
<https://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/464/370>

Including this article is a bit of a cheat, as it is itself a review essay, covering six of the latest publications on advertising in the late 1980s, including Michael Schudson's *The Uneasy Persuasion*; Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream*; and William Leiss, Stephen Klein, and Sut Jhally's *Social Communication in Advertising*. The value of the essay lies in its very existence: there simply were not many good critical academic perspectives on advertising before this time. Rutherford calls these books part of a "second wave" of publications on advertising that situate it as a cultural phenomenon in a capitalist society.

Pair this with the fourth edition of William Leiss et al.'s (2018) *Social Communication in Advertising*, which does a fine job of apprehending the new advertising behemoths of Google, Facebook, and YouTube, and with Stuart Cunningham and David Craig's (2019) *Social Media Entertainment*, which analyzes the phenomenon of user-generated content and/as advertising.

Article 4



Bryant, Susan. (1995). "Electronic Surveillance in the Workplace," *CJC*, 20(4). <https://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/893/799>

Despite its 1995 publication date, this article may as well have been written in 2020. Its apprehension of themes of surveillance, privacy, labour, technology, and marketing—as well as its references to paragons of research at the intersection of these themes, such as Shoshana Zuboff, David Lyon, and Oscar Gandy—render its insights especially revelatory.

Pair this with Zuboff's (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* or insights from David Lyon's Big Data Surveillance project (Surveillance Studies Centre, 2020).

Article 5



Newson, Janice. (1988). "The Corporate-Linked University: From Social Project to Market Force," *CJC*, 23(1). <https://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1026/932>

The article considers how higher education in Canada, Britain, the U.S., and elsewhere has been "corporatized," a broad term that encapsulates not only transformations in funding sources for teaching and research but also in the university's mission and in research questions themselves. Newson describes the infrastructural conditions of this shift and the transition from collegiality to managerialism as a mode of institutional decision-making, with its attendant focus on quantifiable metrics of evaluation, enrollment-based budgeting, and industry-oriented research.

Pair this with work on quantification and metrics, such as Wendy Espeland and Vincent Yung's (2019) "Ethical Dimensions of Quantification," or with more recent accounts of the corporatization of higher education, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era.

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