**Advertising Management and Professional Identity in the Digital Age**

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**Introduction**

Employment in advertising, like other creative and cultural industries, has typically been characterised by a reliance on informal networks, collegiate styles of management and the use of project-based work teams (Smith and McKinlay, 2009; Grabher, 2002, in Deuze, 2007). An order of insecurity permeates careers in the field. This is particularly so for those charged with producing the creative content, the ‘creatives’ (Hackley and Kover, 2007). Reputations depend on building credibility, often over a long period of time, through unpaid or low paid work which helps the aspiring creative build up a ‘book’ of work and gain entry into the inner circle of networked advertising professionals (McLeod et al, 2009).

In spite of the difficulties of gaining entry to the advertising field, it remains attractive for many who feel that it is invested with social capital (Schwarzkopf, 2008). But the industry is facing a series of challenges which, some commentators argue, could spell the end for advertising as we know it, with unpredictable implications for professional identity and the labour process. It may be premature to call the end of advertising- after all, the advertising business has always had to utilise changes in media technology as opportunities, rather than threats. The difference today is that it is facing challenges to its working practices on several fronts. Developments in digital and mobile communication technology for advertising have to be understood through a prism of increasing media concentration, fragmenting media audiences and the rise of integrated marketing communications. The latter development, driven by holistic brand logic, in concert with the burgeoning possibilities for advertising of web 2.0 and mobile, is blurring the distinction between promotion disciplines (Hackley, 2009a).

This is creating a convergence mentality in two senses. Media technology is moving towards convergence of devices, so that all media engagement could happen through one, mobile, WAP-enabled device in the not-too-distant future (Sharma et al, 2008). Concomitant with this, advertising professionals are under pressure to devise content solutions which fit the convergence landscape. This demands not only creative and strategic ability but also digital literacy across a range of media platforms. Therefore, professional networks have to range beyond their immediate discipline so individuals can, when required, supplement their own skills by calling on those of other specialists. In turn, this is pushing more agencies into project-based working since it is harder than ever for them to maintain the creative and technical skills in-house that are needed to deliver integrated, multi-platform campaigns.

In this short chapter we will outline some contradictions around the notion of professional identity in the context of changes in the advertising industry. We will suggest that the task of crafting a sense of professional identity in the field is being shaped by new technology and working practices. Aspiring advertising professionals have to respond to this complex working environment by making use of wider and deeper networks and creating a digital presence.

We acknowledge that there is a risk of conflating the career experiences and trajectories of creatives with those of account planners and account management. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this piece we feel this is justified in order to engage more generally with the management of the creative advertising development process. In addition, we feel that some of the trends apparent in the field are impacting on all categories of worker, though perhaps not equally. None are immune to the effects of increased outsourcing and project-based working. What is more, the boundary lines between marketing communication disciplines are becoming increasingly blurred. Account executives or planners are sometimes directly or indirectly responsible for the creative content of campaigns (Hackley, 2003c; Peng and Hackley, 2007). With greater pressure for integrated media solutions there is more stress on all advertising professionals being able to think both strategically and creatively. One London, agency, *Mother[[1]](#endnote-1)*, has responded to this trend by flattening its structure and taking out the account management layer - it claims that all its account team members are creative. This remains an exception but it reflects a move toward more integrated, multi-skilled and flexible account teams.

*Professional Identity in Advertising*

A sense of identity generally is negotiated through an “internal-external dialectic” (Jenkins, 2004, p.18). Who we say we are requires validation from external sources. These might consist of the standards, qualifications, values and rewards that are constructed by professions to exclude outsiders and affirm hierarchies of membership. Such professional structures can obtain in creative occupations such as journalism, acting and screenwriting which have a tradition of strong unionisation (McKinlay and Smith, 2009), as well as in traditional manufacturing or service production. In addition, there are the discourses which obtain in the wider world about that profession. Being a surgeon, for example, would probably elicit greater respect and social status than being an advertising professional.

In advertising, there are no enforced entry qualifications and union power is low or zero. What is more, the legitimacy of each of the three main crafts of advertising, creative, planning and account management, is often openly challenged on a day-to-day basis within agencies (Hackley, 2003a). The roles co-exist in a state which could be described as creative tension, though some would describe it as permanent dysfunction. The three crafts bring very different sets of implicit assumptions to the work and this sets them in opposition to each other in a battle for control over the creative advertising development process (Kover, 1995; Kover and Goldberg, 1995; Hackley, 2003b).

For the world at large, an advertising man (there are many highly successful and accomplished advertising women but it is a male-dominated business) occupies a dubious status. Advertising is a form of communication which is regarded simultaneously with awe and contempt (Cook, 2001). Its practitioners are often regarded in a similar light. It is blamed for all manner of social evils, from anorexia to obesity, from alcohol-related illness and street disorder to general moral decay and the rise of a material lifestyle (Hackley, 2010). Yet we betray our fascination of it with television shows and websites devoted to the funniest, most shocking or most beautiful advertisements. The most successful campaigns are credited with changing attitudes, creating cultural icons and sometimes revolutionalising entire industries. The legendary *Levi 501s* campaign by BBH in the 1980s, for example, was said to have increased sales in the denim jeans market as a whole by 600% (Hackley, 2005).

Stereotypical representations of the advertising industry in popular culture reflect its ambivalent cultural status. As Hackley and Kover (2007) point out, in movies such as *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* and *What Women Want* the advertising professional is wealthy, privileged, and also maverick, cynical and narcissistic. In *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* the central character is self-obsessed, insecure, mendacious, and half-crazy. In the current top-rated US TV series *Two and a Half Men* the main character, played by Charlie Sheen, is shallow, hedonistic, materialistic and selfish. He makes his living writing advertising jingles. Typically for the advertising industry in the USA or the UK, Sheen’s character is white, educated and privileged. The planning and executive roles in advertising have, traditionally, often been taken by graduates of elite universities (Hackley, 2000) but this is not so true of the creative roles. McLeod et al (2009) found that it is common for advertising creatives to describe their own origins as working or lower-middle class. Advertising offered a step up in class, based on talent.

The origins of advertising’s social capital are difficult to pin down. No doubt the rapid growth in advertising revenue in the postwar period as television ownership and viewing figures soared, helped. It gave the industry the scent of money and provided the resources for the much-celebrated creative revolution which shifted advertising from the realm of marketing to the fringes of modern art. Important advertising agencies such as Crawford’s of London championed the idea that advertising creativity could contribute to the cultural economy (Schwarzkopf, 2008).

Because the resources available for constructing professional identity in advertising are so slim, workers have to construct their sense of professional identity anew every day. As one professional said “We are only as good as the last thing we did...” (Deuze, 2007, p. 130). Advertising creatives lack a backstop of professional legitimacy so that even if they earn credit for their performance in one campaign, they have to reproduce that in the next. As one said, “I have to start from scratch every morning” (Hackey and Kover, 2007, p.66). This lends a particular insecurity to the profession. Writers and artists can assert their identity as writers or artists even if they have never sold a piece of work. If they have had one success, it offers a lasting testament to their craft skills. When reputations are made in advertising they can confer legendary status on an individual, with wealth and job security to match. But these individuals are very few and for the great majority, reputation has to be earned with each new job.

Nixon and Crewe (2004) refer to what they call “social splitting” (p. 143, in Hackley and Kover, 2007) to describe the way that creatives in advertising have to reconcile the contradiction of the cool, urbane image some outsiders hold of being an advertising creative and the intense rivalry and ruthless competition which obtains inside the industry. The situation is even more complex than this, since, as we have noted, advertising professionals can be regarded very negatively indeed. Attacks on advertising, most famously articulated by Vance Packard (1957; discussion in Hackley, 2007), reflected another perception of the industry as the science and art of manipulation, with a hidden oligarchy of highly educated and skilled technocrats pulling the strings of consumer behaviour. This ambivalence, of course, might enhance its attractiveness to those who see a certain anti-establishment side to the advertising business.

*Advertising management and working practices*

The working practices of advertising are clearly an important influence in labour processes in the industry. Advertising agencies, to differing degrees, have well-deserved reputations for being unorthodox, collegiate and informal in the way work is organised and controlled, at least in comparison to labour processes in more formally bureaucratic industries. There can be considerable differences in emphasis between agencies, but the general approach in advertising agencies has changed remarkably little in 40 years (Feldwick, 2009) and is quite similar around the world (Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2008). The licence to be creative is an important component shaping the character of advertising work, and the legitimacy of creativity in advertising is disputed not only within agencies but in the wider industry. Today, advertising is a small, highly concentrated industry in which creative control over campaigns is contested between local agencies and the global headquarters of brand marketing corporations (Deuze, 2007).

Key ideas about the management of advertising have inscribed the creative component within the process model for advertising development. The first school of advertising copywriting was established at the Lord and Thomas agency in the early part of the 1900s under industry pioneer Albert D. Lasker. Lasker was inspired by the ideas of one of his employees, John E. Kennedy, who argued that advertising was ‘salesmanship in print’ (Kennedy, 1904). As Hackley (2010) notes, citing McDonald and Scott, (2007) “other ideas about advertising effectiveness, advertising research and creativity were popularised by famous practitioners in the 1960s. In addition to Bill Bernbach’s groundbreaking ideas on advertising creativity they included David Ogilvy’s notion of ‘brand personality’ and Leo Burnett’s use of dramatic realism, all of which were counterpoints to the ‘hard sell’ school of advertising associated with Rosser Reeves and Claude Hopkins” (in press). An influential idea about managing the advertising development process, called account planning (Hackley, 2003a), became well-known in the 1960s and formalised the role of creativity as part of the value-creating process in advertising. Account planning may have preserved the existence of the creative agency in the face of pressures for more instrumental and accountable business communication (Feldwick, 2009, citing Fletcher, 2008). As a counterpoint to the creative side of the process and the craft skills of fine and graphic art, copywriting, music and scriptwriting which go with that, a scientific vocabulary of marketing and consumer research and copy-testing techniques also emerged. These had to be mastered by agency professionals who became social researchers in the service of advertising (Hackley, 2002). The creative and scientific sides of advertising are perpetually in conflict, but they also act to mutually reinforce conventional working approaches.

*Concluding comment: digital identities?*

Individuals in creative industries have to utilise informal networks in order to learn about the job, build a reputation and hear about work. Today, changes in the structure, technology and working practices of the advertising industry mean that the networks have to be wider and deeper in order to gain access to a greater variety of skills. One implication of this is that individuals are utilising web 2.0 and mobile in a mirror image of the trend for agencies to market themselves at a personal level through interactive technology. It is already accepted in marketing that blogging is an effective strategy for gaining new business (Hackley, 2009b, p. 124)- in fact, there is a view in the advertising industry that that blogging is the most important new business mechanism. Agencies offer advice, ‘think piece’ articles and case histories on their websites, sometimes with an entry point for hosted discussion. In this way, the traditional method of pitching for new business on the basis of a client brief is increasingly by-passed as potential clients can look at the agency’s work and discuss projects over the internet without any commitment.

Now, individuals as well as agencies are proving their digital credentials and creating an integrated shop window, networking forum and new business pitch by setting up their own blog- http://joeadamfry.com/ is a recent example. This website showcases the skills of a talented young PhD student who is also a consultant in digital and creative advertising. The site acts as a business card, a shop window, and a permanent tool for dialogue with any interested party. It reflects a wider trend for the digitisation of networking. Individual strategies for negotiating professional identity in advertising, then, are taking on some of the character of changes in the industry itself. While the digital revolution might be throwing advertising labour processes into a flux, it might also offer some solutions for entrepreneurial individuals.

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1. http://www.motherlondon.com/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)