

Technological Artifacts and their Advertisements:  
An Alteration of Society through Manipulation

Advertisements today and throughout history do more than just promote a product or artifact to a potential consumer. They often associate the artifact with certain qualities they hope will appeal to individuals, and display a unique technic. That is, the advertisement exhibits a relationship between the artifact and society, often demonstrating how the artifact will improve society or solve a specific pressing issue (Winner 123). In this way, the artifact becomes integrated with society –like an extension of humans –as communications scholar Harold Innis theorized (Scannell 134). Scholars including Lewis Mumford might expand analyses of advertisements to suggest that humans today are “trapped” by the technologies they have created, because such artifacts “mold” its users to coordinate with its features (Mumford 5).

Curious as to how these scholars might analyze advertisements in recent history, I found two advertisements for cell phones, both of which were released in the last thirty years. The first advertisement I examined was a commercial produced in the mid-1980s for a Motorola cellular device. The advertisement repeatedly uses the term “commonplace” in reference to cell phones. This implies that a cell phone is, or will ultimately become, an ordinary element of people’s lives. The advertisement depicts a man in formal attire talking on a cell phone and claims that “scenes like this are becoming commonplace in the U.S.” Not only does this imply that using a cell phone is becoming ordinary, but it also infers that more people in the U.S. will work in business settings.

There are other instances of a relationship between cell phones and business in the advertisement. It briefly acknowledges that most of its users are involved in business: “right now, businessmen and women are major users of radiotelephones.” But the advertisement

immediately goes back to the idea of the cell phone as commonplace when it suggests that, “more people will take advantage of cellular as its benefits become apparent.”

As to how the cell phone will become commonplace? The advertisement proposes the idea of a “cellular revolution.” Using the word “revolution” makes it seem that the increase in cell phone users is inevitable; that it is not society’s choice that the popularity of cell phones will increase, but rather it is an unavoidable effect of the technology itself. The advertisement states:

Eventually, seeing people using cellular phones may seem as commonplace as someone checking time on an electronic watch, figuring on an electronic calculator, or programming on an electronic computer.

After watching the commercial, the critical-thinking viewer may question the technic displayed in the advertisement. That is, what kind of relationship is there between the technology (in this case, a cell phone) and society?

In “Authoritarian and Democratic Technics,” Mumford hypothesizes that two types of technologies “have recurrently existed side by side” (Mumford 2). The first is authoritarian, which means that the technology itself holds the power in the relationship between society and technology. The other –democratic –suggests that society is the center of the relationship. Between the two, Mumford argues that authoritarian technology is the dominant kind in today’s society. He says, “The center now lies in the system itself, all its human components are themselves trapped by the organization they have invented” (Mumford 5).

If Mumford were to watch this Motorola commercial, he would likely claim evidence of an authoritarian relationship. References to a “cellular revolution” suggest that the use of cell phones will spread nationwide, affecting all people in the U.S.

In “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” Langdon Winner discusses two opposing theories regarding technology: social constructivism and technological determinism. The first claims that technology is a result of human action to help fulfill a specific desire (Winner 131). The latter also says that technology is created by society for a specific purpose, but that technology later alters society in accordance to its patterns (Winner 122).

If Winner were to watch the Motorola commercial, he may argue that it is an example of technological determinism. Similar to Mumford’s idea of an authoritarian technology, technological determinism suggests a dominance of the media artifact over society (Winner 122). The advertisement claims that over time, owning a cell phone will become more and more ordinary. The introduction of cell phones into society, he may argue, changes the composition of society and class. When cell phones were first created, only upper-class businessmen and women had them. But the advertisement suggests the technology will become more commonplace, and thus a less exclusive artifact; in turn, the upper class becomes a less exclusive community of society. At the same time, the advertisement’s idea of the cell phone as a commonplace, average element in society implies that individuals who do not own one are part of inferior group, separate from the rest of society.

This idea that the Motorola cell phone creates a new community may also be shared by Harols Innis. In “Communication and Technology,” the author writes that, “media technologies tend to create monopolies of power and knowledge” (Scannell 128). He may analyze that the media technology in the advertisement will alter such monopolies in society; that those who own a cell phone have more power than those who do not, and will be members of what he calls a “global village.” This concept suggests that individuals worldwide become more connected as a

result of their shared use of an electronic media (Scannell 136). Therefore, all the people who use the Motorola cell phone are part of the same global village.

While Mumford, Winner, and Scannell might point out different concepts and theories in their analyses, they do come to a shared conclusion: that the advertisement and technology suggest an alteration in the formation of society. The commonness of the Motorola cell phone reduces the exclusivity of the upper class, because cell phones are no longer unique to that community. Instead, all Motorola users are part of the same “global village” in which they share the similar features reflected in the cell phone.

After coming to this conclusion, I wondered if more recent advertisements and technologies might have a similar effect on society. The second advertisement I analyzed was a print ad for the Blackberry Curve 9360, which was released in 2011. The headline reads, “Social. Fun. Stylish. Just like you.” The text addresses the audience in a straightforward manner by associating characteristics of the technology with those of the audience.

By associating characteristics of the Blackberry with those of the audience, the advertisement suggests that the technology is an “extension” of humans. Scannell writes that, “All media may be thought of as tools that extend the range and scope, not only of human activity in time and space but, more crucially, of one or more of our bodily faculties and senses” (Scannell 134). He might argue that the Blackberry is an extension of our ears; the artifact allows us to hear from distances further than what is possible without it. Furthermore, the advertisement implies that the Blackberry is an extension of our personality. Our “social” and “fun” qualities are now evident in the artifact. The phone is more than just a technology, but a representation of the user.

This raises an issue of individuality in society. If people in a society all use this same Blackberry, does that mean they have the same personality? And what if the individual using the Blackberry does not consider themselves to be “social,” “fun,” or “stylish,” like the advertisement evokes? Does the Blackberry demand its users to share such qualities?

Perhaps, Mumford may argue, the technology will “mold society” to obtain these characteristics (Mumford 5). In this case, the advertisement would show signs of technological determinism. The advertisement places value on the listed characteristics, and suggests that humans do the same. It says for us to “stay social,” molding the consumer to conform to match the features of the technology. The advertisement also claims that the Blackberry is “everything you need.” Once again, it attempts to manipulate the audience into placing value on the technologies features, like its flash camera and “high performance processor.”

Winner might offer another way to look at the situation. Consider his theory of technological politics, which proposes ways in which artifacts have political components. Winner suggests that an “invention” can “settle an issue in a particular community” (Winner 123). In this case, the “invention” is the Blackberry; the “community” could be individuals who do not consider themselves “social,” “fun,” or “stylish,” but aspire to be. According to this theory, the Blackberry serves as an extension of their personality, providing the individuals with the desirable qualities, thus settling their issue.

Winner’s hypothetical analysis of the Blackberry advertisement has a more positive attitude than those of Scannell and Mumford. He might conclude that the artifact relieves consumers of an issue by delivering them desired qualities they do not otherwise possess. This conclusion led me to a question: can technologies insert in consumers characteristics that we do not willingly seek out? I believe the answer to this is “yes.” Take the iPhone, for instance. The

iPhone is undoubtedly one of the most popular cell phones in today's society. It offers users the ability to play games, communicate with people, surf the internet, and much more. But recent studies have suggested the iPhone makes users more anti-social. Why talk to a person face-to-face when you can text them over the iPhone? The iPhone, some researchers propose, has changed the nation's "personality" from social to anti-social.

This concept that a technology can alter the composition and values of society is prevalent among Winner, Mumford, and Scannell's articles. Through different theories and concepts, the authors suggest that technological artifacts and their advertisements associate the artifact with values of a certain community, or suggest that it will solve an issue in the community. In this way, the technology become integrated with society, molding individuals to match its features and changing society's composition.

Motorola advertisement: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WUF3yjGf4>