

# Advertising Advertising:

The emerging advertising  
industry's dual promotional  
campaigns, 1890-1920

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America's advertising industry rapidly developed toward the end of the Gilded Age and continued primarily during the Progressive Era. By and large, it emerged and consolidated itself between 1890 and 1920. Unlike industries that had the advantage of establishing themselves during the poorly regulated Gilded Age, such as the transcontinental railroad corporations,<sup>1</sup> the advertising industry primarily had to establish itself during an era of reform. During this period, intense public scrutiny was levelled upon business malfeasances, including false and misleading advertising practises. Resultantly, it had to negotiate between representing itself to the public as a conscientious industry, while simultaneously representing itself to potential clients as experts capable of cultivating 'prejudices' towards consumables – prejudices that could 'be put into the human mind through the intelligent use of printers' ink'.<sup>2</sup> This entailed combining the emerging field of psychology with 'scientific management', which advertisers promised to potential clients could entice consumers not merely through the invisible-hand of the market but through the overwhelming influence of desire.

This paper will weave together the ascent of the advertising industry and its activities during this age of reform. This will entail an examination of how the industry was advertising and representing itself to the public and to businesses. Drawing largely upon the works of two of the foremost historians on early American advertising, T. J. Jackson Lears and Pamela Walker Laird, the primary goal of this paper is to expand upon their work to show how advertisers or

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1 For more on the erratic and unregulated ascent of the railroad corporations, consult Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of America*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), *passim*. For more on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, consult T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), and Nell Irving Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era*, second ed. (New York; London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008).

2 N. W. Ayer and Son, *The Ayer Idea in Advertising* [trade booklet] (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son [self published], 1912), 22-23.

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‘admen’ actually conducted aggressive campaigns to convince society of their moral integrity and businesses of their power. The conflicting messages of these campaigns reveal them to be duplicitous, and also contemptuous of both society and business. To demonstrate this, advertisements and trade publications will be examined. This will also reveal that the emergence of this industry was more than just an inevitable consequence of industrial necessities – the admen clearly felt it imperative to ‘advertise advertising’.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Advertising, Capitalism, and The Rise of the Professional Admen***

In 1911, Herbert Casson noted within his monograph *Ads and Sales* that ‘experts’ had estimated that the average annual expenditure on advertisements ranged between ‘\$600,000,000’ and ‘\$1,000,000,000’. For Casson, this clearly represented that advertising was now ‘an accepted power in the business world.’<sup>4</sup> Two years later in 1913, Paul Terry Cherington claimed in his monograph *Advertising as a Business Force* that it was estimated that 95% of all national advertising and most regional advertising within the United States was conducted by advertising agencies.<sup>5</sup> Claims based upon the sensational estimates of unnamed experts lead one to suspect that these assessments were bloated and little more than professional puffery.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they were at least accurate in suggesting that advertising organised through professional agencies was by the 1910s a lucrative and pervasive service-based industry (the estimated range on expenditure may actually be quite accurate – a recent estimate of the expenditure for 1900 is \$542 million).<sup>7</sup> Taken together, both thus allude to the tremendous commercial and socio-economic transition occurring, marking the shift away from the comparatively meagre \$5 million of 1867<sup>8</sup> and the typical owner-manager control of advertising.<sup>9</sup>

Economists such as Germany’s Karl Knies began to explore and argue for the centrality and importance of advertising to industry and the economy as early as the 1850s.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, however, the nature of advertising remained comparatively static until the late 1880s and businesses seemed either ambivalent or ignorant toward it as a legitimate and powerful mode of

3 The Associated Advertising Clubs of the World launched a series of advertisements in 1915 that explicitly aimed to “advertise advertising”. For instance, consult “President Wilson’s Message on Advertising (advertisement for the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World)”, *Illustrated World*, [unknown edition] c. 1915/6, 154. The usage of this phrase is also highlighted by Laird: Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing*, (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2001), 365.

4 Herbert N. Casson, *Ads and Sales: A Study of Advertising and Selling from the Standpoint of the New Principles of Scientific Management* (Chicago: A. C. McLurg and Co., 1911), 52-53.

5 Paul Terry Cherington, *Advertising as Business Force: A Compilation of Experience Records*, (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company [for the Associated Advertising Clubs of America], 1913), 493.

6 Casson was writing for advertising “friends” and Cherington’s was published by and for the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World. See the publication details and prefaces of Herbert N. Casson, *Ads and Sales* and Paul Terry Cherington, *Advertising as Business Force*.

7 Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* [2nd Edition], (Boston: Wadsworth; Cengage Learning, 2012), 46.

8 This figure is supplied by Stephen Gennaro, who in turn takes this figure from Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966) in Stephen Gennaro, “J. Walter Thompson and the Creation of the Modern Advertising Agency”, *Advertising and Society Review*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2009) [page numbers N. A.].

9 As shall be demonstrated, Laird extensively explores the changing roles of the owner-managers. Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 38-56.

10 Ronald A. Fullerton, “A Prophet of Modern Advertising: Germany’s Karl Knies”, *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 27, no. 1 (1998), 51-66.

producer-to-consumer communication. Pamela Walker Laird highlights in her 2001 monograph *Advertising Progress* that advertising was primarily conducted or at least overseen by business owner-managers themselves. Overall, it was disorganised and lacked 'professional' standards of procedure and purpose; tended to be either sensationalistic, representing the virtues of industry (and the owner-managers), material splendour, or the fantastic (as observed via patent-medicine ads and the circus performer P. T. Barnum's ads), as well as highly descriptive. The latter entailed the representation of little more than the goods or services on offer; and was organised through direct business-printer relationships. The agencies that did exist prior to the 1880s were essentially little more than businesses that either owned or rented advertising space within newspapers and magazines (or worked for the media).<sup>11</sup>

Late into America's second stage of industrialisation (which began in the early to mid-1860s), advertising professionals began to emerge in droves within the United States and businesses began to turn to them for their supposed experience and expertise in moving consumer goods. This occurred, Laird demonstrates, due to the explosion of mass-manufacturing; the corporatisation and bureaucratisation of businesses; the divorcing of owners and managers; and the specialisation of skills and services. In addition to these broad structural transformations, advertising culture shifted due to manufacturers becoming increasingly aware of the need to communicate to a national audience of potential consumers the uniqueness of their products in a marketplace glutted with identical goods; the increasing popularity of the magazine; and also the aggressive advocacy of prominent advertising individuals and agencies to promote and legitimise their services. Essentially, this was the result of the changing socio-economic structure (the development of consumer-society) *and* the intensive lobbying of industrial actors. By the 1920s, advertising through agencies had been 'sold' and firmly consolidated as a service-based industry. Toward this consolidation, agents, or admen, hailed themselves as bastions of industrial and social progress responsible for the functioning of America's capitalist economy.<sup>12</sup>

Laird and Lears both highlight the highly argumentative and self-aggrandising practises of the admen during this era. Both extract evidence from trade-journals, business publications and advertisements themselves. They also document how references to 'science' came to dominate professional discourse, particularly Frederick Taylor's notion of 'Scientific Management', and how notions of psychology excited and directed admen to tailor their messages to manipulate their audiences (whether they had this effect is debatable and likely unquantifiable).<sup>13</sup> However, both historians touch upon this history as a means to advance their broader theses. For Laird this is to demonstrate how the industry emerged and legitimised itself by emphasising its 'progressive' nature,<sup>14</sup> and for Lears this is to demonstrate that, even despite the rhetorical alterations which

11 *Advertising Progress* is divided into three sections. For the nature of advertising prior to the 1880s/90s, see Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 1-151; for the changing socio-economic structures and institutions and the rise of advertising agents, see 155-246; and for the consolidation of the agencies and industry, see 249-361.

12 See Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 155-246 and 249-361.

13 For respective examples in Laird, see *Laird, Advertising Progress*, 304-61 (self-aggrandising); 71 (trade-journal); 311 (business publication); 264 (advertisement); 275-9 (science); and 288-91 (psychology). For respective examples in Lears, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 196-234 (self-aggrandising); 199 (trade-journal), 206 (business-publication); 213 (advertisement), and 206-34 (science and psychology). In terms of those that reject the notion that advertising holds such a grasp over audiences, see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 196-234, and Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), *passim*.

14 Laird, *Advertising Progress*, *passim*.

sought to secularise and professionalise the industry, an underlying notion of magical personal transformation, deriving from the carnivalesque market-places of early modern Europe, was retained.<sup>15</sup> Both works are fascinating and complex, though they either subordinate this particular moment to their overall arguments or somewhat bury it among other content. This paper intends to combine some of the ideas presented by these two historians in order to further draw out this history – a history which deserves to be emphasised explicitly in its own right and brought to the foreground. Additionally, toward this end, further semiotic attention can be paid to the self-promoting advertisements of these agencies and their industry. Doing so will shed more light on how this industry both advanced its claim to being indivisible and central to capitalist economics and the duplicitous and varying dialogues occurring between admen and the public, and admen and business.

### ***A Community of Honest Professionals***

On 29 June 1916, President Woodrow Wilson addressed an enormous crowd of professional admen within Philadelphia's Independence Square.<sup>16</sup> Speaking to the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World (AACW),<sup>17</sup> as he had done several times before and would do several times after, Wilson proclaimed that he felt 'at home in this company' of men whom he admired for their thinking it 'worth while to get together in order to tell the truth.'<sup>18</sup>

Wilson was referring to the 'Truth in Advertising' movement advanced by the growing advertising industry. This movement was the industry's response to the widespread public distrust of advertisements which intensified during the Progressive Era, as evidenced by 1898's 'Guy' bill to 'prevent misleading and dishonorable [*sic*] advertising' in New York<sup>19</sup> and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 which was in-part inspired by the legacy of the sensational claims of patent-medicine advertisements.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the industry co-opted the concern with false-advertising. Consumers, they argued, should not be deceived, but should instead be presented with information which will assist them in making free and informed decisions.<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times* reported that the Sphinx Club (an advertising club formed in the late 1890s) moved an initiative in 1902 to 'protect the readers of newspapers and magazines from fraudulent advertising' through investigative bodies capable of suppressing dubious advertisers.<sup>22</sup> In 1911, the trade publication Printer's Ink proposed a 'model' statute against false-advertising, and in 1913 the Associated Advertising Clubs of America (AACA – the predecessor to the AACW) introduced and adopted a series of 'rules' to promote truthful advertising devoid of exaggerations. They also established the National Vigilance

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15 Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, *passim*.

16 Caywood, Bell and Fischer (copyright holders), *President Wilson Addressing Associated Ad Clubs at Independence Square, Philadelphia*. (photograph), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, c. 1916 [Available online. URL: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007661895/>].

17 "ADVERTISING CLUBS WIDEN THEIR SCOPE: Title of Organization Changed to Associated Advertising Clubs of the World", *New York Times*, June 23, 1914, [page no. N.A.].

18 Wilson, Woodrow, *Address of President Wilson to the Associated Advertising Clubs, Philadelphia, June 29, 1916*, United States of America Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., USA, 1916. Though found from separate locations, it appears that the photograph and the speech refer to the same event.

19 "For Honest Advertising: C. C. Shayne Argues in Support of the Bill to Prevent Misrepresentation", *New York Times*, March 10, 1898, 4.

20 For more, consult Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 203-4.

21 Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 205.

22 "Movement Against Fraudulent Advertising: Investigation and Suppression Desired", *New York Times*, October 9, 1902, 16.

Committee and the Better Business Bureau to enforce these rules.<sup>23</sup> By 1920, it was reported that '[a]dvertising sermons were delivered in a number of churches [...] by business men of national significance.'<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the AACW was so aggressive and confident in advancing this movement they sought presidential *and* ecclesiastic endorsement. They received both.

A whole-page advertisement placed in the popular monthly magazine *Illustrated World* around 1915 demonstrates the efforts of the admen. It also demonstrates features of the era's predominant style of printed advertisement (the prevailing advertising medium prior to the advent of the radio and the television), featuring both images, brand logos and supporting text. The ad was placed to promote the AACW's 'Truth in Advertising' and 'Advertise Advertising' campaigns. Though one might assume the ad's target audience was the business community, the fact that it appeared in such a magazine and ties the industry to national development suggests that the audience was the broader reading public. It is arranged around a testimonial letter supposedly authored and signed by President Wilson. Contents of the letter include statements such as '[a]dvertising is a factor of constantly increasing power in business' and that the AACW's push for truthful advertising should be 'of the greatest benefit of the country' – something which was 'one of the inspiring things in our outlook upon the future of national development.'<sup>25</sup> Wilson's portrait, the White House, and an American eagle clutching an olive branch accompanied the text. This patriotic symbolism attempted to anchor the meaning that the work of these agencies was not just morally permissible but morally praiseworthy – they were indefensible to American business and, subsequently, society. Wilson's words had here become fodder for the AACW's campaigns.<sup>26</sup>

This crusade was evidently not so much a bid to relieve any moral qualms that the admen may have had. It was instead an effort to represent the advertising profession as a community of honest professionals to the wider public. It was, as Laird and Lears observe, a public-relations campaign, intended to assert and instate ideological and cultural hegemony.<sup>27</sup> As noted, there was widespread public distrust of advertising due to the legacy of the outlandish promises made within patent-medicine advertisements – advertisements that dominated media. Thus, in establishing themselves as an industry, the admen took it as their prerogative to present a socially-conscious and morally-legitimate profession. As Casson noted 'the first duty of a corporation is to secure the goodwill of the public.'<sup>28</sup> This sentiment very easily applied to the business association and the best way to secure goodwill was to unite as a lobby and assert the 'Truth in Advertising' movement. Consequently, the drive for commercial honesty and professional conduct was usurped and utilised as a kind of sales tactic. Lears agrees, stating that '[s]incerity had become at once a moral stance and a tactic of persuasion.'<sup>29</sup> The admen were motivated not so much by social interests but by self-interest.

23 H. J. Donnelly, Jr., "The Truth-in-Advertising Movement as It Affects the Wealth-Producing Factors in the Community", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 115, [*Scientific Distribution Modern Selling - A Dynamic Wealth Producing Force*], September, 1924, 161-173, and "Advertising Men's Creeds: Baltimore Convention Adopts Strong Declaration of Principles", *New York Times*, June 14, 1913, 3.

24 "Advertising Clubs Meet in Indianapolis: Sermons on their Work are Preached from Many of the City Churches", *New York Times*, June 7, 1920, 15.

25 "President Wilson's Message on Advertising", 154.

26 "President Wilson's Message on Advertising", 154.

27 Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 375-380, and Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 198-230.

28 Casson, *Ads and Sales*, 151.

29 T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Rise of American Advertising", *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 5 (1983), 157.

Moreover, Quentin Schultze demonstrates that by usurping the campaign against false-advertising and establishing ethical codes-of-practise, the advertising industry both limited the scope of public debate over the moral legitimacy of advertising in general and undermined the methods of those outside the professional associations.<sup>30</sup> One can observe this in the campaign and the response to it. By organising into a large professional association and usurping the campaign, these admen could themselves determine what counted as 'right' and 'wrong', 'true' and 'false', and 'professional' and 'unprofessional', and could other and demonise outsiders – it was those outside of the organisation that were immoral, fraudulent, and unprofessional. By and large, their campaign worked. As observed by Wilson's endorsement and their acceptance on pulpits, the state and society bought the message, especially so following the apparently noble efforts of the admen's war-time propaganda efforts. In regards to the latter, advertising agencies were commissioned through the Committee on Public Information to sell both the war itself and the government "Liberty" bonds to finance it. As both Laird and Lears demonstrate, this was a major factor in establishing the industry's social legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Taken together, it is unsurprising that the AACW successfully 'advertised' and 'sold' their desired impression, given that this was a campaign conducted by expert persuaders.

### ***America's Top Persuaders Sell the Art of Persuasion***

While engaged in this public relations campaign, the industry was simultaneously engaged in an aggressive campaign to advocate its specialised services and legitimacy to the business world. It is certainly true that the larger structural changes facilitated the turn to professional agencies, such as the rise of the business corporation and national distribution networks, but such agencies still had to contend with deeply embedded apprehensions held by many businesses. Lears highlights that advertisers were 'mistrusted by farmers, manufacturers, laborers', and others connected to the production process due to advertisers being considered unnecessary service-based 'middlemen' commercially 'parasitic' to the efforts of manufacturers.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Laird highlights that the eventual hegemony of the agencies over advertising was not a foregone conclusion, as the agencies had to compete with printers, newspaper and magazine publishers, advertising manual publishers and freelance specialists, all offering to assist businesses with advertising. Any one of these could have become the prevailing advertising model.<sup>33</sup> Recognising these challenges, the admen and their agencies saw to it to represent themselves as the indispensable and *correct* model – a model which if ignored would bring about disastrous consequences. It is here that one can observe that although their campaign to attract the business community appeared on the surface to be more rational and, accordingly, more respectful, similar, though subtler, methods of persuasion were being utilised to win over their audience.

The J. Walter Thompson Company released a series of advertisements intended for businesses at the turn-of-the-century, most from 1902, which clearly represent this sentiment. The company was one of the largest advertising agencies of the era, along with N. W. Ayer and Son, and was principally concerned with magazine advertisements. It originated in either 1864 or 1868 as Carlton

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30 Quentin J. Schultze, "Professionalism in Advertising: The Origin of Ethical Codes", *Journal of Communication*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1981), 64-71.

31 Laird and Lears both highlight the consolidating impact that WWI had upon the industry. Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 359-61, and Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 218-225.

32 Lears, "The Rise of American Advertising", 157.

33 Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 210-231.

and Smith, and was subsequently bought out and re-branded by employee James Walter Thompson in 1878.<sup>34</sup> Until the 1890s, the company's primary service was to place advertisements in magazine advertising columns, allegedly accounting for 80 per cent of all American advertising by 1889 within popular magazines such as *Harper's*, *American Garden*, and *Cottage Hearth*.<sup>35</sup> Beginning in the 1890s, the company started to construct elaborate brand-oriented advertisements featuring extensive imagery and supporting text, designed to construct mythological connotations and to appeal emotionally to the target audience.<sup>36</sup> The series of advertisements intended for businesses, however, were highly argumentative, demonstrating that they were constructed to create the impression that they were appealing to their audience's rationality. The only image appearing on the advertisements was the company logo, featuring the business name, years of operation, and a flying owl carrying a blazing lamp under the phrase 'Experience and Knowledge Will Light You To Success'. The latter was clearly suggesting that the company's expertise and wisdom in advertising could ensure its clients a pathway to prosperity. The remainder of the ads consisted of arguments proposing either that it would be perilous for businesses to ignore advertising professionals (in this instance, J. Walter Thompson professionals), or that businesses ought not worry about such a burdensome endeavour, as the professionals were the only people experienced and knowledgeable enough to mount successful campaigns.<sup>37</sup> So while maintaining the appearance of respecting their audience's rationality, the ads actually sought to appeal to the insecurities of businesses desperate to move their goods in the burgeoning and viciously competitive consumer marketplace.

During this era, despite their desired public image as a morally conscientious industry concerned with grand ideals such as truth and justice, scholars and professionals associated with advertisers and the AACW were arguing that the role of advertising was to psychologically manipulate audiences through a 'scientific' approach. Casson, whose monograph *Ads and Sales* was based upon addresses to ad-clubs and intended for organisational 'friends', claimed that advertising was about teaching 'the buying public a new habit' - a habit of subconsciously buying things 'AUTOMATICALLY'. For Casson,

the aim of the farseeing advertiser is to make the public buy his goods, not from choice, but from habit. And it is right here that we find the common ground upon which both Advertising and Scientific Management stand.<sup>38</sup>

A part of this was to tailor specific advertising messages for varying audiences, such as women (constituting 'three fourths of the buying public') and African-Americans. Market-segmentation and target-market strategies were thus developing.<sup>39</sup> This illustrates that advertisers were devising

34 Stephen Gennaro, "J. Walter Thompson and the Creation of the Modern Advertising Agency", [Page numbers N.A.].

35 "80% of the Advertising in the United States... (advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company)" in *Blue Book of Trade Marks and Newspapers*, (Connecticut H. P. Hubbard Co., 1889) [p. N.A.]. Accessed via Duke University Libraries' "Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850-1920" collection, item "J0101".

36 For example, see "Absolutely Pure" (Advertisement for Swift and Company's "Wool Soap" by the J. Walter Thompson Company), c. 1900-1910. Accessed via Duke University Libraries' "Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850-1920" collection, item "J0036".

37 For the former, see "New Advertisers (house advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company)", 1902, and "Advertising is an Artery of Business... (house advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company)", 1902, item "J0104". For the latter, see "Put your business before the public... (house advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company), 1902, item "J0103". All accessed via Duke University Libraries' "Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850-1920" collection.

38 Casson, *Ads and Sales*, 69-70.

39 Casson, *Ads and Sales*, 53. For more on how advertiser's focussed upon women, see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 209.

methods to tap into and take advantage of deeply entrenched customs and values, rather than merely offering product descriptions or appeals to rationality. Furthermore, Cherington, whose monograph *Advertising as a Business Force* was published by and for members of the AACW, featured a chapter prescribing methods to overcome problems with persuasion, particularly consumer resistance to advertising and purchasing brand-named goods. While acknowledging that the public did not necessarily passively and automatically follow the calls of advertising, noting that the average consumer (members of the lower middle-class or upper-working class) had to consider income and budgetary limits, were inclined to save, and adhered to consumption habits, he nevertheless raised these motives for resistance to inform advertisers. It was their job, he argued, to construct advertisements so powerful that they could undermine such resistance. ‘The consumer problems of the modern advertiser’, Cherington stated, were ‘not merely to discover buyers of goods and to exploit them.’ Instead, they needed to be ‘as intricate as war plans.’<sup>40</sup> Advertising would have to appreciate the complex psychological phenomena of their audience in order to use psychology upon that audience.

Admen appropriated this discourse of science and psychology into their own campaigning to businesses. They attempted to demonstrate that they were not just experts in constructing advertisements but experts in persuasion. It is here that the duplicitous rhetoric between admen and the public, on the one hand, and admen and business, on the other, becomes most evident and most extreme. The N. W. Ayer and Son company’s 1916 trade booklet, *The Ayer Idea in Advertising*, sought to prove the effectiveness of the industry and their particular company by claiming that they adhered to a strict and potent approach, dubbed ‘scientific selling’, which was capable of redirecting and cultivating prejudices towards particular branded consumer goods. While this was supposed to facilitate consumer choice, it simultaneously implied that advertising was tailored in such a way as to unconsciously steer consumers toward desired ends – the purchasing of a client’s products.<sup>41</sup> An advertisement placed by the J. Walter Thompson Company in 1920 titled *Guiding Human Decisions* proclaimed that ‘[o]nly through a special knowledge of how people in large groups think and decide can [...] vital decisions be won economically.’ It went on to state that ‘basic laws govern the actions of people in great masses’ and, through their many years of experience, the company had helped their ‘clients build volume and net profits by preparing campaigns *that guide human decisions* [original emphasis].’<sup>42</sup> The capacity to understand and utilise psychology to further the sales interests of businesses was thus a selling point in the admen’s pursuit to win over the business community.<sup>43</sup>

Thus the admen privately advanced promises to create compliant consumers, akin to what we would now call Pavlovian dogs, while it publicly advanced a moral crusade for truthful advertising. In other words, the latter was a crusade to bolster the free and informed decision-making of an

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40 Cherington, *Advertising as Business Force*, 89-118, esp. 94 and 116.

41 N. W. Ayer and Son, *The Ayer Idea in Advertising*, 10, 21-3, 29-33.

42 “Guiding Human Decisions: Fixed Laws Found to Underlie all Human Actions – Now Applied to Influencing Millions of Buyers (advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company)” in *Editor and Publisher*, July 31, 1920, 37. Accessed via Duke University Libraries’ “Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850-1920 collection.

43 Though neither the J. Walter Thompson Company nor the N. W. Ayer and Son company were listed as controlling members of the “Truth in Advertising” movement in the Business Service Corporation’s *Who’s Who in Advertising*, agents associated with them are listed within the directory, including an employee for J. Walter Thompson (Harry P. Breitenbach, also president of the Detroit Advertising Association in 1915) and various agents who cite their previous professional experience with N. W. Ayer and Son to highlight their expertise (Clarence Wesley Campbell, Jack W. Speare, E. E. Vreeland, and Frank B. White). As such, it is safe to draw a connection between these companies and both of the movements. Business Service Corporation, *Who’s Who in Advertising* (Detroit: Business Service Corporation [self-published], 1916), 77-9. For the respective individuals, see 8, 11, 64, 68, and 71.

able-minded consuming public. Here it is evident that the public campaign was in this way itself a false-advertisement. As Lears states, ‘the notion of consumer sovereignty was a veneer over a deeper structure of belief that equated the consumer audience with a mass of doltish dupes.’<sup>44</sup> As we have now observed, they also held the same view of their business audience. These professional persuaders were utilising very similar tactics upon their two audiences, both society at large and the business community, thus showing contempt for both. Though the latter campaign appeared to have been more “honest”, this was both only on the surface, and only due to necessity. In other words, it was seen to be a more beneficial and effective sales method.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of Progressive era, the admen, such as those involved with the J. Walter Thompson Company and A. W. Ayer and Son, had secured the advertising agency as the prevailing institution. They had established hegemony over advertising and had become a permanent fixture within America’s capitalist economic system.<sup>45</sup> Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as Arthur Asa Berger notes, advertising in the United States is a ‘\$170 billion industry’.<sup>46</sup> It was the events of the Progressive era that has made such a reality possible. At the same time, the admen’s success over the hearts and minds of the public was only temporary. Despite the conviction of the Secretary of the National Vigilance Committee that the movement had largely stamped out false and fraudulent advertising and had secured consumer confidence by 1924,<sup>47</sup> public opinion on advertising soon turned and has since been turbulent.<sup>48</sup> Consumer-activists waged a vicious legal battle against the advertising industry during the 1930s, accusing advertisers of failing to provide general product information;<sup>49</sup> sexism in advertising came under attack beginning in the 1970s; and today advertising is viewed by sizeable portions of the public as a nuisance, and is often criticised for its targeting of children.<sup>50</sup> Businesses may have permanently ‘bought’ the admen’s message, but the public has since become resistant or ambivalent towards it.

However, the emerging advertising industry’s conflicting rhetoric occurring between the public and businesses (1890-1920) were at the time seen as necessary means to achieve consolidation. While vast transformations within the United States’ social and economic structure facilitated their ascent, the admen contributed to establishing their hegemony as the prevailing experts responsible for producer-to-consumer communication. This involved convincing the public of their moral integrity and businesses of their capacity to move consumables via psychological influence. Ultimately, the admen demonstrated that things do not just sell themselves – they too had to

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44 Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 230.

45 This is not to suggest that *all* businesses ceased taking responsibility for their own advertising.

46 Berger’s figure was for 2009. Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Impact on American Character and Society*, (Pennsylvania: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 1.

47 H. J. Donnelly, Jr., “The Truth-in-Advertising Movement as It Affects the Wealth-Producing Factors in the Community”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 115 (1924): 161-73.

48 For more on advertising in the 1920s to the 1940s, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1986), *passim*.

49 For more, consult Inger L. Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), *passim*.

50 For public irritation with advertising, see Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 8; for sexism see 94-6, and for inequalities, see 42-5. For a critique of advertising and marketing to children, see Sharon Beder, *et al.*, *This Little Kiddy Went to Market: The Corporate Capture of Childhood*, (London; New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 1-22.

advertise advertising. Crucially, it worked. The admen took command of American advertising as corporate capitalism had just fully taken command of American society.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This alludes to the title and focus of the edited volume *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*. Gary J. Kornblith and Michael Zakim [Eds.], *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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