

The Past, Present, and Future of Television Commercials

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Advertising is dead! Long live advertising!

In this time of transition, what is a “television commercial”? We think that we know that the “commercial” is the selling minute that is distinct from the program text. But in early radio, broadcast programs *were* the advertising—paid for by sponsors and produced by advertising agencies—what we might today call “branded content.” Instead of the “commercial,” radio writers referred to the announcements of the sponsoring brands as part of the script “continuity” or as the “commercial credits” (as in “brought to you by” or “a word from our sponsor”). Over the first decades of broadcasting, the term “commercial” had to evolve in order to distinguish the program from the advertising, a necessity once single sponsorship—and the end of advertiser program control—went into decline. Several decades of linear network television then trained us to see and identify the differences between the “program” and the “commercial.” The differences are usually obvious: drop into any linear network feed and it would be rare to not be able to immediately perceive whether you are watching a “program” or a “commercial.” However, as the linear feed declines and audiences increasingly avoid interruptive commercials, television advertising strategies have been shifting—most obviously back to many of those old program/ad integration strategies such as sponsorship, branded content, cast commercials, product placements, brand integrations, and so on.

But my question today is whether or not we can dramatically expand the notion of “TV commercial” beyond the 30-second spot originally designed for the linear feed. Can we or should we apply the term “commercial” to any form of moving picture or video—such as GIFs, Snaps, Instagram Stories, YouTube vlogs, and so on—that are designed to sell and sponsored by an advertiser? In other words, can we develop analyses of video advertising strategies that help us see the both the differences *and* the continuities between these new forms and the traditional television commercial? Or, on the other hand, is the term “commercial” dying its natural death, and should we instead be developing new terminology to talk about these emerging forms of televisual advertising?

I’m not usually too concerned with terminology, except insofar as how it might reveal some of the cultural and industrial practices of the time (for example, the term of early radio being “continuity” rather than “commercial”). However, I raise this question because I am discovering that in these newer advertising forms my students do not necessarily distinguish between “program” and “commercial.” Much of the televisual content they consume, such as Snaps, GIFs, and

YouTube vlogs, are also forms of branded content—actually paid advertising—but are not announced as such or visually distinct from content that is not advertising. One of the points often raised is that their favorite YouTube influencer’s vlog about mascara is *not* a “commercial.” But isn’t it just as much a “commercial” for mascara as a traditional 30-second Maybelline commercial? I am spending more time and effort than before in helping students identify distinctions between “content,” that is, stuff they want to watch, and “advertising,” that is, stuff that advertisers want them to watch. As those categories blur together, I try to devise terminology and categories to help them identify, analyze, and reflect on the strategies being used to convince them to buy things: emotional appeals, product information, celebrity associations.

So maybe the term “commercial” will go away, chased away in part by the advertising industry itself, hoping to tempt viewers with new advertising forms more entertaining and less annoying than the traditional commercial. But before we give up the term, I think we need to consider terminology that emphasizes that whatever these televisual forms are, they are *also* “advertising”: they are forms of content designed to convince you to buy something. “Branded content” perhaps sounds too much like industry jargon; “sponsored content” sounds like the advertiser controls the content when often the advertiser does not; and “content marketing” may be too broad for the purpose here.

I’ll end with a plea that we media studies scholars *not* assume that these new televisual advertising forms always use new strategies in how they convince audiences to buy, but that, as we analyze them, we put them within the context of decades of advertising strategies. Every time I watch another YouTube video of an influencer demonstrating the best way to use a cosmetic or nutritional supplement or exercise device, I can’t help thinking that the 1950s advertising industry’s hope that television would sell products through “demonstration” has finally come to fruition. What is old is sometimes new again.