

The Appeal of the Infomercial

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, global television viewers have been presented with ever-increasing, putatively novel, forms of commercial speech. Such forms include advertorial, programme sponsorship, paid-for ‘considerations’ and infomercials. Typically, scholars have focussed on these forms of commercial speech as part of, or an adjunct to, other, wider, concerns, such as the impact of regulatory change. One result is that the forms themselves are not interrogated as thoroughly as they might be, with the consequence that they (and their component factors) may be assumed, rather than understood. This article remedies this situation by empirically describing the infomercial form and by critically examining the appeal of that form in relation to three main actors in the television ecology: advertisers, broadcasters, and audiences. Specifically, the article builds on data from three sources. First, relevant popular and academic publications have been used to outline the contemporary state of the industry. Second, I draw from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with infomercial and television industry practitioners. These took place in Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand. Third, I conducted four focus groups in Auckland, with two groups of open ages (participants here possibly had some experience viewing public service television) and two groups of adolescents (participants only had experience of the post-1990 highly commercialised television environment).

The term ‘infomercial’ refers to television commercials (usually either two or twenty eight minutes in length) which feature products or services that promise personal transformation. Weight-loss, personal wealth and increasing individual skills and confidence are typical sites of this transformation. Infomercials are also typified by a high energy, over-the-top persuasive language, repetition of key phrases (such as ‘But Wait! There’s More!’), and relatively low-end production values. They also occupy timeslots that are otherwise uneconomic for television networks, that is, those times in the schedule where mainstream advertisers do not place commercials because the audiences are too small to be usefully measured. In practice, such timeslots on free-to-air television are late at night, early weekday mornings, and during the weekend.

The political economy of the infomercial

Presence in non-prime time timeslots suggests it is central to understanding the importance of the infomercial in a political-economic sense. Normally, commercial television is understood as providing viewers with programming (or editorial content) that is interrupted by commercials (advertising content) (Balasubramanian, 1994:35). From a critical perspective, it is obvious here that programming is being used by broadcasters to attract viewers who will (hopefully) pay sufficient attention to the commercials to purchase (or at least recall) the products and services advertised (Smythe, 1981: 89; Lealand, 1997). This vantage point allows researchers to characterise the dominant interaction between advertisers, broadcasters and audiences as one where television viewers devote their time and effort to programming that rates highly enough for businesses to conceive of the viewers as sufficiently numerous and affluent to afford their products. This occurs within a standard commercial television system, whereby broadcasters sell audiences to advertisers such that those audiences can be broken into discrete demographic and psychographic units.

This general account does not fit the case of the infomercial. As I will outline, broadcasters only schedule infomercials in timeslots where ‘traditional’ television commercials are not viable. Simply put, the audience watching is not large enough to be measured through ratings data. The timeslots can still be valuable for the broadcaster however; they can be packaged and on-sold to marketing companies at relatively cheap rates (Blumenthal and Goodenough, 1998: 277). In broad terms, viewers will watch infomercials if they can conceive of the product advertised as interesting and relevant (Hallberg, 1995: 277). Given that the timeslots are typically late at night, weekday mornings and weekends, it might also be the case that television viewers at these times are primarily motivated to watch “something” and they may not deliberately choose to consume an infomercial. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that viewers regard infomercials so negatively that they will choose to turn off their televisions. For whatever reasons they may have individually, it seems most viewers are content to watch an infomercial if it is the only option available (Hallberg, 1995: 217).

There is insufficient space here to offer a textual reading or critical analysis of the infomercial as a form of television. The critical characteristic of the infomercial can, however, be extrapolated from its difference to “normal” commercial television. As I have argued previously:

in an intensification of standard commercial formats, the entertainment within the ‘program’ acts as the hook for the advertising message of that same program. This is the ‘infomercial model of communication’—editorial and advertising are unified into parts of a whole which serves commercial ends. By conflating editorial and advertising together for commercial ends, infomercials not only remove the barrier separating commercial and non-commercial content, they recast information as a commodity like any other (Johnson, 2013: 43).

Further, infomercials are different to other forms of sponsored content on television, precisely because they present all information as potentially commercial. Unlike a sponsored programme (where it is relatively simple to determine that an advertiser has paid to be associated with the programme content) or product placement (where the presence of logos and brand names forms part of the cultural normality of the narrative), an infomercial presents the viewer with a media text where there is no separation between editorial and advertising content (Parsons and Rotfeld, 1990: 63).

By using the preceding insight as the basis for analysing the infomercial as a form of commercial television, then, it is possible to identify the position of each of the three main groups: advertisers,

broadcasters and audiences. From an advertiser's point of view, an infomercial offers a more intensive and controlled method to interact with potential customers. Here there are two vital factors: increasing credit card use and the technological capacity to use multiple telephone numbers and establish a call centre. Credit cards enable infomercial marketing companies to streamline and rationalise their business. Telephone technology needs to be sufficiently complex to allow a variety of distinct numbers to be used in specific infomercials (or commercials) and to allow for a call centre to be established. Over the 1990s, New Zealanders increasingly favoured credit-based consumption patterns (Kearns et al, 2001:191). With respect to call centres, increasing computer use (and decreasing costs) in the early 1990s meant that marketing departments were able to perform database and call centre operations in-house. This forced external companies to offer consultancy services instead of controlling the entire operation themselves (Marketing Magazine, 1993: 50). In Europe, this meant that by 1995 a single company could operate a multi-national free phone number, with multi-lingual call centre staff (Marketing Magazine, 1995b: 53). That same year a New Zealand company – VisionNet – launched with promises that technological advances would allow over 10,000 calls per hour to be processed (Marketing Magazine, 1995a: 59). Crucially, they were directly targeting the DRTV business (McVey, 1995: 57). Choosing to use in-house call centres was standard in the infomercial industry and was directly related to sales. In December 1995 the major international home shopping network QVC tripled the size of its call centre as a result of increasing orders (Marketing Magazine, 1995c: 48). In terms of technology, call centres were seen as a prime opportunity for telecommunications companies to attract lucrative business contracts (Miller, 1996: 35), and by October 1996 Telecom (the monopoly provider in New Zealand) was promoting its ability to offer 'computer telephony integration' to businesses searching to lower overheads and increase customer satisfaction (Harrison, 1996: 46).

From a broadcaster's point of view, the infomercial offers an opportunity to gain revenue in timeslots that are otherwise uneconomic. In fact, the overwhelming majority of broadcasters freely admit that the attraction of the infomercial is the additional revenue they offer (Wicks, 1997: 35). There is, however, surprisingly little academic research on the broadcaster / infomercial dynamic, perhaps because of its obviously commercial nature. From a critical perspective, nonetheless, it is important to note that broadcasters choose to populate uneconomic timeslots with infomercials. In New Zealand this is particularly important because of the resolutely money-making function of broadcasting. Simply put, the option of donating these timeslots to education, community, religious or charitable groups is not possible because of the need to maximise revenue [1].

From an audience member's point of view, there is evidence that viewers who are relatively brand-conscious are more likely to purchase from an infomercial (Donthu and Gilliland, 1996: 74), and that scepticism about product quality does not necessarily obviate against a purchase (Speck et al, 1997: 59). Not surprisingly, viewers from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to purchase from an infomercial (Agee and Martin, 2001: 36). Here, it might be useful to speculate that for such viewers the infomercial offers a way to access products that might not otherwise be available to them. Similarly, audience members can, it seems, use the infomercial as a substitute for "direct experience"; the demonstrations and repetition of the persuasive message can convince some viewers to try the featured product (Singh et al, 2002: 63).

The high point of the infomercial's success was the 1990s, when the combination of broadcasting deregulation, computer-based technology and relatively easy credit allowed viewers heretofore unrivalled access to direct selling via their television screens. Not surprisingly, one major issue became obvious almost co-terminously with the introduction of the infomercial: the potentially

deceptive nature of its communication with viewers. In short, there was a significant concern that infomercial marketers could mislead or even scam viewers, in no small part by combining the combination of the extreme enthusiasm of the participants with the fantastic benefits the products could putatively bring. In some jurisdictions, this concern reached the level of a public enquiry (see Wilson et al 2002).

By the end of the 1990s, however, a range of factors had led the infomercial to be less visible and less effective. Although there is a range of factors that caused this so-called ‘decline’ of the infomercial format, the most important for my purposes is that the initial hype surrounding infomercial marketing had eased to the point where it became just another tool that could be deployed across or within a broader communication / persuasion strategy (rather than a novel, particularly profitable development). The result was that a more dispassionate assessment could be made of the infomercial’s place within marketing, on television, and in our culture. One consequence of this was the reconsideration of the infomercial by academic researchers.

The most obvious component of this reconsideration was the acceptance that there were products (or product ranges) that were particularly suitable to the infomercial format, not least because their unique selling proposition (USP) required a considerable amount of ‘information’ (Witepski 2006). Similarly, as Pitcher (2006) and Dimofte et al (2012) note, particular textual aspects of the infomercial, most obviously the preoccupation with exaggerations of personality and efficacy, allow for variegated responses from those who participate and / or view. It is simply not the case that every communicative interaction with an infomercial is an exploitative one. In fact, even official organs of the state began to see infomercials as a way to ‘explain’ their actions and desires to group of people they might not have ordinarily interacted with. Here, the role of the infomercial to build a product or service’s perceived value was seen as paramount (see Lucock and Woodford, 2013). In recent years, infomercials have also been adapted as a teaching and learning tool within higher education settings. This could be as simple as using the infomercial model as an exemplar to teach marketing (Brodowsky and Belch, 2006; Matveev and Milter, 2010), a way to remind public speakers to relentlessly focus on their audience’s (perceived) needs (Lane, 2009; Larotta, 2016) or as a site through which logical fallacies can be unpicked (Marietta-Brown, 2011).

Similarly, with the increase in co-creative education methods (where students engage with kinaesthetic learning), the infomercial has been a productive area of development. Students can develop their own versions of infomercials for typical marketing projects (MacDonald 2012) or they can take the infomercial as a conceptual base for developing artworks that interrogate the mundanity and pointlessness of the personal brand (Workman 2015). Instructors have not been slow to use student creations as a way of critiquing others’ infomercials in order to deeply learn underlying theoretical concepts (Lee and Hoffman 2015). They have also found that infomercials can form the basis of other forms of content creation (such as interactive games) where persuasive and apparently informative elements can be deployed as the basis for developing particular kinds of game-based learning (Bodnar and Clark, 2017).

Within the marketing discipline, scholars have pointed to the way(s) in which infomercials prefigured developments like native advertising (Taylor, 2017) and the ever-intensifying reification of the personal brand (Vesey, 2016). However, the most interesting – and potentially fruitful – critical reinterrogation of the infomercial concerns its relationship to ‘fake news’. Here, the infomercial’s construction and manipulation of truthiness (by selectively defining a problem and its commodified solution) is seen as a clear forerunner of contemporary battles over journalistic content and integrity (Kwon et al, 2016). Further, the significance accorded personal stories of self-transformation can be

in part explained by the infomercial's use of ritual devices to portray the move from failure to success as commodity-centred (Glick, 2016) and the role of the 'winner' (as hero) can be deployed to inspire viewers to believe what they are told, rather than what might be objectively correct (Beggan, 2016).

Returning to the infomercial as a form of television

Nevertheless, the research considered thus far does not account for the underlying appeal of the infomercial format in itself. The purpose of this article is to return to the original television infomercial format and empirically investigate its appeal for each of the three main players in the commercial television ecology. It is something of a truism to observe that the main appeal of the infomercial is economic: advertisers can gain a high degree of control for a relatively low investment; broadcasters can generate revenue from otherwise unprofitable timeslots; and audiences can purchase affordable, putatively attractive products. However, there are other, less obvious, areas where infomercials are attractive. Advertisers can use infomercials to cut through an otherwise cluttered post-modern mediascape – infomercials remain markedly less sophisticated and require significantly less cultural capital to be understood. Broadcasters can use them to encourage new clients to advertise on television. Smaller or community-based businesses can benefit from producing their own narrative within a promotional context, particularly if their products or services can be demonstrated 'as live'. And audiences can mobilise meanings where the infomercial as a televisual text references questions of class, cultural capital and self-identity. However, aside from these examples, economics is the most obvious area to begin an investigation into the appeal of the infomercial.

Advertisers

For an advertiser, the most basic attraction of the infomercial is the cost of advertising time. Although there is little material available publicly [2], it is possible to estimate the cost of an infomercial timeslot. In the 1990s Prestige Marketing was by far the most dominant infomercial marketing company in New Zealand and industry insiders consider that in 1996 and 1997 Prestige held approximately eighty-five per cent of total infomercial bookings (New Zealand Direct Marketing Association (NZDMA) spokesperson 2015 pers. comm., 10 November). It is therefore possible to use figures derived from the *New Zealand Listener* schedules to determine the cost of infomercial time. Prestige Marketing spent NZ\$5,276,266 on television advertising time in 1995 (AdMedia, 1996: 20), NZ\$8,930,766 in 1996 (AdMedia, 1997: 45), and NZ\$9,767,037 in 1997 (AdMedia, 1998: 58).

The average cost of infomercial hours can be calculated by taking 0.85 of the total infomercial booking time and using that figure to divide the annual figure for Prestige 'adspend'. Table 1 below shows the calculations for 1995, 1996 and 1997 [3].

Table 1: Cost per infomercial hour 1995-1997

Year	Total Infomercial Hours	Prestige Marketing Proportion (85%)	Prestige Marketing Annual Adspend	Cost per Infomercial Hour
1995	1997	1697.45	\$5,276,266	\$3108.35
1996	3322	2823.7	\$8,930,766	\$3162.79
1997	3975	3378.75	\$9,767,037	\$2890.72

The cost advantages over thirty second spot advertisements, slots for which can each cost over NZ\$10,000 (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September), is even greater when the cost of the infomercial itself is considered. Most imported infomercials became available as part of a general license and local infomercials could be produced for under NZ\$5000 (Infomercial company marketing manager 2015, pers. comm., 17 November).

Infomercials also appeal to an advertiser because, like all forms of direct marketing, they allow her to “cut out the middle man” (NZDMA spokesperson 2015 pers. comm., 10 November) and control her product sourcing. Like the American infomercial industry, New Zealand companies brokered supply deals in low-wage countries (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September). Of course, New Zealand infomercial marketing companies could also access pre-existing supply deals as part of their licenses with American firms. In this way a significant proportion of their product-sourcing was accomplished by parent companies or co-partners.

An infomercial marketer also benefits from the remarkable speed with which she can determine whether her campaign will be successful: “we knew which channel, which time zone, down to the last five minutes, where the phone calls were coming from, from which advertisement” (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September). Two New Zealand infomercial marketers (who were employed by different companies) believed three airings were sufficient to determine success (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September; Infomercial company marketing manager 2015, pers. comm., 17 November). Response speed allows for control to a degree that is unheard of with traditional television advertising:

It would be fair to say that, if you see something in direct response and you see it a lot, then it’s working and that means someone, somewhere is monitoring it, which you don’t get in advertising (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September).

In turn, this control means that infomercial marketers can plausibly argue that they have a high degree of sensitivity to the ‘market’. They also argue that the most obvious appeal of the infomercial is the product itself because it can be framed highly individualistically:

It was always very me-orientated products. I want to look better, I want to be slimmer, I want to be brainier, I want to do this (Infomercial company marketing executive 2015, pers. comm., 18 October).

Obviously the ‘solution’ offered by an infomercial is commodified (in terms of the product advertised) and packaged in particularly emotive terms:

We were selling hope (...) It was definitely – “You’ll be prettier, smarter, fitter, thinner” (Infomercial company marketing executive 2015, pers. comm., 18 October)

These remarks clearly relate the infomercial to the themes of ideology and its transmission through advertising. It also shows how infomercial marketers could position themselves advantageously by, for instance, generating ongoing ‘relationships’ with customers (because the company is identified as the repository of ‘hope’ or the access to it). Clearly, this is motivated by economics: customers who buy for emotional reasons are seen to be more likely to commit to substantial purchases (of, arguably, unnecessary items).

The infomercial also appeals to advertisers because of the peculiarities of its production, which is normally handled in-house. Generally, infomercial marketing companies think of the infomercial as a marketing tool rather than in terms of aesthetics (Infomercial company video editor 2015, pers.

comm., 23 September). Accordingly, infomercial marketing companies can operate with lower fixed costs (most obviously wages) than the more 'creative' mainstream advertising agency or media sales business. This can be framed positively. For instance, infomercial marketing companies would not typically view themselves or their work as pretentious: as one industry insider said when asked to define what his company did, "I was trying to get money out of people by selling them stuff" (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September). It is extremely doubtful that a mainstream advertising company would conceptualise its business in such straightforward terms.

Infomercial production also encompasses re-versioning overseas infomercials and commercials, which entails substantially less risk than developing product locally. First, overseas-sourced infomercials cost less "because you didn't have to shoot them" (Infomercial company video editor 2015, pers. comm., 23 September). Second, New Zealand marketers selected from a sample that had previously been tested overseas (and obviously, they would choose successful examples). In practice, approximately one per cent of the new products marketed via infomercials and DRTV commercials was local (Infomercial company product manager 2015, pers. comm., 24 September). And being local was no guarantee of success; one company that marketed via infomercials throughout the 1990s only had one success with a local product (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September). Part of the in-house production system involved conducting telesales internally. In the USA call centres are generally external to the infomercial firm and service more than one client from a range of different sectors of the economy. American customers are therefore subjected to very strict script-based selling, to which telesales staff must adhere in order to cover all the benefits of the product or service. By contrast, New Zealand call centres operate in a comparatively relaxed manner:

We didn't have pre-programmed scripts because the operators knew the products. Therefore, if Mrs. Smith asks a question, they don't have to look down the script to find the question. Yes, they were told how to answer the phone and how to prompt for the upsell and how to ask for the credit card number but they weren't hard and fast scripts like the US system (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September).

Technology was also used to increase the spontaneity of the telesales experience (for both customers and staff). Specific computer programmes allowed telesales staff to link immediately to information that would elicit 'natural' responses to customer enquiries without the need for scripts at all (Infomercial company product manager 2015, pers. comm., 24 September). This relaxed, friendly approach was vital in generating significant databases to be used for future sales. One infomercial company had approximately 400,000 people on its main database (Infomercial company marketing manager 2015, pers. comm., 8 November).

However, the most important area where in-house production appealed to infomercial marketing companies was post-production. Although in-house facilities are not necessary for infomercial production, the cost advantages are significant, especially considering the similarity of many infomercials:

They make many, many different versions of the same commercial to all intents and purposes. To do that outside at a facility would be exceedingly expensive, whereas in-house it would cost nothing (Television industry consultant 2015, pers. comm., 29 September).

As with the call centres, the key here was the advent of computer-based technology which became available (and cost-effective) in New Zealand in the early 1990s:

It's the computer per se – simply the cost of computer-editing is so much lower than tape-based editing. You are literally talking ten percent of the cost (Television industry consultant 2015, pers. comm., 29 September).

Importantly, this did not always provide the best quality television. Unsurprisingly, infomercial marketing companies tended to purchase equipment at the cheaper end of the scale. This, coupled, with time pressures, had a variety of consequences:

We had poor broadcast equipment, so that's obviously going to drop your quality down significantly. We would have to re-edit commercials or infomercials from masters that we'd already made, and so they'd already been compressed twenty to one the first time through to Beta SP and then we'd have to back off that tape again and the quality was severely diminished but the broadcaster really didn't care because it was a clever enough codec that it kind of held its colour even if it was getting softer and we were paying them masses of money for time they couldn't use otherwise and what did they care? (Infomercial company video editor 2015, pers. comm., 23 September)

Here it is interesting to note the cynicism exhibited. As detailed previously, working on infomercials would not offer video editors much artistic satisfaction; the formulaic nature of the infomercial and the stress on flexibility militate against any real job satisfaction. None of this is to argue that such developments are unique to the infomercial industry. It is clear that a variety of producers of television (of various kinds) operate digital systems at the least possible cost and that this is largely driven by the technology itself (Television industry consultant 2015, pers. comm., 29 September).

The other major area where infomercial advertisers need to accept less than ideal conditions can best be summarised as 'branding'. Broadly speaking, the traditional marketing focus on 'the brand' is devalued by infomercial marketers. This was observed by Paul Meier, the majority owner and CEO of Prestige Marketing, in regard to mainstream advertising agencies:

Their ideas of how to market products and mine are completely different. They are very much into branding, not direct response marketing. We want an immediate return from a low-cost ad. If we went to them and said we wanted to launch a product like Natural Glow, they would say it would cost \$5 million (quoted in Ninness, 1996: D3).

However, this presents an immediate problem – in a mediascape where most (if not all) other commercial speech is focussed on 'the brand', infomercials and infomercial marketers cannot remove themselves entirely from the need to promote their own image. At times, this was particularly problematic:

'Sell the product, not the brand' (...) I could see the merit in it but I didn't agree with it because I felt that when you've spent a lot of money to get this thing and it comes to you in a scungy cardboard box and you open it up and (...) you pull out the actual product that yeah, you bought – see to me, the experience of buying – you had the opportunity to get a double hit; the fun of buying, then the fun of receiving the package, the fun of you know (...) and all of that was taken away from our purchasers, (...) all that fun over and over again and then if you branded it properly, you could have then lined it to the line extension and it could have been a wonderful thing (...) Because you've got to have quality, you've got to give people quality for what they pay for (...) the consumers aren't stupid, they're not stupid (Infomercial company marketing manager 2015, pers. comm., 8 November).

Here, it is clear that the low-cost appeal of the infomercial can be taken too far. The tension between the need to maximise revenue (by keeping costs low) and the requirement to project a reasonable image of the company and its products (through the “brand image”, whether intentionally constructed or not) is perhaps irreconcilable. Certainly, if the main appeal of the infomercial is cost-related, advertisers would be reluctant to devote too many resources to anything that does not directly and immediately affect sales.

Nonetheless, the ‘brand image’ of the infomercial business can prove advantageous for infomercial advertisers. One obvious feature of the infomercial as a text is its relatively unsophisticated, simple message. And presenting an unsophisticated, simple message projects an image about branding which is both nostalgic and inclusive. Infomercials completely marginalise the need to have sufficient cultural capital to get the irony or the image-based appeal of, for instance, a commercial for Nike. Some infomercial advertisers saw how this could work to their advantage:

At the end of the day people are quite basic and if they don’t get it the first time then they’re never going to get it and it just annoys them, so with an infomercial it has the potential to be captivating – the fact that you’re teaching somebody about a product that they wouldn’t have already known – and you’re thinking ‘Oh okay, well I can see the value in that.’ Whereas you see these fantastic images and random, bizarre things you go “Well, what’s that got to do with me?” You don’t see the personal connection (Infomercial company marketing executive 2015, pers. comm., 18 October).

Aside from judgements about the infomercial audience, the key point here is the perceived need to make a ‘connection’. Notwithstanding the problems traditional branding has for infomercial advertisers, there is a clear (if sometimes unheralded) opportunity to develop a strong brand image that can promote sales. Of course, such an image has potential disadvantages, not the least of which is opportunities for parody.

Overall, although the major appeal of the infomercial for advertisers is economic, the specifics of that appeal are more complicated than the available literature suggests. The received wisdom (infomercials are cheap to produce and advertise cheap products) is broadly true. However, the details of how those dynamics actually develop are significantly more nuanced than most indications allow. This is equally true of the appeal of the infomercial for broadcasters.

Broadcasters

Primarily, broadcasters are interested in infomercials because they offer significant economic advantages over standard programming. Fundamentally, they generate revenue – infomercial marketing companies pay to schedule their shows in times that do not attract spot advertisers (because audiences are too low to be measured) and broadcasters are generally open about this:

It’s a revenue-gaining exercise as opposed to an audience-gaining exercise (MediaWorks spokesperson 2016, pers. comm., 21 January).

You’ll find that in certain dayparts, the decision will be made on commercial return only, as long as it doesn’t denigrate the audience (TVNZ spokesperson 2015, pers. comm., 28 November).

A more sophisticated account would factor in the opportunity costs involved. Infomercials allow programming that would otherwise be unable to generate revenue to be saved for less marginal timeslots where audience sizes are more attractive to spot advertisers:

I know that when I was at TV3 sitting on management, we changed it at that point to go in the mornings to put infomercials on, it was very much just a revenue stream on dead-air time that was costing us money to programme. And so we can take off things that supposedly had an incremental cost to us by playing them, we could put something on that was actually going to pay us some money and we didn't really care about the viewers. And that's probably in a nutshell – probably won't tell you that now – but all it was about; it was about making another dollar (Independent producer 2015, pers. comm., 26 November).

[Infomercials] enabled our network to extract more revenue out of off-peak programming time and it reduced our programming outgoing costs because of the fact that we were actually achieving revenue rather than paying for programming to take up those hours – that time (MediaWorks spokesperson 2016, pers. comm., 21 January).

Of course, it is worth noting that infomercials are also attractive to broadcasters because they require very little time or money to become screen-ready [4].

Naturally, broadcasters are aware that screening infomercials can have negative consequences for audiences:

As a network when we assess infomercials, certainly revenue is the key. Our on-air look is very important and, arguably, some of the infomercials that have been on in the past haven't been particularly strong - the offer or the production may be perhaps a little bit cheesy and a bit of an annoyance to the audience. So we balance the importance of the revenue versus the downside - the overall look of the station (MediaWorks spokesperson 2016, pers. comm., 21 January)

Nonetheless, in New Zealand networks relied substantially on the infomercial for revenue. For MediaWorks, infomercials were closely linked to the status of TV4, on which infomercial hours increased in 1999 (an extra two hours per day) because “the cost of programming [was] too high for the revenue that can be generated in that timeslot” (Marketing Magazine, 1999: 1). Despite this attempt to increase revenue, in 2003 TV4 was rebranded as a music channel – C4. Interestingly, C4 retained infomercials and “other commercial activity” from midnight to 4.00 pm in order to earn revenue while the channel “grew” (AdMedia, 2003:1; Ralston, 2003: 25; Owen, 2003: 23.).

Overall, as one industry insider argued, infomercials have become central to the business of television in New Zealand:

I think if you banned infomercials – made them illegal or whatever – I think you'd harm today's commercial structure of TV stations, especially a channel like MediaWorks (...) a large part of its revenue's based on that model and I don't know that you'd really do the public a service either way (Television industry consultant, 2015, pers. comm., 29 September).

These findings support the data available from the USA where, for instance, the vast majority (97.2 per cent) of stations screened infomercials for the revenue they generated (Wicks, 1997: 35-6).

Another indication of the importance of the infomercial to New Zealand broadcasters is the closeness of the relationship between them and infomercial marketing companies. Typically, unlike spot advertisers, infomercial marketers deal directly with broadcasters' sales and marketing teams (Infomercial company CEO 2015, pers. comm., 19 September). Not only does this reflect the structure of the DRTV industry and its basic economic rationale (vertical integration of the production process), it also allows the broadcaster to be captured by infomercial logics (to some degree) and broadcasters

tend to view the relationship between themselves and their DRTV clients as one of mutual understandings and shared goals (MediaWorks spokesperson 2016, pers. comm., 21 January; TVNZ spokesperson 2015, pers. comm., 28 November). And, of course, networks can organise their business more rationally if it is conducted with ‘transparency’.

This symbiosis is evident in the manner in which TVNZ conceptualises its role with regard to their clients’ evolution. In particular, TVNZ especially extols its success at developing DRTV businesses:

Usually at a different part of their evolution (...) It’s just the nature of the client’s evolution – there’s no rhyme or reason. (...) Clients come to us probably forty percent of the time and because we’re the leading brand in the country and also the leading broadcaster in television that happens by default. Sixty percent of our business comes through us developing categories or targeting particular clients or targeting other media (...) But quite often we’re encouraging the clients to understand their own business and most of them – a percentage of them – don’t have a business plan. A larger percentage don’t have a marketing plan and an even larger percentage don’t have an understanding of where their business fits in the national economy rather than just the local economy. So we end up to be educators, consultants and then we apply our expertise in television (TVNZ spokesperson 2015, pers. comm., 28 November).

Such comments clearly indicate the importance TVNZ places on generating revenue. They also show how infomercial businesses remain legitimate and successful in New Zealand. Infomercials might be functionally separated from “programming” but they are an unremarkable reality within both major networks. This contrasts with most other countries, where the infomercial remains marginalised through regulation and norms within the television industry. Probably the clearest indication that the infomercial is appealing to broadcasters, however, is the degree to which they welcome this situation:

Direct response television is totally different now than what it was five to ten years ago. Five to ten years ago we had a DRTV pack and we encouraged people to get direct responses back on offers or brand awareness or whatever it was. These days, (...) as such we don’t actually – because of the extent of the category – *we don’t measure it any more*. But we tend to measure direct response by success – the indicators the client has for success combined with their television campaign tend to be the measurement that we apply to television (...) Prevalence of direct response is huge now because of the fact that companies have credible websites or have credible helpdesks, or customer service desks so they tend to use 0800 [numbers] or URLs regularly (TVNZ spokesperson 2015, pers. comm., 28 November) [*emphasis added*].

Although broadcasters remain content to outline specific details regarding the DRTV business, they are much less inclined to acknowledge the level of non-standard revenue sources.

Content analysis of the schedules of the *New Zealand Listener* shows that in the ten years between 1994 (when infomercials first began to feature on both networks) and 2003, 20.2 percent of all free-to-air broadcasting on New Zealand television was taken up with infomercials. In this period an average of 8.47 percent of total broadcasting on TVNZ was devoted to infomercials. For MediaWorks the comparable figure was 31.98 percent. The massive difference in these figures reflects the relative ability of each network to attract other, more traditional, forms of advertising. Here, TVNZ was in a much stronger position, which meant that MediaWorks relied more on infomercials.

Overall, therefore, when the infomercial is compared to other forms of broadcasting that share a similar funding philosophy, there was insufficient support from normal sources to fund the number

of hours that networks wanted to broadcast. In this context, and given the availability of ‘ready-made’ broadcasting that earned revenue relatively easily, it is not surprising that networks looked to use infomercials as much as they felt able. As we have seen, however, they were aware of the problems that such broadcasting could pose for audiences.

Audiences

The notion of appeal is problematic when discussing audiences and the infomercial. Apart from a (very) small minority of dedicated enthusiasts, viewers typically deride infomercials or dismiss them out of hand. Nonetheless, when given the opportunity, viewers can develop relatively sophisticated responses to, and appreciations of, the infomercial form. Before detailing these, however, it is necessary to understand how infomercial audiences are perceived by broadcasters, marketers and regulators.

Infomercials were initially trialled by a sceptical broadcaster; MediaWorks appears to have been genuinely surprised by the ‘neutral reaction’ of the audience when infomercials first screened in November 1993 (Brett Kelly, 1994: 32). The network might reasonably have believed that the infomercial would prove unacceptable to New Zealand audiences. There is some evidence of this; for example, in March 2001 TVNZ was forced to rescind its decision to replace overnight screenings of the BBC World Service with infomercials and repeats after significant “public demand” (Waikato Times, 2001: 2). Despite such setbacks, broadcasters chose to prioritise generating revenue wherever possible because they believed infomercials were unavoidable and could be monitored “to make sure there wasn’t a massive backlash” (MediaWorks spokesperson 2016, pers. comm., 21 January).

Infomercial companies generally acknowledge that their business involves manipulation:

I guess it was interesting to see what people responded to – what types of products people responded to – and sometimes the simplest thing really revved people up. And sometimes the best products, the quality products (...) often didn’t go very well because you couldn’t embellish quite so much with them and so people realised ‘Oh okay’ (Infomercial company marketing executive, 2015, pers. comm., 18 October).

However, infomercial companies tend to discount the potential seriousness of embellishing because they believe viewers are motivated by “the greed factor” (Infomercial company marketing manager 2015, pers. comm., 8 November) or because they feel that audiences are composed of sovereign consumers (Infomercial company marketing executive 2015, pers. comm., 18 October). Taken to its logical conclusion, this can lead to a negative positioning of the audience as an object of contempt:

If you’re watching infomercials, you’ve really got to have something better to do with your life. And I think even people who are watching infomercials know that and infomercials sometimes even make jokes about that (Infomercial company video editor 2015, pers. comm., 23 September).

I think for some people – especially in weight loss areas – they’re embarrassed to go to the gym, they know they have to get fit and if they get this product that’s going to promise them a quick fix with very little effort, then they can do it secretly in their homes. At the end of the day, they probably look at it and look at it and look at it and think “Oh, okay, I still actually have to make some effort” (Infomercial company marketing executive 2015, pers. comm., 18 October).

Mainstream advertisers would almost certainly not think of people in this way; they look to identify with, empathise with and ‘speak to’ the viewer as a potential customer. Considering the infomercial audience can provoke empathetic reactions but these are most likely to be expressions of pity rather than ‘fellow feeling’:

I always used to feel that, in our jobs, that I was almost taking advantage of those people that least needed to be taken advantage of (Infomercial company product manager 2015, pers. comm., 16 September).

Here, the ideological position is that although people might be ‘taken advantage of’ in buying the advertised product, it is not necessarily their ‘own fault’. There is a considerable cross-over between the views of infomercial marketing companies and regulators in regard to the shared view that the infomercial audience is primarily constructed in terms of class:

It’s generally lower socio-economic people who aren’t at work probably or housewives who aren’t doing anything and so they have the tele on at the particular times that infomercials are screened (Infomercial company product manager 2015, pers. comm., 16 September).

I think the structure of the ads themselves almost fitted into a demographic, in that it was “But Wait! There’s More!” and “yes, it’s cheaper” and “if you do it now, you’ll get this and this and this and this” so the emphasis was always on the offer rather than on the quality of the product (NZDMA spokesperson 2015 pers. comm., 10 November).

Such sentiments work to discount any need for greater regulation – viewers who can not read the text ‘deserve’ (in some way) to be exploited; they should ‘know better’ than to believe the claims and promises made in the infomercial. Like infomercial marketers, regulators believe that viewers benefit from consumer sovereignty such that advertising or marketing do not need external standards:

It’s viewer choice to watch or to listen to an ad. If the ad in actual fact is delivering them information that adds value to their lives, whether it involves their product or not, is not the concern of an academic, it’s the decision of the viewer (TVNZ spokesperson 2015, pers. comm., 28 November).

Similarly, the potential for infomercials to be identified as advertising and for advertising and editorial to be conflated are not seen as legitimate concerns in New Zealand. Approaches that do warn the viewer are seen to be unnecessary and insulting:

I don’t think they’re giving the consumer credit for their intelligence – this is a personal view, personal philosophy. The more legislators meddle with market-based information, the more they’re going to complicate matters. Marketers want to deliver messages that are going to be seen and received positively by the market. The market is not dumb – there’s always going to be an element that doesn’t understand the difference [between advertising and editorial] but, I mean, you could put six-foot-high notices up and they wouldn’t see the difference, so my view is that the minute you start to meddle in a legislative manner with any communication medium, then you’re – it’s the thin end of the wedge (NZDMA spokesperson 2015 pers. comm., 10 November).

This view reveals the degree to which infomercial audiences are typically positioned as a mechanism through which pre-determined ideological positions are mobilised. To legislate is to ‘meddle’; broadcasting should be ‘free’ for commercial norms to operate unhindered. Overall, therefore,

perceptions of the infomercial audience in New Zealand cannot be divorced from the general positioning of the television audience (as purchasers within a commercial broadcasting system). However, this does not mean that critical interpretations of the infomercial (and its influences) are unknown:

We are more and more living in a society that lives on credit, which people are seeing more and more almost as a magazine subscription – if they’ve paid something off, that means they can buy something else. And infomercials – the products they sell – are often, let’s say, at best middle of the road quality sold at the higher end of the price range, made apparently affordable by avoiding the true cost of it and focussing on the monthly payments (...) Basically, we don’t have a class system now, we have an income system now, and that’s the debt cycle that the average middle class person is in – buying the trinkets that they get tempted with. I have that problem with television full stop; it’s used to peddle gear all the time and infomercials are the worst at that (Television industry consultant 2015, pers. comm., 29 September)

Ultimately, however, this view is counter-hegemonic within New Zealand. The position of advertising as a normal part of the television system is especially ingrained; even viewers are unlikely to argue for their removal. This is probably a result of the remarkable degree to which advertising can be perceived as vital and beneficial. When asked if New Zealand could “have television without advertising”, members of one focus group replied:

BRIANNA you need it to, like, fund television

CIARA that’s the purpose of television

BRIANNA to fund it

(Focus Group B 2016, 11 December)

These young people were all under twenty years old and so had no experience of a television system that was not hyper-commercial. Identifying commercial speech as ‘the purpose’ of television is nonetheless striking because it explicitly disallows any public service alternative. Older viewers who had experienced a more mixed broadcasting system also recognised the economic importance of advertising, but this was likely to be expressed in a more nuanced manner:

IMOGEN I think if you tried to have television without adverts, can you imagine what your costs would be

MATT yeah

IMOGEN to fund it?

MATT yeah

IMOGEN I mean, really, in all fairness they’re paying, almost, for us to watch

(Focus Group C 2016, 17 December)

Given these comments, it is clear that the infomercial model of communication – advertising and editorial unified to serve commercial ends – would not necessarily be unacceptable in itself.

Probably the most important issue when considering the general appeal of the infomercial for audiences is that it although can be critiqued, viewers remain able to identify areas of appeal:

THOM That ad might make an impact younger people than we are

OLIVIA that's right

VERONICA I'm interested

THOM particularly if they

VERONICA I'm interested in that!

THOM are you?

VERONICA yeah

All [laughter]

QUEENIE It's annoying the way it keeps repeating and repeating things over and the way they smile [pushes chest out]

All [laughter]

VERONICA but then you wouldn't advertise something with a sour face would you?

QUEENIE But it's very cunning because they leave the amount of money that you'll spend til last so you have to hang in there and watch

VERONICA til the end

QUEENIEmore and more til you see how much it costs

ROXANNE I still think they should be more realistic though, like, they should have people saying "It was hard work but the results were worth it in the end – I feel better!"

QUEENIE Yeah

ROXANNE Instead of just showing incredible, unachievable "results may vary".

QUEENIE They make it look very easy

ROXANNE it's not

QUEENIE it's not easy

ROXANNE it's not easy

PETER it's dishonest advertising really, to a certain degree

(Focus Group D 2016, 18 December)

The key point here is that no participant rejected the infomercial and its modes of address and persuasion despite their analysis of its constituent parts. Even the most outspoken view – ‘it’s dishonest’ – is qualified. Similarly, specific criticisms are framed as suggestions (the infomercial can be ‘improved’) rather than as a rejection.

Infomercials appear to be a programme (of some description), as the structure requires an in-built dissimulation regarding the true – that is, commercial – nature of the broadcast. Such distinctions are not immediately apparent to viewers and initial reactions often tended to define the infomercial as a form of programming:

GEORGIA I think it’s a programme (...) like, it talks – it’s not as boring as normal ads

ELIZABETH I guess you could say it’s like a documentary

DOMINIQUE It’s like an advertising programme

(Focus Group B 2016, 11 December)

Older viewers also defined the infomercial relationally, although their level of critique is usually more apparent:

ROXANNE They are like little movies; they’re like little sci-fi movies. If you watch them they just get more ludicrous and ludicrous.

All [laughter]

(Focus Group D 2016, 8 December)

Despite the differences here between the reactions of younger and older viewers, neither group defines the infomercial in relation to advertising. When asked how they might distinguish infomercials from advertising, one group responded by citing specific features:

CIARA There’s a number at the bottom of the screen

FLEUR I don’t know, you can just tell because it’s always got a voice in it, like

ELIZABETH and it’s the way they talk – you know they’re not going to finish quickly or anything

FLEUR yeah, and it’s, like, focussed on the product like hard out

(Focus Group B 2016, 11 December)

Of course, this does not necessarily indicate that these viewers would prefer infomercials over normal advertising only that they do not necessarily see infomercials as simply *another* form of advertising. Viewer attempts to define the infomercial form can, however, illustrate areas of its appeal. The most important point here is that the infomercial marketers claim that audiences enjoy watching products being demonstrated can be supported by viewer reactions:

JANE It was almost like a television programme

HANNAH Yeah

JANE The whole thing, just like

HANNAH Went on and on

JANE programme, about one little thing.

LYNDA At least on
some of the other ones, like, they show what you can do

KELLY Yeah

LYNDA I
remember a really cool slicer/dicer thing

KELLY Oh

LYNDA And it

KELLY Oh my God
– I saw that

LYNDA And you twist it and it does all this stuff

(Focus Group A 2016 3 December)

Here, audience members have sufficient knowledge (and confidence in the knowledge of others) to explicitly talk of the appeal of a previously advertised product almost as if they were discussing a previously screened programme.

Infomercials also appeal to viewers because they feature celebrities. Obviously, this has clear links to the process of value transfer that can occur within any form of advertising [5] (see Corner, 1995: 119). Audience reactions to the infomercial text, however, reveal that this process can have a particular dynamic in New Zealand:

JOHANNA It's too much American – there's nothing there that you can actually check up on. They're using movie stars and everything that's targeting insecure people and the thing is, it shouldn't be on TV here. We shouldn't be having so much Americanised stuff on the TV

(Focus Group C 2016, 17 December)

THOM Most of those people performing were obviously models, they didn't have stretchmarks or anything like what we have, we're just ordinary

All [laughter]

ROXANNE And American stars – they’re assuming we’re all into idol worship and perhaps New Zealander’s aren’t. Maybe they should have New Zealanders on and not American movie stars (Focus Group D 2016, 18 December)

Again, the interesting point is that the infomercial is not rejected as a result of this difference but that suggestions are made where it might be ‘improved’.

In addition to this general dynamic, younger viewers also react to individual celebrities:

JANE Okay, has anyone heard of that Daisy whoever or other girl?

MICHAEL Yeah,
didn’t she

KELLY Yeah

NERIDA America’s Funniest Home Videos

OLIVE So-called

LYNDA Daisy Fuentes

KELLY Yeah – so-called celebrity

LYNDA And “I wasn’t born with a perfect body”

OLIVE Yeah

LYNDA Yes you were – it was surgically changed okay

JANE You wouldn’t be a
supermodel or an actress if you weren’t born with a perfect body.

OLIVE Exactly

JANE How stupid do you think we are?

(Focus Group A 2016 3 December)

Here, viewers can gain personal and social benefits from deconstructing and criticising the text. However, this interaction also points to the most important aspect of audience reaction to the infomercial text – credibility. To understand the relationship between credibility and the appeal of the infomercial it is crucial to recognise that a lack of credibility does not necessarily detract from an infomercial’s appeal. For instance, viewers can point to their own sophistication in seeing through the text:

OLIVIA Your video will be picking up body language and facial expressions throughout all that I’m sure

All [laughter]

Moderator What kinds?

OLIVIA and fidgeting

Moderator Yes, what kinds of expressions do you think?

OLIVIA ooh, I don't know

TH cynical

All [laughter]

(Focus Group D 2016, 18 December)

Unsurprisingly, seeing through the infomercial can also lead to a rejection of some of the artifice of the text:

IMOGEN It's a con, a big con

JOHANNA it's a scam because they promise you all these things, they promise and promise – it's like “we're gonna give you a lot” then at the end “and you'll get this for nothing” and “we're not gonna charge you this price, or this price, it'll be this price!”

(Focus Group D 2016, 17 December)

HANNAH In her, like, class where it was supposedly real-life, all the people were thin

KELLY All of them

HANNAH You didn't see any fat people doing it

JANE It's cause fat people couldn't do it

MICHAEL Cause it'd be like [struggles to lift his leg with his hands]

All [laughter]

(Focus Group A 2016 3 December)

Given these sentiments, the appeal of the infomercial could be seen as limited. However, audience members can offset this by applying the infomercial to others:

KATHRYN I know a person that is quite large and very desperate to lose weight and she watches them shows and she sends away for everything you know, because she's so desperate to lose weight and it's really sad because you know that it's a con and it's not going to help her at all and you know she's just

MATT that's the kind of people they're relying on to make their money

KATHRYN that's right – that's what I mean

MATT it's horrible

KATHRYN but
 this particular person is glued and it does pull her in, whereas I watch it and I'm bored
 and already looking out the window

(Focus Group C 2016, 17 December)

Interestingly, younger viewers (who might be assumed to have a high degree of media literacy) showed awareness of the impact of the research process on their views:

ELIZABETH I think that most people just take it because it's there and they tell you
 this and you don't think about it that much – too deeply in thought

DOMINIQUE Yeah

ELIZABETH it's like you don't – pretty much – go back to your
 friends and say “what did you think of that?” like we're doing now

(Focus Group B 2016, 11 December)

This last comment is especially perceptive. Infomercials are usually broadcast in timeslots (most notably overnight and in the early morning) when viewers are thought to be less critical of the message they receive. But even if this factor were discounted completely, reluctance to admit to watching infomercials would militate against in depth discussion. The main reason for this is the general public's perception of the low-end values assigned to infomercials (in terms of cultural capital).

As discussed previously, marketers believe one of the appeals of the infomercial is its lack of sophistication compared to branded advertising. Interestingly, audience reactions can support this view:

JOHANNA There's one ad – I can't even remember what it is now – that makes no
 sense, I have no idea what it means or anything and yet, that one might, I might say to
 someone – like my son or someone – “Do you know what it means?” and he goes “Nah”
 – “You don't even know what the ad means?”

IMOGEN I don't think anybody
 watching an advertisement wants to be challenged. You want to watch it, if you enjoy
 it, you'll watch it more (...) maybe buy the product. But I don't think people want to be
 really challenged watching an advert – to try and factor, try and fathom out what this
 man was thinking

(Focus Group C 2016, 17 December)

Clearly, this can be related to Bourdieu's (2000) concept of distinction. Viewers can use the infomercial as a marker of their own tastes and, by extension, their social class position. Importantly, this can be a major appeal of the infomercial, which typically has few pretensions to 'really challenge' its audience. Infomercial marketers would also argue and cultivate the view that they connect with their audience in ways that mainstream advertisers do not.

However, comparisons between the infomercial and spot advertising made by infomercial audiences are not expressions of taste and cultural capital. Rather, such expressions are connected to the camp aesthetic. When asked if the infomercial excerpt reminded the group of 'anything else on television' one participant replied:

PETER It does, it does, what's that one ... *Days of our Lives* – all the plastic people, like them

All [general agreement]

PETER that's what they're like. And you wouldn't get on a programme unless you looked like one of them [on the infomercial]. I wouldn't do those exercises myself because if I ended up looking like them I'd be in trouble wouldn't I?

QUEENIE Yeah, it's nice that you don't aspire to that!

All [laughter]

(Focus Group D 2016, 18 December)

Here, there is an obvious linking of the infomercial to a particular lifestyle that is “of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag, 1964: 2). This lifestyle is framed with reference to another televisual text (indeed, a programme) but the correlation between infomercials and plasticity is clear. Infomercials are, nonetheless, enjoyable. Not only does this indicate why they are especially susceptible to parody, it also demonstrates a key appeal of the infomercial for audiences who have no intention of buying the product advertised. This appeal is one possible reason for the general lack of resistance to the structural impact of the infomercial within television.

One major consequence of the infomercial is a tendency to accept attempts to conflate advertising and editorial content in normal television. Such attempts are readily identifiable but viewers can feel powerless because of the relatively seamless integration of commercial messages into the programme:

LUCY If you want to watch a programme [that conflates advertising and editorial], it does it subtly and you have no choice

(Focus Group C 2016, 17 December)

Again, this demonstrates the general lack of external normative reference points available to New Zealand viewers. This might be a reflection of the low levels of local content on New Zealand television – if people wanted to watch certain local forms of local programming (and / or local programming at certain times), hyper-commercial forms that conflated advertising and editorial were often their only practical option. As with the infomercial itself, such developments were more likely to be acceptable (and indeed preferred) by younger viewers. When asked specifically about their responses to commercial messages within programming, one group responded with enthusiasm:

ELIZABETH I'd prefer it if it was subtly into the programmes. Like, I don't really notice the advertising because I'm so wrapped up in the programme but with the ads it's like right in my face.

Moderator So why do you prefer it that way?

ELIZABETH So I don't have to notice it so much – like it's subconscious

DOMINIQUE Yeah, you can trust the people

- ELIZABETH not, “Oh, get that”
- BRIANNA you can see it so it works
- ELIZABETH yeah
- FLEUR Yeah, when it’s in the programme – say it’s like a vase or something – and they’ll buy it and they’ll put it in their house and stuff and it’s not like an infomercial so you can kind of actually trust it, like they’re actually doing it

(Focus Group B 2016, 11 December)

The point to note here is that these younger viewers’ expectations of broadcasting allow programming and advertising to be functionally inter-linked.

Overall, despite these findings, it remains true that the infomercial appeals to some viewers because they can buy (novel) cheap products. My research has deliberately not focussed on these people and, instead, concentrated on the meanings made by other viewers who would be expected to make up the bulk of the audience [6]. Here, the picture is relatively straightforward – viewers mobilise a range of meanings around the infomercial as a form of television. However, this supports the general thrust of my research – infomercials need to be understood as part of television.

Discussion

As with any form of broadcasting, the appeal of the infomercial is largely a matter of context. Advertisers, broadcasters and viewers think of and relate to the infomercial text and its commercial message depending upon their particular role within the wider broadcasting system and, in general, these perceptions and reactions are in keeping with the expectations derived from the existing literature (and from common sense). Advertisers are drawn to the infomercial because in certain circumstances the format offers significant advantages over spot advertising. Broadcasters primarily look to the revenue that screening infomercials can bring. Audiences sometimes respond to the persuasive message but can mobilise the infomercial as a cultural marker even if they do not purchase the product.

When taken further, however, the combination of these factors speaks to a more interesting, and insidious, appeal of the infomercial. If the infomercial format at its heart conflates informational, persuasive and rhetorical content for the purpose of relentless promotion, this underlying communicative form can be adapted and mutated to new, and previously unaffected, areas. Focus group participants in this study were – to a greater or lesser degree – welcoming of an approach that provided them with product information, even when they acknowledged that information could and would be skewed by the producer’s financial interest in sales. In other words, they were willing and able to discount their own interest in receiving neutral or balanced information if they received the benefit of apparently useful material that had value within their personal and socio-cultural lives.

This article has also shown how the preconditions for this audience acceptance, and even welcoming, of the infomercial form are economic. Once the media environment allows, or even encourages, hyper commercial speech to permeate its messages, previously separated (and separable) concepts like ‘information’ and ‘persuasion’ become inextricably intermingled. With this as the background, it is perhaps no surprise that it is now possible for people to dismiss news reporting that

does not fit their worldview as ‘fake’. Further, and of even more concern, when such perceptions are decoupled from media content, propagandising becomes the norm: in the contemporary world, all information can be thought of through this frame. When some communicators reject the very notion that veracity and persuasion are separate, all communicators can be assumed to operate at the same self-interested level. One ‘truth’ is, indeed, as good as another, and what ultimately matters is how virulently and enthusiastically it is promoted.

Author bio

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Endnotes

- [1] After the election of a Labour Government in 1984, successive administrations from both main parties followed a resolutely neoliberal economic and social policy agenda. Similar to the Thatcher / Reagan administrations in the United Kingdom and the United States, this meant a policy framework that prioritised controlling inflation and restricting the money supply rather than ensuring full employment. One consequence of this thinking was the increasing imposition of part charges across many areas (in New Zealand this manifested as charging market rent for social housing, massive increases in medical and pharmacy charges and significant fees for tertiary education students, amongst others). Specifically, in terms of television, the state-owned broadcaster – Television New Zealand (TVNZ) – was legislatively required to operate as a commercial broadcaster and return an annual dividend to its ‘shareholder’, the government. In practice, this meant that TVNZ operated to maximise ratings and to exploit every possible opportunity to add alternative revenue streams (like programme sponsorship, product placement and infomercials). TVNZ’s privately-owned competitor, TV3, was likewise financially oriented. Across the sector, there was and is, minimal regulatory ‘interference’ with broadcasting. There is no local content quota; no requirement to broadcast a certain quantum of news / current affairs; no limit on the number of advertising minutes per hour; and no limitations on commercial content aimed at children and young people. Only broad consumer protection and standards legislation apply (along with codes on advertising alcohol and tobacco).
- [2] The most obvious reason for this is commercial sensitivity; networks are incredibly unwilling to divulge the cost of infomercial timeslots. This is because it would show the level at which spot advertising became uneconomic and because it would indicate the amount of money they derived from infomercial marketing companies.
- [3] After 1997 the figure of 85 percent becomes untenable because a number of new companies began to advertise via infomercial and Prestige Marketing began to concentrate on TVNZ channels part-way through 1998.
- [4] The only real costs are the fixed costs proportionate to the timeslots in which infomercials screen.

- [5] Value transfer is the process whereby the desirable context in which an advertised product is placed (in this case the celebrity and the lifestyle they represent) attaches favourable connotations to that product.
- [6] This is because infomercial marketers work on response rates of 1-10%: 90-99 percent of those watching do not buy the product.

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