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Reaction / Commentary on "Advertising and the Perfect Storm" by Sut Jhally, the Executive Director of the Media Education Foundation

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Nearly 100 years after President Calvin Coolidge spoke of capitalism by stating "The inhabitants of our country are stimulated to new wants in all directions . . .", Sut Jhally's lecture titled "Advertising and the Perfect Storm" does much to reflect on the enormous expansion of those material wants in the 21st century. More potently, Jhally effectively envisions the negative effects on societies, nations, and the environment if those pervasive desires – fueled by the symbiotic relationship between advertising and capitalism - are left unchecked.

Jhally's thesis of a coming socio-economic storm brought about by ever-swelling consumerism is thorough and progressively connects the facts underlying his idea. While providing examples and research to support his view, he does not ignore the other side of the argument and acknowledges the role & necessity of goods and commercials to sell them. Despite the severity and plausibility of his concerns, Jhally balances his theory with suggestions for change and thereby avoids being mere anti-capitalism rhetoric.

A deeper analysis of his premise could be founded on the fact that this lecture is dated 2010 and comment could be made on whether or not his dire predictions have been realized and to what extent. Additionally, some elements that Jhally excluded from his argument could be presented as ways to counter-balance, deter, or at least delay his view of the coming storm.

Jhally references Karl Marx's concept of "the Fetishism of Commodities" or the distinct appetite consumers have for purchasing and amassing items, many of which they do not need in the most practical sense. This consumerism is driving by a "want", a "cult of cool" propagated by advertising that marks (mars) nearly every physical and on-screen space available. Jhally explains how in every instance ads strive to appeal to society's (researched and verifiable) sense of joy and happiness, depicting the acquisition of products as the true route to each individual's intangible serenity and contentment.

As in 2010, corporations and manufacturers continue to promote their brands in the \$500 billion-a-year ad industry. What has since changed is that the fetishizing of products is shared between the companies and consumers. Celebrity endorsements continue to exist

but now alongside online “product influencers”, aspiring personages who endorse the marvels of a particular product to their “followers”, most often in the world of fashion & beauty products. In a similar way, “style bloggers” and “style arbiters” like Joe Zee publicize clothing, shoes, make-up and hair, pre-packaged expensive “lifestyles” that push consumers to spend money on “must have” items. Other sites, like Poshmark and ebates, pay their members to shop. Added to this group are the Youtube videos of package openers, whose delight in buying and opening merchandise is “liked” by 100,000+ viewers. The far-reaching “buy and be happy” narrative that Jhally warned about is now also blissfully sown about by consumers themselves, not just corporations.

The ever-increasing amount of video content – namely generated by the entertainment industry – has also transformed advertising. Subscription video on demand sites – Netflix, hulu, Amazon Prime – are now creating and publishing so much content that subscribers (some only jokingly) remark on not having enough hours to watch it all. Enter a new vein of advertising; one that entices consumers to not even purchase a product but rather surrender their personal time to enjoy “all this great content”. “Binge-watching” – hours spent consuming an entire season of episodic TV in one sitting – was nonexistent in 2010.

Television commercials and billboards invite consumers to simply do nothing and assure them happiness will be attained when they “Netflix and chill”. 2018 analytics tracked 851 broadcast commercials paid for by Netflix over a 30-day period. Its competitors, hulu and Amazon Prime, spent enormously on 3,204 and 1,943 spots respectively.¹ In response, a lesser-promoted ad campaign to counter this “couch potato” lifestyle is underway, imploring youth and teens to be more physically active.

Jhally was disturbed by a narrative that pushed people out of the house and into the stores. That narrative is now augmented by the unprecedented promise of staying still and having delight delivered to your home via subscription.

Jhally’s thesis also referenced advertising’s socio-political influence, citing as an example President Bush’s post-9/11 appeal to the American people to “go shopping for their families” as a way to embolden citizens against terrorism and help them feel safe again. Its influence continues today, enlarging its intrusive presence in state and local civic planning. Large-size outdoor billboards have been a component of the ad industry for over 100 years. The enduring effectiveness and importance of this “old fashioned” medium is exemplified by the recent \$300+ million purchase of a series of billboards along LA’s Sunset Strip by Netflix, one of today’s most prominent hi-tech companies.²

As stated by Stephen Freitas, chief marketing officer at the Outdoor Advertising Assn. of America, at the time of the deal, “You can’t miss it, you can’t change the page. That’s one of the appeals [of outdoor billboards].”

That appeal, when multiplied by over 4,000 signs in various sizes and state of repair– like in Los Angeles - leads to urban blight.³ That appeal, when government limits & safety conditions are ignored, leads to brands and products and logos and slogans painting over the look and feel and coloring of a city’s character.⁴

Moreover, since 2010, promotion outdoors has aligned itself with consumers’ love of technology and gone digital. LEDs, optical sequencing, etc. have enabled the digital / electronic billboard. Like the Jumbotron used in stadiums and indoor arenas, advertising in all of its exceedingly bright glitz has taken to the streets and highways. The effects of their shiny lights and active displays on passing motorists have not been thoroughly researched. Nevertheless, several have been erected – via a construction permit loophole – along the 5 Freeway in Los Angeles, shining the wares of the adjacent Citadel shopping mall into drivers’ eyes at night.⁵

Some protest has been raised and in 2013 one West LA Homeowners’ Association was successful in suing for the removal of a digital billboard in their neighborhood, beaming commercials at residents 24 hours a day. Nevertheless, Jhally’s claims regarding the manner in which commerce & advertising encroach on government and mold our very communities is evidenced by a 2018 article by www.landlinemag.com:⁶

The tax and fee increases have been touted by Gov. Jerry Brown as a means to help the state address a \$130 billion backlog in deferred road maintenance.

To further eat into the funding gap, the governor recently signed into law a bill to convert the state’s signage definition from static signs to include digital billboards.

A legislative analysis indicates the plan could raise \$500,000 annually for each billboard classified as a digital billboard. The revenue could be applied for road work in the state.

Previously AB3168, the new law also clarifies and limits what can be considered as a landscaped highway. The change allows existing billboards to be relocated along highways.

The digital billboards also would be taller than existing billboards.

Advertising’s real-life alteration to the landscape would be coupled with a similar “tweak” to what was formerly the authority of the State. From www.smdailyjournal.com:⁷

State lawmakers are considering a proposal to turn motorists trapped in highway congestion over to those advertisers. They aren’t thinking about old-fashioned billboards, though. Instead, officials want to sell advertising on state-owned digital highway signs, the ones that usually inform motorists about delays ahead or missing kids.

Throughout these examples – bloggers hawking goods on behalf of corporations online, ads that sell do-nothing behavior, billboards gone wild – consumers, viewers, and even government officials surrender to advertising and what it purports to promise: fame & influence, fun times with the family as it gathers ‘round the screen, a lucrative revenue stream leading to satisfaction from a challenge met. All are different benchmarks of a happiness and sense of well-being Jhally cautioned advertising is not equipped to deliver. All are the modern-day proof of the detrimental and far-reaching effects of consumerism Jhally described in 2010.

Despite the pessimistic character of these hollow-promise cases, there are other factors, trends, and movements *not* addressed in Jhally’s lecture that might offer meaningful safeguard against the turmoil he demonstrates rampant advertising could bring. Three elements are presented here.

Jhally’s discourse references “the Western World” with intermittent specific remarks regarding “the US” and “America”. Based on this, audiences may infer that his argument speaks to the dangers of excessive ads, billboards and commercials (solely) in the United States. This begets the question: What about the rest of the world, for example, the UK and Europe?

The state of consumption / consumerism in other countries is not at the same level as the US. The volume of billboards that litter many US metropolitan areas outweighs the signage in an equal number of large European cities. US institutions display banners advertising their sponsors yet no such display drapes the exterior walls of chateaus in France’s Loire region or the side of Rome’s Coliseum even after its expensive renovation, underwritten by a shoe manufacturer. From The New York Times in 2014:⁸

Diego Della Valle, the founder of Tod’s, was initially suspected of planning to harness his \$34 million restoration of the Colosseum to an aggressive advertising campaign: Critics worried that the Tod’s logo would festoon the scaffolding and be printed on admission tickets for the 2,000-year-old arena. Mr. Della Valle said he had no intention of exploiting his sponsorship and had donated the money out of a sense of national pride. The only visible nod to the financing ended up being a small Tod’s logo on exterior signage detailing the nature of the project.

Similarly, Marx’s fetishism of goods – shopping – is viewed differently in Europe than in the US. While nearly every shop, store, mall, grocery across the US remains open for business on Sunday, arguments continue in many European countries for and against “Sunday trading”.⁹ Only recently were stores in Italy allowed to open on Sunday and even that law is under serious consideration for repeal. Stores are closed on Sunday in many regions of Germany for religious reasons and in areas where commerce is allowed the hours are restrictive. The frenzied dash to the stores and online to buy for the year-end Holidays –

Black Friday and Manic Monday – are American marketing inventions along with 24/7 supermarkets, builders warehouses, and convenience stores.

Notably, the prevalence of TV commercials for prescription medicines on US networks (illegal until the George W. Bush administration gave the OK to promote Big Pharma) that assure comfort, happiness, and new life with each spot is unknown in Europe. Ads of all sorts air there, of course, but those equating drug dosage with happy families, loving couples, and positive social interaction are not believed nor their implied values embraced.

Unique cultures with disparate views see advertising in ways that contrast with the American perspective. To paraphrase John Berger, “the way they (non Americans) see is affected by what they . . . believe. “ and so there is hope in the fact that the some parts of the world do not conceive of buying, acquiring, and getting stuff at the same rate as the US.

With progressive and convincing statements, Jhally speaks to the degradation of the natural environment as a down-stream by-product of advertising. As presented, this negative aftermath is attributed to (primarily) buyers’ gigantic consumption rate; the “use once and toss” ease built into products that is later crammed into harmful landfills. However, he does not attribute any of this ecological wreckage to the ingredients & construction of the products themselves.

Noxious car fumes that contribute to the smog layer in the air are, indeed, produced by shoppers driving around cities in search of a bargain (ala’ Black Friday) but cannot today’s automakers figure out how to improve gas mileage and vastly improve emissions standards to cut down on pollution? Car engineers have been working on this problem for decades alongside revisions in government regulations. Hybrids and 100% electric vehicles are now more widely available to buyers. Tesla has mastered its unique marketing message to sell over 80,000 of its cars in one sales quarter alone, proving there is an alternative to the conventional, gas-guzzling machines the ad industry has painted in colors of tough, fast, luxurious, or sporty but rarely environmentally-friendly.

Many household products – like Tide laundry detergent - are laden with chemicals that harm the environment, especially sources of water.¹⁰ 1,4-dioxane, a petrochemical solvent found in paints and varnishes is one of the product’s cancer-causing chemical ingredients. Low-grade kitchen cleaners are also formulated with noxious additives that damage the water supply downstream. All of these products could be made from natural or ecologically safe particles, as evidenced by the many companies already doing so, such as Seventh Generation.¹¹ The cheerful, agreeable family situation played out in ads for P&G could easily be placed into commercials for the alternative brand; it is the wondrous “fresh clean” scent that brings the smile to their faces. Why not protect our waters at the same time?

The food industry is another sector using advertising to promote foodstuffs that are not healthy for people or the biosphere.¹² Serious concern over obesity in children in the US is now starting to confirm the added sugars and hormones that permeate most processed foods. Junk food and fast food television spots are truly a message with their own embedded values and points of view. They're designed to coax the basic senses, arousing tastes while ignoring harmful additives. The effective "Got Milk" campaign quenched consumers' thirst for milk but eschewed arguments against factory farming. The equally persuasive "Beef, it's what's for dinner" ad¹³ reserved no time in its brief 15 seconds to mention that 1,799 gallons of water is depleted to produce just one pound of meat.¹⁴ Multiplied by the number of burgers and steaks shown sizzling in restaurant commercials, the drain on the US's clean water supply is massive.

As Jhally explains, commercials and consumerism are not able to face the challenges inherent in nature's contamination. In tandem with his cogent advocacy for a reduced role for advertising in society's narrative, pollutants and waste in the vehicles we drive, the wares we use, and the foods we eat demand a new focus be applied to the creation and make-up of the products themselves. Radically unique approaches would lead to new ways of eating, moving, cleaning, etc. Utilizing the power of advertising, with time this new lifestyle could be woven into our shared cultural values or tap into pre-existing ones (e.g. the "culture of cool" begets "it's cool to be green").

At time of Jhally's speech in 2010, the worldwide web was not as ubiquitous as it is today. Online outlets for communication and expression were only nascent. Consider that Facebook had only launched in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and Instagram switched on in 2010. Neither Jhally nor anyone else could have predicted their course or vast measure of global influence at the time but while the Internet as a tool / medium has exacerbated the issues of consumerism (e.g. style bloggers urging followers to buy now while it's on sale and hey, shipping is free), the Net has also become a viable counterbalance to the headline story of consumption by giving a space for new narratives unheard of in 2010.¹⁵

These stories are founded on real-life crusades for social change and recognition of other voices that – before the rise of online social media – struggled to be heard or went silent.¹⁶ Some of them include:

- #METOO – focus on the sexual assault of women
- Black Lives Matter – fighting for justice for the African American community
- LBGT – numerous sites decrying discrimination based on sexual preference
- Foundation for a Better Life / Pass It On.org - using advertising to further social betterment¹⁷
- Environmental & animal conservation organizations (NRDC, WWF, et al) – publish videos offering a view of global warming and wildlife extinction

Since 2016, the political discourse online and in the media regarding the current President and his discordant rhetoric has swollen. While much of the debate is seen as divisive, the American citizenry is now talking about more than just “Coke vs Pepsi”.

Commercials will continue to exist but hundreds more choices, niche groups, causes / social ills have been galvanized by social media. They exist in every corner of the world and often bypass TV to get their message out more immediately online. They are becoming the new competitors to the supremacy of advertising as the primary narrative. So much so that the brands themselves have begun to participate in activism.¹⁸ In the words of Alex Holder in a Feb 2017 article for UK’s The Guardian: “Sex doesn’t sell any more, activism does. And don’t the big brands know it”.¹⁹

Jhally himself explores how the Internet has fostered a forum for new narratives to exist alongside (and sometimes overshadow) advertising in his 2017 updated video entitled “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse”. There, in encouraging tones, he associates these new movements for civil progress with Antonio Gramsci’s “optimism of the will” in recognition of their significant efforts to change today’s world.

This attitude of hope infuses both his 2010 and 2017 presentation, leading to his idealistic conclusion that although the answers might be complex, a “serious view” can be engaged within our culture(s) to counter the coming storm. Excessive consumerism and a shopaholic mentality appear not to be the accepted norm everywhere in the world. These diverse views dilute the power of the US’s “buy it all” manifesto. Products and the means of their creation – along with their communicated (advertised) meaning – will need to account for their long-term after-effects. This eventful change could arise by socially-conscious public demand or government decree or realigned financial goals in the global marketplace. At the same time, a viable economic framework supporting new industrial approaches to sustaining our environment would need to be developed. More mobile apps could be published to direct consumers to opportunities for action rather than just the latest bargain. New authentic needs – rooted in social justice – have begun to displace the “need” for the latest touted (often redundant) products. Bold, outspoken voices beyond the reach of base advertising are by necessity raising loud enough to drown out the jabber of commercials.

President Coolidge described the advance of humankind using terms like “desire”, “power”, “wants”, and “wealth”. In the decades to come, the revolutionary array of concurrent shifts described above – in society, industry and media – could instead accomplish his “enlarging circle that represents the increasing circle of civilization”.

¹ See: <https://www.ispot.tv/brands/lqZ/hulu>

² See: <http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-netflix-sunset-strip-20181016-story.html>

Also: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-regencyoutdoor-m-a-netflix/netflix-offering-more-than-300-million-for-billboard-company-sources-idUSKCN1HD1FK>

³ See: <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-more-digital-billboards-proposed-20180617-story.html>

Also: <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-digital-billboards-20160310-story.html>

⁴ See: <https://www.laweekly.com/news/billboards-gone-wild-4-000-illegal-billboards-choke-las-neighborhoods-2153144>

⁵ See: <https://www.loscerritosnews.net/2015/02/28/hmg-cn-exclusive-citadel-outlet-mall-billboards-violate-city-and-state-laws/>

⁶ See: <http://www.landlinemag.com/Story.aspx?StoryID=73247#.W-TekZNKg2w>

⁷ See: https://www.smdailyjournal.com/business/avoid-highway-ad-space/article_e7be9ca4-7d97-11e8-9959-fb1427b2db47.html

⁸ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/arts/design/to-some-dismay-italy-enlists-donors-to-repair-monuments.html>

Also: <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/how-italys-monuments-are-getting-a-makeover>

And: <http://www.domaine-chaumont.fr/en/partners>

⁹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/11/poland-sunday-trading-ban-takes-effect>

Also: <https://italicsmag.com/2018/09/11/italy-government-shops-close-sunday/>

And: <https://www.berlin.de/en/tourism/travel-information/1740536-2862820-shopping-hours-sunday-shopping.en.html>

¹⁰ See: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/26/tide-detergent-1-4-dioxane_n_1455575.html

¹¹ See: <https://earth911.com/living-well-being/7-eco-friendly-laundry-detergents/>

¹² See: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/318630.php>

¹³ See: <https://www.decodedscience.org/ractopamine-its-whats-for-dinner/26921>

¹⁴ See: <https://www.producer.com/2018/01/how-much-water-is-required-to-produce-a-pound-of-beef/>

Also: <https://foodtank.com/news/2013/12/why-meat-eats-resources/>

¹⁵ See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2018/04/10/the-Internet-and-the-next-generation-of-activism/#1bca8d49130b>

¹⁶ See: <https://smerconish.com/technology/crowdsource-outrage/>

¹⁷ See: <https://www.passiton.com/who-we-are>

¹⁸ See: <https://www.skyword.com/contentstandard/creativity/whats-behind-the-surge-of-brand-activism/>

Also: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/04/04/should-brands-go-political-with-their-ad-campaigns-nine-agency-pros-weigh-in/#14f78cc2785e>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/03/activism-sells-brands-social-conscience-advertising>