

Promoting a promotional culture: a case study of the Junior Franklin County News.

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Abstract

Although the extraordinary level of commercial speech in New Zealand media is relatively commonly acknowledged (see, for instance, Bell, 1995, Campbell, 2000, Hope, 1996, Horrocks, 2004, Lealand, 2002, Thompson, 2003, Watts, 2009), there is very little academic work that focuses on this commercial speech in its own right. Particularly emblematic case studies, like Xenical (Johnson & Hope, 2001), peculiarly successful forms of advertising, like the infomercial (Johnson & Hope, 2004, Johnson, 2013), or persistent trends in policy like unfettered neoliberalism (Thompson, 2011), allow for a wider, more critical perspective. To date, however, there has been little, if any, research into the lived experience of people as they negotiate this increasingly commercialised media culture. This article aims to investigate one aspect of that experience by focusing on the Junior Franklin County News, an annual insert into a community newspaper. We will argue that the insert, by being produced by primary school students, offers a real insight into their conception of ‘advertising’, ‘newspapers’ and the inter-relationship between the two. It will show that the commercial media’s contemporary ‘infomercial’ focus can be deployed by children through relatively sophisticated techniques and will conclude by arguing for more clarity and precision when teaching children about the ‘doing’ of media.

Advertising and Children

Typically, despite their over-riding commercial nature, modern media systems retain a sense, and often a related practice, that there are certain groups of people to whom their advertisements should be regulated. Of these, the most obvious is “children”. Perhaps because of the fact that parents often oversee their children’s viewing habits or perhaps because of the longstanding view that television is a particularly passive medium, commercial messages on that medium are periodically the subject of popular and official discourse. This can often lead to wider discussions about advertiser’s attempts to integrate those messages outside traditional media – examples here include Lego (Davis, 2013) and advergames (An & Stern, 2013, Harris, Speers, Schwartz & Brownell, 2015), both locations where commercial messages might permeate the narrative of play. Nonetheless, traditional media also offer similar opportunities, even if these are less likely to be featured in wider societal discussions.

Such discussions are typically based on the presumption that children have less cognitive ability to differentiate between media forms (and therefore believe advertisements and the claims to be “true”) and / or that the effects of such messages are negative. On one level, there appears to be a positive relationship between children’s exposure to commercial messages and an increase in materialism (Calvert 2008); on another, even the promotion of “healthy” food options in a global chain’s commercials leads children to want the fast food (and not the “wholesome” alternative) (Boyland, Kavanagh-Safran & Halford 2011). Of course, there is a significant amount of material exploring these, and other related, issues; space restricts our treatment of them in this paper. We will proceed on the basis that (a) commercial messages aimed at children feature across most media forms; (b) these messages may be

separate from or linked in with media texts; and (c) the resulting attitudinal and behavioural changes in children are likely to be as complex as those in adults. Our purpose now is to place these broad issues within the local New Zealand context.

Within this context, most probably as a result of the hypercommercial and hypersaturated mediascape that has obtained since the later 1980s, periodically the issue of advertising to children features within public debates (to a greater or lesser degree). Often these discourses are provoked by popular coverage of relevant issues. For example in 1997, *Consumer* magazine found that confectionery comprised 27 percent of all food advertising to children, with fast food restaurants at 19 percent and soft drinks at 16 percent (Unattributed, 1997, p. 16). In this case, the major impetus for the public discussion was a disagreement between the two main political parties as to the appropriate action to take when such facts emerge. This is important because the incoming Labour Party's apparent willingness to "intervene" in the market was one of the very few occasions the elite consensus on neoliberalism was in jeopardy. Given the paucity of real debate, it is not surprising that the outcome of these discussions was to support the individual child's "right" to be a consumer.

To this end it is worth noting that the New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority argued at the 1999 World Federation of Advertisers' Congress that advertising to children is a right protected by the United Nations; Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the freedom to "seek, receive and impart information of all kinds" (Unattributed, 2001, p. B1). Unsurprisingly, this view has no external normative standard, nor does it question the wider impact of advertising in intensifying consumer culture. Nevertheless, advertisers do often take a wide view of their role, arguing that they perform a public service:

younger citizens of the global economy, advertisers say, need to be versed early in the language of mass marketing (DeBoni, 2000, p. A3).

Of course, the main benefactors of this service are the advertisers and the companies they represent. The most brazen rationalisation for advertising to children, however, often comes from the advertising profession. In 2000 Sandy Callister of the Bates Palace agency claimed that consumer culture is universal and that "we are all obsessed with acquiring things – we can't expect our children to rise above our culture" (Unattributed, 2000, p. 14).

These issues played out in the public eye periodically during the remaining years of the Clark administration. In 2007, for instance, the Ministers of Broadcasting and Health (Steve Maharey and Pete Hodgson respectively) issued a press release announcing their success in convincing broadcasters to limit "junk" food advertising to children (Scoop 2007). This, typically third way, agreement signalled a significant retreat in the potential for the government to engage the issues at anything other than a superficial level: for example, the next year the Associate Health Minister Damien O'Connor issued a press release stating that promoted "healthy living", with a focus on the children (and their parent's) responsibility to "burn off" excess calories (Scoop 2008). There was no meaningful engagement with the deep level issue of whether children ought to be consumers of commercial messages, and what normative bases might underpin such judgements.

A more rounded critique did begin to take shape in the first term of the incoming Key administration. Again, however, this tended to focus on those commercial messages that were seen to have negative effects on behaviour (that is, too little exercise) and diet (that is, unhealthy food). Academics, health researchers and left-leaning Green Party politicians did attempt to widen the debate (Johnston, 2010, p. 4, Radio New Zealand Newswire 2010, Mace 2011) but there was a remarkable lack of will to engage with the issue as a matter of public policy. Instead, the normality of children seeing, hearing, and responding to advertisements aimed at them and at other age groups was entrenched.

Here it is worth considering the importance of this normality. Often the academic and popular press argue or imply that advertising holds a central role in contemporary life:

in industrial societies in [the twentieth] century, national consumer product advertising has become one of the great vehicles for social communication (Leiss, Kline & Jhally 1997, p. 1)

From one perspective this is self evident. Modernity was obviously built on the interconnection of industrialization, urban society, and mass mediated communication supported, at least in part, by advertising. And it is easy to suppose that as the twentieth century unfolded, the ubiquity of advertising became an increasing reality, to the point where Andrew Wernick (2007) and others could realistically describe contemporary culture as promotional, that is, a culture where every aspect of life is permeated by commercial logic.

For our purposes, however, the key issue is that Wernick's insight be interpreted as dynamic: various forces and factors in society continuously combine to create this state. This is important for two reasons. First, we can see in the ongoing discussions of children and advertising that the focus has been on (health) effects, not a structural or normative critique of the practice of advertising to children; this suggests a degree of consensus about the status quo. Second, we can look to locations other than the media to find examples or case studies where "children" and "advertising" interact. The particular instance we focus on is an inserted section of a local newspaper. The Franklin County News covers small town and rural southern and southwestern Auckland and is a "community local paper" (Editor, pers. comm.) Twice a year, local primary schools are visited by journalists and produce up to two pages of "news" content. Typically, up to forty pages (that is the result of work with twenty schools) is then inserted into the main newspaper as The Junior Franklin County News.

For reasons of space we do not have the opportunity to explore the interrelationship between schools, commercial culture and lived experience. Rather, we take the position that formal education systems are part of Wernick's promotional culture (and certainly therefore cannot be seen as non-commercial oases, whatever their protestations to the contrary). We also work from the perspective that schools are agents of conformity in society, with the socialization of pupils – and sometimes parents – their fundamental structural purpose (Saldana, 2013). Taken together, these points led us to the hypothesis that the media texts produced by the students could be read on two levels – (a) as a local indication of what the student's interpretation of journalism and / or newspapers is and (b) as a more general indication of the student's engagement with the promotional society in which they live.

Method

We chose to use a version of discourse analysis in response to these hypotheses. Our first step was to randomly select an edition of The Junior Franklin County News to provide the sample material. We assigned random numbers to every edition from the last ten years (so there were twenty instances of The Junior Franklin County News available) and drew a number. Our sample was the first edition from 2006.

Our approach to using discourse analysis in this project is based on two key points. First, following Harvey (1996), we recognise the inseparability of discourses from the human actor(s) involved in manifesting them. Second, following Fairclough (1992), we acknowledge the power discourse has to move past merely re-presenting social formations and to actually construct those formations.

The particular approach to discourse analysis that we employed is that of John Dryzek (1997, p. 18), who developed a four-stage model to understand and unravel the layers of discourse at work in any given text:

Checklist of elements for the analysis of discourse
1. Basic elements recognised or constructed
2. Assumptions about natural relationships
3. Agents and their motives
4. Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices

The main advantage of this four stage checklist is that sets out a relatively flexible way to develop a full appreciation of the (often interdependent) layers of meaning within a single text. It also allows an analysis of pictorial elements, as well as language.

In the first stage the key is to recognise and record elements that the producers of the text have used to create the discourse. These may be pre-existing elements that the producers have used or new elements they have developed themselves. This stage also includes the decision(s) not to use other entities.

In the second stage, the researcher critiques the implications and assumptions that are attached to or flow from the elements. The purpose here is to gain insight into the intentions of those who produced the text(s).

In the third stage the researcher identifies the motivations and intentions that lie behind the text as a whole. Here, researchers must also look to identify how these factors relate to the agent who is constructing the text.

The fourth stage deals with key metaphors and rhetorical devices deployed in the text. Here, it is the social use of language and other devices to affect the attitudes or behaviours of the audience is crucially important.

Taken together, these stages allow researchers to work through the complexities and nuances within a particular text. It emphasises the agency, or at least the intentionality, of the people and / or groups working to construct the text and its attendant layer of meanings. Of course, this does not mean that Dryzek is arguing that all who construct texts do so against a checklist of his four stages. And we would not argue that point. Instead, we contend that, because discourses are socially constructed and socially constructive, we can observe and analyse the results of those social processes encoded within the texts, whatever level of intentionality might obtain to them.

Data Analysis

In the first *The Junior Franklin County News* (2006) there were three distinct textual forms to analyse. Each local school produced “Kids Views” – up to four articles, each written by one child – advertisements – each produced by one child – and a profile of their school. Every student in the class was given the task to produce one article, one advertisement and one profile. The best were then chosen by the teacher and the journalist who worked with the class on the “newspapers project” (Editor, pers. comm.). This point is crucial to our analysis. The *Junior Franklin County News* tasks were presented to the students by a journalist in conjunction with their normal classroom teacher as “doing newspapers” (Journalist pers. comm.). Tasks were explained using the journalist and her typical workday as a model. The children then spent class time working through each of the tasks.

The “Kids View” article randomly chosen for our analysis was produced by students at Waiuku Primary School. All the students who wrote articles were in Year Eight, which meant they were twelve or thirteen years old. In this case, the articles focussed on local businesses, which was interesting in its own right. Rather than replicate the journalist’s rounds, the children were presented with the information they were to use (and they were able to question the journalist about that information (Journalist pers. comm.).

Figure 1: “Kids View” - *Junior Franklin County News*, April 2006



Deploying Dryzek’s model here, it is obvious that all four “journalists” are working from a position where the information about each business can be packaged as “news”. Deeds Printing has “helpful and friendly staff”, Rosli’s Café “will just thrill your tastebuds and satisfy your hunger”, The National Bank “helps out heaps”, and Barfoot and Thompson “are the biggest and the best”. The basic elements constructed here are (1) journalist and (2) local business, and (3) the relationship between them (a constructed entity in its own right). The tone of the articles is similar, and could almost be termed formulaic. This ties in with the education the students received about the way journalists write; although they were not taught the inverted pyramid as such, they were taught about the need to lead with the most important facts and structure the remainder of the article in descending order of importance (Journalist pers. comm.).

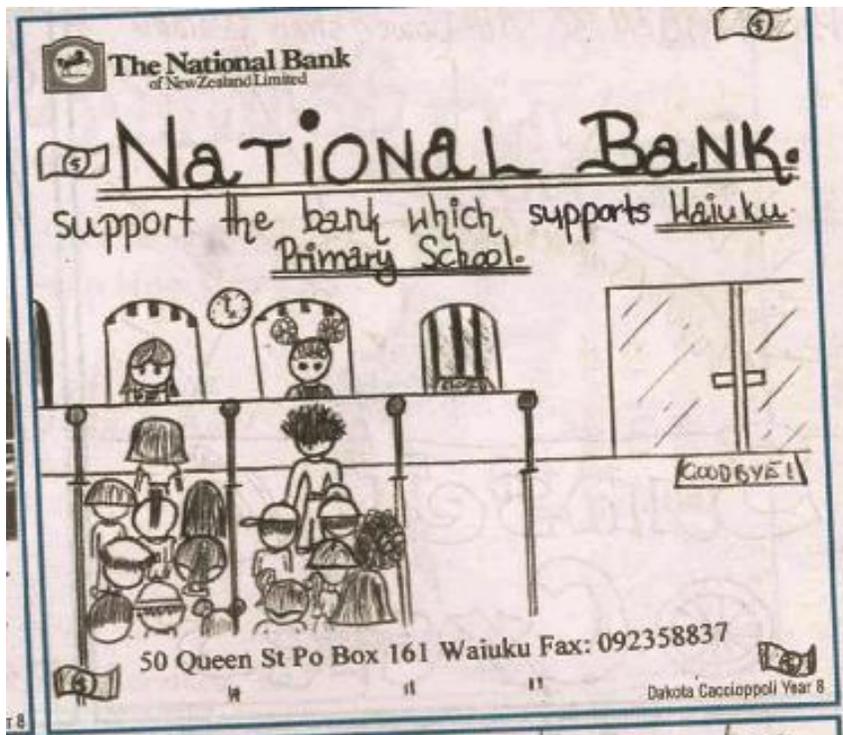
From this point it is relatively easy to see how the students have constructed the natural relationships that exist within “journalism” as they have been taught it. The obvious position that each author has taken was to accept the information they have been given – they were not, for instance, given a series of facts that they needed to check, or a set of quotations they were to select from. This does not mean, however, that the resulting articles were simplistic or unsophisticated. Instead the writers are able to develop a coherent story from the material they have been given, a story that relies on the natural relationship they have with their “sources”.

The agents and their motives that become apparent when analysing the “Kids Views” articles extend from the assumptions they have made about the natural relationships between journalist and source. Underpinning this point is the obvious belief that the businesses share a common ground with the newspaper and, even more importantly, that the newspaper exists – at least in part – to support local businesses. Even the slightest details support this claim: for example, nothing in the article on the National Bank mentions queuing or the customer experience (although the branch is “friendly and reliable”). There is simply no instance of any element that might show the student journalists are aware there are alternative banks in the township, or that they might offer (slightly) different experiences.

In terms of key metaphors and other rhetorical devices, the most striking feature of every one of the four articles is a personal endorsement from the journalist. The Deeds website is “easy to find”, John Cook has been, himself, “to be trained as a National Bank school teller”, Elliot Chow “personally recommends [Rosli’s Café’s] chocolate pancakes”, and Barfoot and Thompson does good work by “sponsoring our weekly school newsletter”. Admittedly, the last of these is less direct than the preceding three, but the overall approach here is to endorse the product or service on offer, based on information given to the student journalist by an agent of that business.

The second item we analysed using Dryzek’s model was an advertisement. We selected the National Bank advertisement using another randomly chosen number, and it appears in Figure Two below:

Figure Two: *National Bank* Advertisement



As a piece of commercial art, this is a relatively straightforward depiction of what a bank does, and what people do within one. The basic elements are obvious – National Bank logos, dollar bills, tellers and queues. There is a clear demarcation between bank workers and customers and the expectation that customers move slowly through their experiences is relatively obvious.

Closer examination, however, shows how the assumptions about the natural relationships that exist in the bank are not simply based around customers waiting patiently for a teller to serve them (although that clearly is a main feature). Each teller is obviously female – one has her hair in two buns, the other a long style either side of her face. There are fourteen customers, and with one bald head, one Mohawk several hats and other hairstyles: the message that this is the bank for everyone is relatively easy to unpack.

This observation leads onto the most pertinent point agents and their motives raised in this advertisement. Simply put, the National Bank is the bank for everyone and, importantly, everyone is prepared to wait to be served. What is also remarkable, however, is that one aisle is empty – there is no teller in the third window, which has a “closed” sign in front of it; nevertheless, this is a very friendly experience – the mat inside the door reads “GOODBYE!”

The key metaphors and other rhetorical devices deployed in the advertisement centre on the way in which the features outlined in the previous stages of Dryzek’s model are reinforced and underpinned by the exhortation to “support the bank which supports Waiuku Primary School”. These eight words clearly demonstrate the promotional underpinnings of the exercise and show a relatively sophisticated approach to writing for an audience. The implication is that not only is the National Bank a good corporate citizen; it acts this way as part of an overall positive and caring identity. The other major point here is that the banking experience is a human one. Customers are inside, not outside at money machines and they (wait to) interact with human tellers, not use phone or internet banking. Rhetorically, then, the bank could be seen as particularly worthy of support because its two main messages (personal service and service to the community) metaphorically support each other.

This point is also at the heart of the third category of text we analysed, the school profile. Despite its length, this was perhaps the easiest component to analyse, if only because of the nature of the information contained within it.

Figure Three: School Profile



The basic elements constructed and recognised here are the school and its wider community, whether they or their children attend or not. "School" is constructed as, literally, a list of superlatives, with very little mention of the content or tone of what occurs in the classrooms. The experience is not so much educational as it is extra-curricular.

The assumption here is that the natural relationship between a school and its pupils is more than just a provider / receiver of education. In fact, the length and positivity of the comments about the school gives the unavoidable sense that schools compete to offer the best "experience" for prospective students; as Sarikka Rosli puts it "it is one of the biggest (and best) full primary schools around." From a critical point of view, this is more significant than the material relating to the articles or the advertisements. Students were given facts about their school and asked to write an article, not to promote it (Journalist pers. comm.).

In analysing the agents and their motives deployed by this text, therefore, we are left with an intriguing (and disturbing) fact: the student who wrote this profile did so within a framework where her promotion of the school was not separable from information about it. In other words, there is no evidence of standard journalistic tropes like objectivity or distance, however those might be defined for a class of twelve and thirteen year olds. Finally, then, the school profile is more complex than the apparently obvious use of persuasive rhetorical devices. The author – as rhetor – has situated a profile of her school

firmly within the promotional discourse of the Junior Franklin County News and, by extension, the promotional culture within which that publication, and its parent, sits.

Conclusion

Our starting point for this research was to recognise two inter-related facts about recent (and, indeed, contemporary) New Zealand society. First, that society exists within the broad ambit of promotional culture(s) (Wernick 1991, Davis 2013). For our purposes, therefore, a critical analysis any constituent part of that society ought to be comprehensible within that frame of reference; if promotion is a contemporary “religion”, there is no part of lived experience which is profane. Second, the particular and peculiar development of media systems in New Zealand – and especially the norms, codes and rules about commercial speech – offer a distinct setting within which the local promotional culture may be analysed and critiqued.

We examined the material that does exist when popular and academic audiences have considered the issue of advertising to children. We found three key themes: (1) children are often positioned as savvy media consumers who do not need “protection” from commercial speech; (2) self regulation is the preferred option to deal with the – limited – concerns related to children’s susceptibility to certain forms of commercial speech; and (3) such concerns relate to the effect of the advertisement (for example, unhealthy eating choices) and, crucially, not to the commercial speech in itself. Needless to say, this means that there is no real consideration of the overall effect(s) that living in a promotional culture bring.

We chose an historical example of a media text constructed by children within a normal school setting to explore these concerns. Simply put, we had access to the results of a group of twelve and thirteen year olds who “did newspapers” for two weeks in class. In “doing newspapers” they acted as journalists, copywriters, art directors and “clients”. Our analyses of the products of their endeavours clearly showed how little distinction the students made between these roles. In fact, having looked at each component of the work they produced, the most remarkable aspect is its internal consistency: all the component parts were clearly in the service of promotional goals. Normatively speaking, therefore, we would argue that there are no meaningful alternatives to that frame of reference.

Here, we need to problematise, however, briefly, the issue of “advertorial”. One of the most characteristic features of contemporary print media is the idea that certain aspects within it (for instance travel features) have been paid for (in whole or in part) by commercial entities that are related to the subject matter of the article. Readers are used to seeing disclaimers like “Our reporter travelled to London on Air New Zealand”. And, of course, the advertorial style of writing is recognisable in itself. For those reasons it is important that we distinguish advertorial from what the student produced in The Junior Franklin County News. Underlying even the most obvious advertorial puff piece lies the notion that the journalist writing it has experience of and a connection to other styles of journalism where there is more separation between her and her “sponsors”. In other words, advertorial can be defined

negatively – in the same publication often one can read that which is not advertorial. Similarly, readers can normally use their media literacy to determine how much influence a sponsor or public relations practitioner may have had over any given story.

By contrast, the texts that we analysed in this article had no such demarcation. There was, in simple terms, no sense in which we could determine that the process for these students made any distinction at all between the “journalism”, the “keep your advertisers happy” and “your responsibility to your local community”. And it would not be hard to develop a learning plan where teachers and journalists co-operated to give students a more traditional experience of “journalism” – quotations from interviewees, facts to sort through, ideas to critique and judge. In fact, as an educational experience that would seem to have more pedagogical value. Instead, these students were presented with a highly commercialised situation, more in keeping with the relentless, pressurised hard-sell of an infomercial, which they accommodated and adapted with ease. The idea of melding facts, commercial messages and civic value into one seamless message appears to have been well within their capabilities. And it is proof that, within the promotional culture in which we live, schools can be just as commercial saturated as the mass media.

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