

Transforming the U.S. Media: Commercial Free at Last

by Allen D. Kanner

ON JANUARY 1, 2007, SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL WENT commercial-free. The “clean city” law that went into effect last year in South America’s largest city means the metropolis no longer tolerates billboards, flashing neon signs, and electronic message panels on its streets and buildings, fliers and bulletins in its public spaces, and advertising on the sides of its taxis and buses.

Strict limits have been imposed on the size of signs on storefronts. “We are aiming for a complete change of culture,” said Roberto Tripoli, president of the City Council. Columnist and historian Roberto Pompeu de Toledo called the law “a rare victory of the public interest over private, order over disorder, aesthetics over ugliness, of cleanliness over trash. For once in life, all that is accustomed to coming out on top in Brazil has lost.”

In the United States, Vermont, Maine, Hawaii and Alaska all prohibit billboards, as do about 1,500 towns across the country. This is a remarkable development, especially since there is an assumption in American society that mass and massive marketing is necessary for corporate capitalism to thrive. The billboard bans indicate how fed up people are with the marketing deluge.

Nevertheless, the prevailing wisdom is that for businesses to be competitive, the nation’s economic system requires a commercially driven media intent on penetrating as deeply as possible into people’s lives and psyches. It is therefore unthinkable that the government would adopt policies that would seriously impede marketing, such as banning advertising to children, or even more comprehensively, transforming the media from commercial-driven to commercial-free.

Yet in terms of social benefits versus harm, we now have decades of experience with the corporate-funded media, enough to conclude reasonably that it is a failed experiment. The experiment began in 1934 with the passage of the Communications Act, which locked into law the commercial structure of radio and all subsequent publicly owned media, such as television, the Internet, and billboards. There was very little public debate during the period before the government decided to hand the media over to corporations, although a movement in favor of non-commercial radio did flair up for several years before the already powerful radio networks crushed it.

We learned from this experiment that corporate advertisers aggressively pursue their goals irrespective of the harm that marketing generates. We have also learned that through their marketing clout corporations are able to control the media by stifling opposing perspectives and molding the content of news and entertainment programs to keep them in line with the corporate agenda. We have found that advertising itself, as it evolves with modern



São Paulo is a city known for its public art and now for its lack of commercial advertising as well.

VISION

I surrender to love in Nasir al-Din and Nazareth.

I pocket my kippa in Khirbat Iribbin
wondering what might have been.

I plead for the bringer of rain and dew to come
to the groves of Dayr al-Dubban.

I lay down my arms (for what it's worth)
along the road to Tarbikha and Tall al-Turmus.

I pray in the holy tongue of reaching and remembering
for the House of Bread and the House of Meat.

I wash myself in the custom of Wa'arat al-Sarris,
first feet, then hands, then with ablutions of the face.

—Joshua Weitz

technology, is an extraordinarily effective tool for influencing people's values, behaviors, and beliefs, especially when it occurs in a context where other views are systematically marginalized. It is time to try something different.

What might a commercial-free U.S. media look like? I would like to offer the following suggestions in the spirit of sparking discussion and subsequent action. I suspect that any media system, commercial or not, will be flawed and subject to its own forms of bias. The key question, therefore, is whether a commercial-free media significantly improves upon one dependent on corporate funding.

As I envision it, a commercial-free media would begin with a ban on all commercial sponsorship. The media would be supported primarily through generous—and legally guaranteed—public funding. The funds themselves would be distributed to promote diversity (class, race, sex, etc.) on all levels, from production to performance. Local media also would be generously supported.

How would people learn about the products and services that are available? It's worth noting here that ads routinely include misleading, exaggerated, or false claims, crucial omissions regarding the downside of products, and emotional manipulation. As such they are extremely poor sources of information. To replace them, publicly funded websites and publications would be created devoted to reliable ratings of products and services. Evaluators would be hired who are independent from the industries being assessed.

Would we have fewer media sources if we went commercial-free? Possibly. But perhaps not, given that local media would flourish. In terms of quality, the enormous cultural diversity that would be unleashed would easily put our current media fare to shame. We also have clues from the BBC, Pacifica, and other commercial-free stations that quality improves when programmers are not pressured to appeal to the lowest common denominator to increase sales.

As a psychologist, I am concerned that children are already engaged with the media 6.5 hours a day while spending 2.25 hours with their parents. Our challenge is the wise use of media, not its endless production.

How would life feel without the marketing deluge? Commercial-free at last. ■

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