

The Symbolic Advertising Communication in the New Integral Reality

A symbolical assessment of the technology impact on a brand icon

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Abstract

The new impressive technological advancements we are leaving change our cultural, social and economical consumption habits and needs. We have cumulatively evolved, as Hartley (2012) states, from a Newtonian, modern knowledge to a quantum, postmodern one and then rapidly to a network, universal type of knowledge that no longer requires nations, countries or regions but "everything known on earth", as in Google's business plan. The brands' or the companies' (or governments) communications must adapt to the new vehicles and platforms such as mobile applications and dramatically more dynamic digital endeavors (responsive websites, social-media). In this context, there are several questions that rise up: how does the commercial message of the brand adapt to the new vehicles? Is advertising going to be an integral reality as Baudrillard (2005) described it, filled with perfect images and sounds, ready for an integral man to consume it? In a programmatic communication strategy of omnichannel consumer interaction, is there still a need for message coherence, and correctly targeted audiences? Or will the AI, the big data and the IOT change entirely the whole communication industry? To answer these questions, I examined the impact of the digitalization on a brand icon (the Ursus bear) evolution by assessing the new types of brand content in the relationship with the content consumption and the new types of exposure and new "planes of expression".

Key words: technological determinism, communication, advertising, culture, semiotics

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Introduction

Present times are characterized, due to the digital technologies used for creating and communicating virtually universally available information, by an "uncertain" relation with the information. In the terms proposed by Hartley (2012: 159-161), culture moved with the help of technology from modern archives, like museums and galleries, to post-modern archives like the broadcast television systems and then to network archives, like the global digital network. Technology embeds everything around us today. We can only imagine non-technological landscapes

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and this imagination is based on fewer and fewer documentaries about third world environments that we watch, paradoxically, on the smart screens of our next generation TV sets, tablets or phones. Choosing to live in an urban landscape and to access any form of communication, we may feel quite often that technology has conquered our world.

The democratization of the access to the information has empowered the individual to create, disseminate, collect and share information. This individual, has not been considered in a good while now (Hall 2006) an obedient receiver of information but a curator, selecting the information that scores best in terms in relevance, credibility, liking or functional interest. From this angle, the information is the one that has to adapt to this consumer, to his or her characteristics. His or her should be emphasized here, because the audiences, as Hall started to describe the term and as the marketing theory used it for decades are more and more fragmented (Kotler & Keller 2012). They consume various vehicles of even the same media. More communication vehicles mean more audiences and, as well, a fragmented consumption of information, due to the potential of the digital media. The one TV set present in a household just two decades ago allowed at that time a group consumption of the media message (with the family, close friends or neighbors). Today, a display in every room of the household and the consumption of the TV programs on the computer, while using a mobile device, running a messaging app or an second screen app (app allowing a direct interaction with the TV content or its producers) – all these actualize an individual consumption and a virtual sharing and interaction even with the TV program and its entire audience. In such a realistic scenario [1], the individual must cope with advertising messages that come across in various forms and shapes: video commercials (TV, internet, mobile app), animated online banner (internet or Large Electronic Display billboards), text notification (any mobile devices, smart watches). This very heterogeneous media context obliges any brand to have the right message, in the right touch-point with the right consumer. Moreover, the multiple expression forms driven by today's technological capacities must resonate with consumers' expectations.

In this context, the objective of the present analysis is to understand how the commercial message of the brand adapts to the new media vehicles. As well, I will investigate the impact of the digitalization on a brand icon evolution aiming to identify how the commercial communication (advertising) merges into an "integral reality" (Baudrillard 2005). To answer these research questions, I will analyze critically the literature about technological determinism and its impact on the message. This will allow me to assess the symbolic communication of a well-known brand icon in Romania (the bear, the icon of URSUS beer, a SABMiller brand) that tried to adapt its identity to the new technologies. The evaluated pieces of communication were used by the assessed brand in 2012-2013. The used method is the semiotic analysis included into a case study that focuses on how the brand icon is declined on several media (adaptation to the technological possibilities) while resonating with the symbolic universe of consumers. For better

understanding the intention of the brand owner, I took into consideration also some opinions of the company's officials.

The technology empowered communication

Technology in general and especially the communication technology are essential for the development of human society, both as form of social organization and as civilization. Many theorists have dedicated great efforts to the study of this technological determinism. One approach in this productive field of study states that writing, printing, television, computers and mobile communications have changed, each in its time, society, and will continue to influence its characteristics and functions on every level, be it the institutional level, the level of social interactions and phenomena, the individual level or the one of culture. The human factor and the social arrangement often receive a secondary role and, according to Daniel Chandler (1995), even Karl Marx is considered sometimes a technological determinist due to isolated quotations such as "the windmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (from his famous work of 1847, *The Poverty of Philosophy*). The technology used in and for communication could be approached in the spirit of Walter Ong's book from 1986, *Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought*, considering, as Chandler (1995) mentions, that a "technological relationism" is a tendency of growing communication technology that moves from a marginal status of social support, to a position of interaction with social structures and individual practices. This approach grants it an important social role and may be seen as justifying the doctrine of the technological primacy as described by the anthropologist Leslie White:

We may view a cultural system as a series of three horizontal strata: the technological layer on the bottom, the philosophical on the top, the sociological stratum in between... The technological system is basic and primary" (White 1949: 366).

But if we accept that technology determines a cultural system as a whole, we should most probably revisit the Marx and Engel's historical materialism (Marx & Engels 1967), and see that the supra-structure of a society (politics, education, family and culture) depends on an economic base, that cannot exist without technology.

Technology can also be taken as a single, homogenous material thing, an attribute of the contemporary society and its culture. Jacques Ellul, for example, used a conceptual umbrella of "technique" to refer to the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency... in every field of human activity" [2] (Chandler 1995) But this perspective may appear as a superficial treatment of very abstract categories and cannot evaluate the social context where each technology is used. Other approaches focus on the technological autonomy (Winner 1977: 19), and raise the issue of the human-technology role exchange and of the technology dominance. Along with technological anthropomorphism or

animism, this issue is again on the table in the last few months, in the public debates about the killer robots [3] (conscious war machines designed to be able to decide on their own if and when to kill the human enemy on the battlefield) or in the new programmatic communication strategies in which advertising (for the moment) is served by mega-computers to no longer private consumers who are connected and inter-connected through many devices to a planet wide informatics system. The inevitable progress that, once started, will continue on its own regardless of the individual or social will is a pretty alarmist perspective, stating that technology implies a progressive and unavoidable revolution, similar to the one described by the Sci-Fi genre. Such revolutions may ease the transition to new eras (of the machines, of the computers) but history has proven that there are no radical mutations: TV did not kill the radio nor did the computer replace the books.

The cognitive consequences and the ideological influences of technology were emphasized by probably the most famous theorist of the current, Marshall McLuhan, who equals communication technology with language, showing that both influence the human perceptions and thoughts in the same amount. Major changes in society, culture and even on individual level are shaped by the changes of the dominant media of a historical moment – the print, for example, has shaped society in terms of individualism, intimacy, specialization or national feeling (Angel 2001, McLuhan 1994: 7-21).

In summary, if we are to evaluate the current speed of transmitting the information or the new affordances in the terms of multimodality (Bezemer & Kress 2008), technology empowers communication and its vehicles.

The technology empowered message

Technology also allows messages to be localized on certain predetermined geo-coordinates, transforming the message in a target in itself. This way, a piece of branded content can be accessed only in a specific spot, contextualizing the communication. Another example is Vine, that allows its users to share 6 seconds of recorded video content while the applications that followed it allow the real time broadcast of video materials with no duration limit. In this temporal perspective, from TV to YouTube and then to video apps, one could evaluate how messages evolved in both the plane of expression and the one of the content, maintaining their coherence or not. The rule of thumb suggests that in fact nothing changes, because the core of the message is still a moving picture accompanied by sound. And its message is still constructed by all the stylistic devices, narratives and the rest of the elements that make a video message that were always used for this purpose, since video manage to gain thrust.

The present technological era can for sure be misleading from the point of view of the support of information. A new medium is born each generation, even if it is a better and improved version of an old one (like the 3D television or the 4DX cinema). Almost every object around us can be turned into a message carrier and, since everything is “saying” something, it becomes a difficult task to

determine which vehicle belongs to which media. An illustrative example for this is a website built on a mobile responsive platform so that it can be read on smartphones or the social-media apps that collect and show messages from wearable devices such as smart-watches and smart-bracelets.

Viewed from the determinist angle, the interconnection previously depicted can appear as creating that new integral reality that Baudrillard (2005) was warning about, in which real reality disappears and the human species is obliged to consume the representation of the representation itself. Ever-duplicated messages produced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and spread by the Internet of Things (IOT) would most probably change the very essence of humankind in a few generation and all efforts to understand the meaning and its cultural infrastructure would then be futile. Yet, all the above is merely an infrastructure, a "yellow bricks road", as it ever was, since the Lascaux drawings and even earlier. In this context, I challenge this view: in a simple communication diagram, a producer codes a message and sends it through a channel to a receiver who decodes it. This channel is "the yellow bricks road" that we need to evaluate correctly. In other words, using a metaphor, until two centuries ago, this was a "dirt road" and the vehicles on it were horse drawn wooden wagons. A century ago, it evolved to a paved road and it allowed cars to move along. Two decades ago, a new wide roadway appeared, allowing the cars, busses and trucks to speed up and to be more effective. Today, we see a hyper-highway supporting incredible high-speed sport cars and limos. Even though the speed and the conditions for transport are different from one "road" to another, the meaning is the same: moving a load from one point to another. In a similar way, I consider that, despite the technologies used, the media IS NOT the message.

Media IS NOT the message

The overused point of view of Marshall McLuhan about the influence of technology over the message became a cultural axiom that stood in the center of the scholars' studies and professionals' creations for decades. Yet, the discussion should cover a larger area of consequences "positive and, also, negative" (Ellul 1990: 35). The intrinsic structure and the symbolic forms in which information is coded on each technological empowered medium have intellectual and emotional consequences upon the individual; their accessibility and speed of dissemination create political consequences. The physical form of the media has consequences on the individual senses while social consequences are influenced by the usage conditions.

Technology is a mediation factor of individual and social phenomena, it influences but it is also influenced by a plethora of other factors. Its characteristics facilitate more or less different types of usages and that these usages are in fact attracting consumers. For example, the already mentioned live-streaming applications were adopted successively both by consumers and the content producers. Just one day after the launch of *Periscope*, the newest live-streaming app, four international brands decided to use it too, along with other similar apps,

to distribute their advertising messages [4] with the objective to test its capacities and, of course, to be among the first visible brands on a new vehicle with a certain potential of large scale adoption by a growing audience, even if fragmented. A more attentive analysis reveals to a curious eye that the main difference in between *Periscope*, its competition (*MeerKat* and *Stre.am*) and the previous apps designed for video socialization (like *Vine*) resides in the power of computation of the servers, meaning the capacity of compacting of the filmed material, the speed of transport and access over the informatic network and the storage capacity of virtual servers. The video content remains video content, the message it carries has little connection to its form, all that really matters is the computing power – as soon as an investor will finance bigger and better servers and a larger team of programmers, a new application and maybe a new channel, will attract like a magnet those consumers and brands that are keen to create and share video content. Video content will keep its position on the preferences scale, position gained over the last 100 years. It just spread from cinema to TV, then to computer and internet, and then to mobile devices, adapting its power relations along the way, especially in the last two decades.

Communication in general, and advertising in particular, seems to be trapped in the course of the technological development: new types of promotional content are developed daily for new types media and new vehicles. Creative use of technology seems to have overthrown the creative use of content and the advertising agencies are more than happy to propose daily new technological inventions to their innovation-hungry clients.

Case Study: The technology impact on the symbolic universe of the Ursus bear

Given the explorative character of this research, the chosen approach is a qualitative one, focusing on the semiotic analysis of a brand icon. The selection of the research corpus is based on relevancy given by the fact that the new technological context triggered a change of a brand icon used in different media. The analyzed corpus includes two TV commercials, a mobile app and the packaging used by Ursus (SABMiller brand) between 2012 and 2013. My intention was to enrich the semiotic analysis with information from the brand owner, yet the company did not agree to provide information about their decisions.

The case-study focuses on the representation of a brand icon, a bear, in different media. Ursus beer is a well-known brand in Romania, owned now by SABMiller, positioned as “the king of the beers”. Its key iconic symbol, the crowned bear, has been used on the packaging and in the main brand communications since its launch. A new image campaign had been aired in 2012, using the bear as a character in commercial communication. As well, there was an attempt to give a technological boost to the brand by developing an application featuring Augmented Reality, which places virtual, digital content in the “real” reality as seen through the display of a smart mobile device.

In the new campaign, the bear have been used in three stances: the TV commercial showed in the end a live bear gazing at a hot-air red balloon carrying

a beer bottle (figure 1), the Augmented Reality illustrated a 3D animated bear (figure 2), and the 2D representation of the bear on packaging – URSUS itself, the logo used for decades (figure 3).

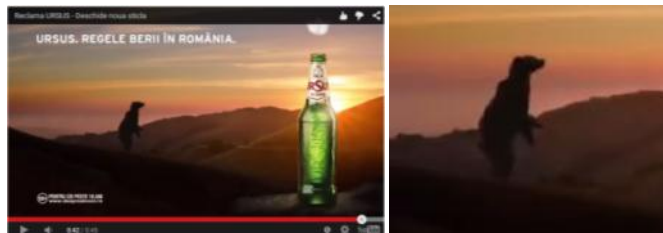


Figure 1 – captures from the TV commercial featuring the live bear



Figure 2 – captures from the demonstration movie of the Augmented Reality application



Figure 3 – the sketch of the bear present in the logo

At the same time, a second TV commercial was prepared for the 135th celebration of the brand, featuring a very futuristic and robotic bear (figure 4).



Figure 4 – capture from the anniversary TV commercial

Four bears were now impersonating the brand: the sketch from the logo, the live bear from the TV commercial, the robotic one from the second TV commercial and the 3D animated one from the mobile application. While the coherence of the entire campaign is not in the scope of the present research, the consumers' acceptability of the representations of the bear was evaluated through a semiotic

analysis. The sketched logo reveals the bear in the position of a trophy and its consumer in the position of the hunter who enjoys the well deserved reward, the beer. The live bear from the first TV commercial starts already to raise the question of the missing trophy and of the unsuccessful hunt. But the bear is in the distance and the consumer could feel that he is a brave explorer who has faced a potential danger and deserves a beer. The robotic bear is already a threat: it looks like a robot, it is clear that it has evolved using some special technology. And it is free, in the woods, just like the bears that make the news every winter by feeding themselves at the city limits. No longer can a man hunt this bear and make it a trophy. The 3D animated one, while appearing in the live-view of the smartphone's camera, is in the same time too friendly and it acts like a circus bear. In all the three messages, the bear is no longer in the safe place, on the wall, and in two of them, comes too close to the real life, to the places and occasions when consumers would rather feel they deserve something else than a representation of a bear wandering around.

As much as technology would have been promising in terms of realization and actualization of the message, I consider more important the potential meanings of the bears. Its semiotic territories spread culturally, in the minds of the audiences, from a tamed animal to a hero-bear, from the king of forest to the wild animal, from the wise bear to the friendly toy, including the gentle giant and the hunter's trophy. These are all connotations of the bear idea, present more or less in the background knowledge, as described by Barthes (1964/67) of virtually any consumer who has gone through basic school and watched TV for a few days. A great description of this cultural span of the bear concept comes from Umberto Eco, who shows in a short story from his 1992 second journal what kids understand from the bear concept mainly because of the schooling system (Eco 2003). Myths and legends, cartoons and fairy tales, films and books, all the contemporary culture and all the advertising that has ever used the image of bear, all contribute in the creation of a bear image that may or may not work well together with a certain brand. The content has to be constructed with meanings that are already in the mind of the consumer, and that can be manipulated as to create a favorable new meaning. The company reached this conclusion internally and decided to retire the "live" bears (the 3D animated one was never even promoted, even though the application was uploaded in the application stores).

The message was already there, in the context of its consumers: the bear remained a trophy and the beer returned to be a good pretext for socializing or an excellent party fuel. The company did not agree to provide any information regarding the process that led to this decision.

Conclusions

The commercial message of the brand has to adapt to the new media vehicles and the technological progress. Yet, the digitalization impact on a brand icon should never occur on the meaning level. The case study presented shows that changes in meaning for the sake of the technology can alienate the consumers. The decision of

dropping the campaign and returning to the initial meaning supports this hypothesis. The symbolic territories of a brand icon, deeply seeded in the cultural background of its consumers, cannot produce meanings in an “integral reality”, not even with the support of technology.

The technological potential may look permissive and the opportunities to change the way a message looks or feels are extraordinary. However, the meaning, the core of the message cannot be reached by technology. A text will remain a text (on a rock, on paper or in an SMS) and the technology will only influence its expression, just as well as the good hero in every story has an adjuvant to help him along the “yellow brick road”.

Notes

[1] TNS/Google, 2014, Connected Consumer Study – Global Results, published online at: <https://goo.gl/f2Q3Y0>, last accessed 30.05.2015.

[2] The Technological Society, published in 1964 in New York, is a translation of the French original titled even more suggestively, *La Technique: L'enjeu du siècle*.

[3] *Killer robots: No one liable if future machines decide to kill, says Human Rights Watch*, article published by The Independent on April 9th, 2015, online: <http://goo.gl/OKjFTB>, last accessed: May 2nd, 2015.

[4] The article was published by Adweek.com on March 27, 2015. Source: <http://goo.gl/ybnZwB>, last accessed: March 30, 2015

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