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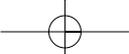
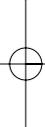


Sally Myers

Carrie McLaren and Jason Torchinsky

## Ad Nauseam

Carrie McLaren started *Stay Free!* as a zine in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1993. She speaks regularly on the topic of advertising and media. Jason Torchinsky has been a key contributor to *Stay Free!* since its inception.



# Ad nauseam

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# Ad Nauseum

A Survivor's Guide to American Consumer Culture

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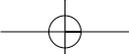
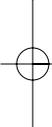
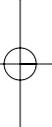
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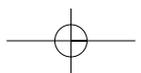
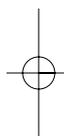
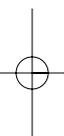
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*For Our Parents*





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# Foreword

by Rob Walker

Active vs. passive: that's the crucial dichotomy everybody talks about in discussions of media culture in general, and the commercialized subset of that culture in particular. I believe I first encountered *Stay Free!* in 1997 (that's the date on the oldest issue I still have, at any rate). An independent publication finding its audience against astonishing odds, it was certainly the opposite of passive. I loved it and remained a devoted reader of the print version and its online successor. It was smart and funny and entertaining and original: well researched and serious when it needed to be, and sharply satirical and almost reckless when it didn't. Extremely informed interviews from scholars coexisted with smart-ass pranks. And the writing, by Carrie McLaren, Jason Torchinsky, and their colleagues, always took an approach to commercial and media culture that was active in the very best sense of the word.

Many of the finest examples are collected here, along with new material that lives up to that standard. Everything in *Ad Nauseam* is about questioning what most people take for granted, laughing at the stuff you're meant to accept soberly, and taking seriously the things you're not intended to notice all. This gets done in a variety of ways. The opening overview

of ad history is indispensable—and is followed promptly by an attempt to train a dog to like iPods that makes some surprisingly effective points about marketing and the human animal. McLaren's piece about subliminal advertising is the most insightful take on the subject I've ever read, and Torchinsky manages to make a visit to a sponsored party at the Playboy mansion provocative in an entirely different manner from what you might expect. Throughout, it's a book of thinking about the news and entertainment we're offered and, in particular, about the commercial expression that underwrites so much of it. It's a book, that is, of thinking about what we're really not supposed to think about—and inspiring the reader to do the same.

It's a sad fact that while the shaping of consumer culture is an incredibly important topic that touches all of our lives on many levels, the vast majority of commentary about it is written by a group of people whose opinions are decidedly skewed. These are the marketing professionals and gurus whose assessments of commercial persuasion in American life invariably boil down to Seven Tips for Selling More Whatever to today's savvy consumer. Whatever value that sort of thing may have for the trade, it's not very useful to the other participants in consumer culture: everybody else. We could use more voices on the subject whose end goal isn't landing new clients or scoring a corporate consulting gig.

So as refreshing as it was to encounter such voices when I first did, and with the way the commercial and media landscape has changed in recent years, it's flat-out energizing to read them now.

To explain why, I have to say something about the cheaper, less useful senses of "active" that have come into vogue in the twenty-first century. Frequently, these uses involve squishing that word into the much-ballyhooed idea of the *interactive*.

Thanks to interactiveness, you can, for instance, respond directly to an online opinion you disagree with: type “Your an idiot” into the comments field, and you have just participated; you have interacted; you have been not-passive. In the realm of consumer culture it means, say, complaining via Twitter that you have lately received a very poor latte from a famous coffee chain. If that coffee chain has employed someone to monitor brand-specific tweets, then perhaps you’ll be contacted and score a compensatory coupon. (And maybe you’ll tweet about that, thereby completing the transformation of your interactivity into word-of-mouth marketing.) Or maybe you don’t have a complaint, you have an idea for a whole new style of caffeinated beverage you wish this coffee chain would sell. No problem. Stop by the new website the chain has set up where you can log on and share your profitable idea. Big ups: you’ve *interacted* with a brand.

Fine. (I guess.) But passing this sort of thing off as empowerment, democratization, or progress presents a few problems. It shamelessly misrepresents the world prior to comment fields and social networking sites and so on as a place where we all stared slack-jawed at *Gilligan’s Island*, nobody disagreed with whatever the evening news anchors had to say, and everybody bought the products that were advertised on television for the simple reason that this is what the advertisements told us to do. This suggests not only that nobody knew how to think, but also that this sorry state of affairs has been resolved only because we are now “allowed” to comment, “given” interactive new techno tools, and “provided” opportunities to express ourselves. In other words, even our newfound unpassiveness has been handed to us from without.

If you find the theory that an active response to commercial culture is a recent gift from corporate America a little suspect,

if you prefer a version of unpassiveness that's a little more genuine, well, you've come to the right place. Of course I'm not suggesting that you'll simply agree with every opinion or conclusion in the pages ahead. What fun would that be? I'm suggesting you'll find yourself doing what I did when I first came upon *Stay Free!* years ago: learning new things, forming new opinions, having a well-placed laugh or two, and thinking. That's the whole idea—or that's what I think, anyway.

**Rob Walker** is *The New York Times Magazine*'s "Consumed" columnist and the author of *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*.

## Preface

A few years ago, I spent a semester trying to teach Nike-wearin', iPod-swingin' American high schoolers what it meant to live in a consumer culture.

The class began with a simple exercise. I showed slides of twenty plants and trees common in our Brooklyn neighborhood and asked the kids to name as many as they could. They stared at me blankly.

Then I showed a slide of the alphabet, in which each letter had been lifted from the logo of a common household consumer product. This time, the kids proudly shouted out the brands associated with each letter. They got nearly all of them right (and I suppose can be forgiven for missing the “U” in Uncle Ben’s).

These kids—and the zeal with which they devoured “American Alphabet”<sup>\*</sup> as opposed to, say, the actual landscape around them—seemed alien to me. But the truth is that high school students like these aren’t all that different from most Americans. Whether living in cities or suburbs, we’re surrounded by



<sup>\*</sup>The title is from the original artwork by Heidi Cody that this exercise is based on.

logos as well as flora. Yet, we're much more familiar with the former, because that is what our culture emphasizes. The ads, logos, and other symbols that we encounter thousands of times each day constitute an education of sorts, but it's a hidden form of teaching. Ask most Americans over the age of twelve whether advertising influences their decisions and they'll tell you: "Advertising doesn't affect me. I just ignore it."

People make similar assumptions about television and other media. We all too often assume that only the unstable, ignorant masses are seriously influenced by what they read, watch, or listen to. The media industries encourage these assumptions by trumpeting Americans'—particularly young Americans'—ever-increasing "media savvy."

*Ad Nauseam* is guided by a singular proposition: to show the varied ways that this culture *matters*. The task is made more difficult by the fact that the particular culture we're concerned with—consumer culture—is generally not recognized as "culture" at all. We're not merely talking about pop culture here, or American culture (although there is a great deal of overlap). We're talking about a culture *centered on buying and selling*, a culture defined primarily by pecuniary interests.

In confronting consumer culture in all its guises, *Ad Nauseam* tends to focus on advertising—and by "advertising" we mean to use the term not merely in the form of the magazine pages you thumb through to get to the table of contents, or the fifteen-second interludes between TV programs, but in the broadest possible sense. As an industry, advertising has evolved over its hundred-plus years to pervade and transform all aspects of American life. You can actually see this process take shape by examining print ads over the course of the last century. These mini-portraits of American life reveal a decided trend: first, the "reason-why" direct appeal disappeared, fol-

lowed by the text, then the product. By the 1980s, a typical ad—still distinguishable from media “content”—would contain nothing more than a logo superimposed over a photo of a sexy woman, happy couple, or puppy.

Today, as we progress deeper into the twenty-first century, the trend continues apace, only by now the ad itself has disappeared as all popular media—film, magazines, television, pop music, and websites—have come to function as ads. As in the plot of the sci-fi B movie *They Live*, Consume! is implied in every media message. Every hit on the radio brings to mind a corresponding car commercial. Online book reviews scan with an imaginary “Click here to purchase at Amazon.com” button. An invisible FOR SALE sign hangs over everything the Desperate Housewives keep in their impressively expensive closets.

The evolution of advertisements has a corollary in the evolution (or, if you prefer, de-evolution) of our brains. We’re surrounded by so many commercial messages that in order to be productive human beings, we’ve tried to cope. We’ve become experts in making snap judgments, in tuning things out. We’ll consider “new and improved” a selling point the first time but learn to ignore it. Twelve-story billboards that initially catch our eye inevitably become invisible. We stop opening e-mails with headers that resemble spam. The more ads proliferate, the more we rely—the more we *have* to rely—on defense mechanisms.

We’ve also learned, for example, ways of distinguishing what advertisements actually *mean* from what they *say*, nuances that you won’t find in any schoolbooks. My friend Paul once joked about the “new” Soft ’n Creamy brand of Breyers ice cream. “So, was all the ice cream they made before hard and crusty?” he said, laughing. His observation struck me as funny at the time. But later I remembered that I had actually wondered a

similar thing *when I was six years old*. Seriously perplexed by the major laundry detergent brands boldly declaring themselves “new and improved,” I pestered my mom to tell me what was wrong with them before. Upon learning that these descriptives were essentially meaningless, I did what every forward-thinking person does: I ignored them.

Inculcating this kind of skepticism is the foundation of a burgeoning media literacy movement, where well-intentioned critics point to disbelief as the necessary prescriptive for ad-land. “Don’t trust advertising,” they say. “You can’t believe what you read or watch. The media lie.”

A well-developed sense of skepticism is, of course, crucial in navigating consumer culture. But skepticism turns out to be a surprisingly limited tool: it gets exhausting quickly. If the typical American sees three thousand ads every day, it’s unlikely she’ll notice more than ten, let alone have time or energy to analyze them. Besides, as anyone who’s ever been sucked into a senseless novel or scary movie knows, there’s pleasure in getting snookered from time to time.

For many years, I self-published a magazine called *Stay Free!* that sometimes ran parodies of popular advertisements. One such parody, designed to resemble a Gap ad, portrayed a young man who had just hung himself, alongside the familiar slogan “khakis swing.” My contributors and I intentionally left the Gap logo off, but it didn’t matter. Everyone we talked to who saw the ad immediately thought of the Gap. Some peo-



ple even mistook the parody for the real thing. A coworker of mine at an urban design magazine congratulated me for snagging a Gap ad! This woman wasn't stupid. She just didn't consciously process the image. Like the students rattling off the brands in "American Alphabet," she reflexively identified the look and feel of the image but never really thought about it.

What we aim to do with *Ad Nauseam* is encourage readers to "think about it"—to make people conscious of the things that they are usually unconscious of, if only for a moment. How does advertising really work? How does it shape not merely our product purchasing but the ways we define community, friendship, and family? What does it mean to live in a consumer culture?

The consumer world, after all, isn't the only world possible. But Americans young and old are like the students in my high school class: fish who can't see the water . . . and, okay, every so often we'll read an eye-opening article and notice the tide, but critical analysis of commercialism is one message that bears repeating again and again. In fact, it *must* be heard over and over if it's going to challenge His Master's Voice, that endlessly chattering loop: advertising.

### *What Is Stay Free!?*

A familiarity with the magazine that spawned this book is by no means necessary for appreciating it, but a bit of background should help provide context. *Stay Free!* began life as a free, local music zine in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, around 1993. The name was chosen as a spoof on the faux feminist name of a popular brand of maxipads. If companies can steal ideas from women's activists, we reasoned, *why not try to steal them back?*

In 2005, we launched a blog, *Stay Free! Daily*, that covers issues similar to those covered in the magazine: marketing mis-

deeds, corporate shenanigans, advertising schemes, and the occasional item related to Brooklyn, where *Stay Free!* headquarters are now located. We eventually decided to go “paper free,” putting out what would be the final issue of the magazine in 2006 and focusing on the blog, which continues on at [blog.stayfreemagazine.org](http://blog.stayfreemagazine.org).

### *About This Book*

Roughly 70 percent of the articles in here originally appeared in the pages of *Stay Free!* in one form or another. Many have been updated, several have been entirely rewritten, and a few are published in their original form. For those of you who care about things like sources, we’ve listed the *Stay Free!* issue number and approximate date of previously published stories at the end of each piece, as well as the author’s name when the article wasn’t penned by one or both of us. Entries that have no such citation are original to this book.

In order to understand consumer culture, you need to first understand modern advertising. So, in terms of organization, the first section looks at how advertising works—and not merely how advertising does what it is intended to do (sell products) but what it does in the process of doing it. Most people have a very limited—and wrong—understanding of advertising. They assume that commercials succeed by prompting viewers to run off to buy the advertised good. The enlightened ad agent, however, merely hopes to win the attention of prospective buyers by momentarily knocking them out of their media comas. Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of consumer advertising isn’t designed to persuade anyone of anything, but merely to link a favorable (if arbitrary) image to one’s brand and to keep it “top of mind” among potential consumers.

In the second part, we look at how rampant consumerism affects individuals and their psyches. No one is immune from advertising's influence. To be not influenced is to be nonsentient. Every time you're distracted by the blinking banner ad—every time you glimpse a naked torso—you're being influenced, regardless of whether you end up buying the advertised good. In fact, altered purchasing habits are only one possible effect of advertising, and a minor one at that. Here we look at how consumer society shapes our behavior, our personal goals, and our attitudes toward our fellows.

In the third section, we take a step back from the individual and consider how consumer culture affects society at large. Nothing is wrong with buying and selling. How else would we secure our morning bagel? The problem starts when the profit motive invades places where it has no business being: schools, courtrooms, and hospitals. The situation is complicated by the fact that advertising has increasingly received First Amendment protection, so that sellers are free to advertise however they like, but you aren't free to get away from it. The result? A society that favors noise and idiocy over logic and quiet contemplation.

Having addressed the basics, we start exploring some of the details in the fourth section. Here we go behind the scenes of the media machine, looking at places and processes that the normal human never sees or ponders: a Nike shop designed exclusively for celebrities, market researchers paid to spy on shoppers, and the creation of corporate-sponsored holidays.

In the same way that going “behind the scenes” sheds light on the consumer world, history presents a mind-altering side to the story. But the commercial media system we know and love is aggressively ahistoric, largely because true warts-and-all history interferes with selling. We explain this in the fifth sec-

tion, drawing on history as a means of understanding a present where Einstein sells khakis and “freedom” can be purchased with a zero-percent-interest credit card.

The final chapter is often one in which authors outline solutions to all of the problems they’ve detailed. We’re not going that route because there is no grand panacea we can honestly prescribe. Instead, for the sixth section, we’ve collected a few minor acts of protest: people who have found creative ways to subvert, exploit, or merely survive the marketing machine. None of these examples are going to change the world but they at the very least suggest possibilities for entertainment not centered on consuming.

### *Introduction*

In his cult classic movie *Idiocracy*, Mike Judge portrayed a future society so anesthetized by advertising that people have given up all intellectual pursuits to devote their time to TV, money, and hand jobs. Though riddled with slapstick and potty humor, Judge’s fable provides us with an important cautionary tale. What happens to a society when it lets corporate marketing dominate its culture? When everything from hospitals to schools to city parks is mined for its profit potential?

What happens is that the governing body resembling democracy quickly devolves into idiocracy. Whereas in a democracy, constituents are defined by their connection to others (“citizens”), in an idiocracy they are defined by their propensity to buy things (“consumers”). Whereas a democracy is governed by rational thought and debate, an idiocracy is fueled by emotion and impulse.

This idiocracy isn’t merely part of a speculative future; it’s already here, invading our schoolbooks, computer screens, and municipalities. Perhaps the scariest thing about *Idiocracy* the

movie is how much it looks like our reality: with newscasts filled with highway chases and celebrity profiles, public pay phones that work only as billboards, and elected officials who mouth nonsense while nakedly fronting for industry.

*Ad Nauseam* is our attempt to teach readers how to look more critically at consumer culture. But we don't want this goal to be mistaken for an end in itself; learning the methods and madness of media mechanizations is only the first step. In order to truly understand unchecked consumerism, we need some sense of an alternative—something to compare it with. And in order to get that sense, we need to start placing some boundaries on the marketing machine. In other words, we need to take action. To that end, we've included information about nonprofit, activist organizations at the end of this book, so that readers so inspired can get involved in battling the powers that be. Only by challenging rampant commercialism and limiting its reach can we hope to ever understand consumer culture and our place within it.

—Carrie McLaren

