Fine Print:
Advertising and the 1950s – Ethics, Culture, and Criticism

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Introduction

The American people experienced a wide range of social and cultural changes during the 1950s. The domestic economy grew rapidly in the postwar years, allowing many middle and working-class people to take part in the growing consumer economy, while millions of white Americans poured into the expanding suburbs.¹ As the economy expanded, so too did the phenomenon of mass culture. New inventions such as the television, as well as the continued proliferation of radios and automobiles, and printed media such as newspapers and magazines, exposed Americans to an unprecedented amount of media, including advertisements. This led to a period of historic growth for the advertising industry, “powered by a combination of demographics and geography.”²

But this proliferation of mass media alarmed many Americans, and advertising in particular bore the brunt of this uneasiness. Critics found advertising to be lewd, hypersexual, dishonest, and otherwise detrimental to social and cultural norms. Stephen Fox, who wrote a history of American advertising, noted that Americans in the 1950s held “a remarkably consistent picture of the advertising world: false in tone, tense in pace, vacant and self-hating, over-heated and oversexed.”³ Marshall McLuhan, a media critic of the 1950s, echoed the sentiment that the industry was “over-heated” when he noted that Americans had become so desensitized to advertising, that they suffered from a state of media “weariness” and “sluggishness.”⁴ Few Americans trusted the industry, and its continued growth was a cause for concern among many social critics. Advertising came to be seen as a sort of omnipresent,

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monolithic force that was reshaping culture and society in a negative way. At its worst, it was seen as a rogue industry that was free to exert its will on an unsuspecting populace.

Many of the historical works written on the advertising industry, and on the history of the 1950s in general, have reinforced these ideas about the advertising industry. One of the most important historical works on the history of advertising, Jackson Lears’s *Fables of Abundance*, postulated that advertising had become a cultural institution that had significantly affected American culture.\(^5\) Michael Schudson put forth a similar concept in his book, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, arguing that advertising has had a significant, and often dubious, impact on American society.\(^6\) Other historical works have documented the general history of the industry, but have not explicitly addressed the industry’s response to the criticism it received. Stephen Fox presented a general history of advertising in his book, *The Mirror Makers*, and he addressed some of the criticisms the industry faced.\(^7\) He did not however, explicitly address the industry’s response to these critiques in the context of the 1950s. In contrast to these other historical treatments of advertising, the goal of this paper is to put forth the hypothesis that advertisers viewed themselves as having a negligible impact on American society and to address, in the context of the 1950s, how advertisers answered the criticism they received and presented evidence that ran contrary to these critiques.

Advertising was not the abhorrent monolith that many of its critics made it out to be. But if this was not so, then the question must be asked as to why it was such a constant target for criticism throughout the 1950s. At least some of this may be explained by the culture of the time. Mass media was a relatively new phenomenon in the 1950s, at least as far as its size and scope

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\(^7\) Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers*, see generally.
was concerned, and many Americans may have not known what to make of it. It is not difficult to understand how a sudden and unprecedented barrage of messages designed to sell products could have made a person feel uneasy. This seemingly omnipresent commercialism may have led Americans to feel that older values were somehow being undermined by a cheap and trivial commercial culture.

The Cold War must also not be forgotten. History does not occur in a vacuum, and while Americans were dealing with the novelties of mass culture, they were also engaged in the ideological struggle of the Cold War. This may have led to an intensification of the fear of mental manipulation on a massive scale. Advertisers, who worked in the business of persuasion, may have been viewed as being capable of such mass manipulation. In an age of atomic weapons ideological warfare, and other forms of Cold War hysteria, perhaps the fear of mass mind control was understandable.

Advertising also happens to be a convenient target for voicing discontent about the nature of postwar life. The advertising man, dressed in a suit, working in the city and likely living in the suburbs, with his face-paced yet seemingly meaningless job, seems only to be a cog in the machine of mass consumer culture. This made such a character a perfect archetype in which to play out a drama about the problems of 1950s conformity. Such a story was also highly relatable for millions of Americans, who likely connected with the seeming meaninglessness of a life in which their main function was to consume and to facilitate consumption.

Critiques of advertising in the 1950s clustered around three distinct themes. The first was a criticism of advertising for its lack of ethics, honesty, and corporate responsibility. Attacks against the ethics of the advertising industry were based on the premise that advertisers seemed willing to do anything to persuade consumers to buy their products, from simple lying, to
attempting to use psychological methods to manipulate the minds of unwitting purchasers. Social critics such as Vance Packard claimed that advertisers were using unethical methods of advertising, such as motivation research and subliminal messaging, to force unwilling consumers to buy their products. The American government also accused the industry of wrongdoing, as government regulatory bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission and Federal Communications Commission cited the industry for misconduct dozens of times throughout the decade. These sanctions implied that advertising firms were less than ideal corporate citizens.

The second main criticism of advertising related to its effects on economics and culture. This critique centered on the idea that advertising was debasing American morals and standards, as well as the economy, because it infused sexuality into mainstream culture and persuaded Americans to waste their money on intrinsically worthless consumer products. Social critics such as Marshall McLuhan and Betty Friedan accused the industry of creating a homogenized society, and they claimed that advertising itself was a dehumanizing force that coerced consumers into conforming to certain standards and norms. McLuhan saw advertising as a pervasive social force that promoted conformity and hyper sexuality, which he outlined in his 1951 book, The Mechanical Bride. Friedan wrote from a feminist perspective, and in her 1963 book, The Feminine Mystique, she explained how advertising had exploited women while also attempting to persuade them to conform to certain standards. From an economic perspective, John Galbraith wrote of how advertising contributed to his theory of the “Dependence Effect,” an economic model that explained how affluent societies synthesized desires through the means of

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production, which resulted in waste and the sapping of wealth.\textsuperscript{11} Together, these cultural and economic critiques of advertising created a picture of the advertising industry as an omnipresent cultural force that was invading American minds, debasing American morals, and eroding American wealth.

The third critique of advertising focused on the professionals who worked in the advertising industry. Much of this criticism derived from the popular literature of the period. These works of fiction portrayed advertising men as morally dubious reprobates and drunkards who made a living in the business of mass manipulation. Frederic Wakeman sparked this literary craze in 1946 with his book, \textit{The Hucksters}, which forever cemented the word “huckster” as a synonym for the immoral adman.\textsuperscript{12} Dozens of similar works followed, all casting similarly unflattering portrayals of the people who worked in the advertising business. Some of these books became revered pieces of postwar fiction. Sloan Wilson’s \textit{The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit} became the quintessential story of postwar conformity.\textsuperscript{13} Arthur Miller’s 1949 play, \textit{Death of a Salesman}, was a powerful story about the pitfalls of the American Dream.\textsuperscript{14} As pushers of materialism who used mass culture as the medium through which they communicated their message, advertising men were perhaps the perfect personification of the culture of the 1950s. As such, they made for a convenient vehicle through which authors could represent all that was wrong with society. Together, the works of fiction crafted by these authors created an archetypical anti-hero for the culture of conformity of the 1950s, and cemented the image of

\textsuperscript{12} Frederic Wakeman, \textit{The Hucksters} (New York: Bantam Books, 1948) (Original Publication: 1947), see generally.
advertising men as crass materialists who secretly longed for a meaning outside of the rampant materialism of the suburbs.

The advertising industry of the 1950s was well aware of these critiques. Indeed, many of the criticisms directed towards the industry were discussed in the advertising trade journals of the 1950s and in the memoirs of the men who worked in the industry throughout the decade. One such journal was *Printers’ Ink*. In the 1950s, *Printers’ Ink* was one of the two most influential and prestigious journals of the advertising industry, rivaled only by *Advertising Age*. Surprisingly, many previous historical works have glossed over *Printers’ Ink*, and have instead focused on *Advertising Age*. For this reason, it was beneficial to give *Printers’ Ink* an extended analysis for the purpose of revealing previously unexplored material concerning the industry. *Printers’ Ink* will thus be the primary journal for information on the industry used in this paper. Every issue from 1950 through 1959 has been examined for these purposes.

In addition to *Printers’ Ink*, the memoirs of David Ogilvy provide a great deal of information on the advertising industry of the 1950s. Ogilvy started his own advertising industry, Ogilvy & Mather, in 1948, and over the course of the 1950s he became one of the most respected and revered executives in the industry. His first memoir, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, was written in 1962.\(^{15}\) The second memoir, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, was written in 1983, and only information relevant to the 1950s has been used as source material.\(^{16}\) Taken together, these memoirs provide keen insights into the advertising business from the perspective of an industry leader.

\(^{15}\) David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (Harpenden, UK: Southbank Publishing, 2011) (Originally Published in 1962), see generally.

Another industry executive, Rosser Reeves, provided his perspective on the industry in his 1961 book *Reality in Advertising*.\(^{17}\) Reeves was chairman of the Ted Bates & Company advertising agency throughout the 1950s and, like Ogilvy, he was one of the most respected and influential men in the industry. Several other supplemental works have also been consulted. Business critic Martin Meyer’s book, *Madison Avenue* (1957), provided useful insights into the inner-workings of the advertising industry.\(^{18}\) Researcher Pierre Martineau’s 1957 book, *Motivation in Advertising*, detailed many of the research methods used by advertising agencies in the 1950s.\(^{19}\) Finally, industry executive Claude Hopkins provided the framework for many of the methodologies used in advertising during the 1950s in his 1923 book, *Scientific Advertising*.\(^{20}\)

These journals and memoirs lay the foundation for the basis of this paper, which will study the advertising industry’s reaction to the many critiques of its work and describe the alternate ways in which advertisers viewed themselves.

Advertisers believed they were doing the opposite of what their critics suggested. From an ethical standpoint, advertisers saw themselves as honest corporate citizens. In contrast to Vance Packard’s assertions that advertisers were using cutting edge psychological techniques such as motivation research and subliminal messaging, the reality is that the actual techniques of 1950s advertising were quite banal and mundane, and consisted of tried and true methods that had been in use for decades. In terms of the industry’s effects on culture and economics, advertisers believed their effect on culture was negligible, and that advertising mirrored, rather than created, culture. They alleged that they exerted a positive influence on economics, promoting an exchange of consumer goods that helped to move money through the economy. As

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for the critique of the advertising man so prevalent in the literature of the time, advertisers acknowledged that a career in advertising was fast-paced and difficult, but they objected to the idea that they were as morally bankrupt as their fictional counterparts. In their minds, they were honest, morally sound, hard-working people, who were no different from anyone else.

The three major critiques of advertising, and the industry response to them, will provide the framework for the three chapters of this paper. Chapter one will be a study of the advertising ethics of the 1950s. This chapter will examine the assertions made by the critics of the advertising industry that advertisers were using unethical methods such as subliminal messaging and false advertising to persuade consumers into buying products, as well as how those within the industry disagreed with this assertion and provided evidence to the contrary. Chapter two will focus on advertising and consumer culture, scrutinizing the critique that advertising was a powerful cultural force that was debasing American cultural values. As with chapter one, the industry’s viewpoint on this matter will also be examined. Chapter three will be a discussion of how the popular literature of the 1950s portrayed advertising professionals as morally corrupted manipulators, and will include the industry’s retort to this literary phenomenon, as well as their perspective as to what working in an advertising agency was actually like.
Chapter One: Advertising Ethics

Throughout the 1950s the advertising industry found itself on the defensive from those who claimed it was using unethical, and even subversive, methods in its attempts to sell consumer products to the American public. Advertising was cast as the great manipulator of the American people, an industry that was as dishonest as it was dangerous, and that could not be left to its own devices. This criticism came both from the American public and from the American government. In the public realm, Vance Packard, one of the foremost social critics of the 1950s, seemed to have spoken for a majority of the American public in 1957 when he wrote that advertisers were “engineering our consent to [the advertisers] propositions,” treating American consumers like “Pavlov’s conditioned dog.”\(^{21}\) Packard’s 1957 book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, created a public outcry against the supposed use of unethical practices in advertising that were based on the psychological methods of motivation research and subliminal messaging.

This criticism manifested itself not only in public opinion, but also in the form of law, as the federal government closely regulated the industry throughout the decade, leading to numerous sanctions for false advertising claims and numerous battles in the Supreme Court between the advertising industry and the Federal Trade Commission. Indeed, from 1950 to 1959 the Washington correspondent for *Printers’ Ink*, G.A. Nichols, reported on well over one hundred false advertising suits brought against the advertising industry by the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission.\(^{22}\) Most of these violations were based on small infractions, largely the result of unintentional mistakes on the part of the advertisers that either confused or misled consumers. Nevertheless, the constant legal actions


taken against the advertising business on the part of federal regulatory bodies helped to drive home the idea amongst both the public and the government that advertising was a rogue industry in need of constant monitoring.

But these claims were largely unwarranted. The vast majority of advertising in the 1950s was not subversive or manipulative. Indeed, it was surprisingly conservative, mundane, and ultimately impotent. Industry executives were shocked by the criticism they received, believing themselves to be the exact opposite of how they were publicly portrayed. They saw themselves as good corporate citizens, and as civil servants who extolled the values of capitalism and the American way of life. Perhaps David Ogilvy, head of the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency, put it best when he wrote that “we are merely human, trying to do a necessary human job with dignity, with decency and with competence.”

Part One: Motivation Research and Subliminal Messaging

The catalyst for much of the public criticism that befell the advertising industry came from one source – Vance Packard’s 1957 book The Hidden Persuaders. Packard was a renowned journalist and social commentator, and The Hidden Persuaders, his first book, became an immediate sensation as the first book to warn the public of the dangers of subliminal messaging, and the related phenomenon of “motivation research.” It was a best seller for nineteen weeks.

The book was both blunt and sensational, as Packard asserts that “large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our personal decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the

\[24\] Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers, p. 185.
social sciences.” The implications of such a phenomenon were indeed frightening; advertisers could bypass the conscious mind and influence the unsuspecting consumer into buying anything through subliminal messaging, and consumers would be powerless to stop this frightening and unethical technique. Packard summed up the situation with a literary anecdote, postulating that if the motivation research trend were to continue, the result would be an “Orwellian configuration of the world.”

To say that the advertising industry had the power to turn the United States into a society similar to that of George Orwell’s novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which the world’s people live in a dystopian society were actions and thought are rigorously controlled by a corrupt power structure, was a strong claim. It was also completely untrue. As it turns out, Packard’s thesis was based on the work of only two men, neither of whom was influential in the advertising industry and both of whom turned out to be less than honest. The first man, the father of motivation research, was Ernest Dichter, who in 1953 created the Institute for Motivation Research. The other man, James Vicary, was an advertising consultant and motivation research enthusiast who conducted one of the first public tests of subliminal messaging in 1957 at a movie theater in northern New Jersey.

Dichter made a name for himself when he became the psychological consultant in the marketing and research department of the Chrysler Corporation in the 1940s. Trained as a psychologist, he pioneered the method of motivation research, which by definition is a psychological method to uncover the subconscious motivations that influence individual

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27 This claim is verified by three independent sources: Martin Mayer’s *Madison Avenue* (1958), David Ogilvy’s *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1962), and Rosser Reeves’ *Reality in Advertising* (1961).
consumer buying habits. It differed from subliminal messaging in that subliminal messaging was the intentional planting of a subconscious factor to induce a certain behavior. But despite his title as “psychological consultant,” Dichter’s job had more to do with traditional research, such as polling, consumer feedback, and questionnaires, than it did with motivation research. The main reason for this centered on the fact that advertising agencies and their clients saw motivation research as a bunk theory. Richard Lessler, the marketing and research manager of Grey Advertising put it succinctly in an interview with Martin Mayer: “for Christ sake don’t tell me it’s research, because it isn’t research as I understand the word.”

Martin Mayer was one of the premier non-fiction writers of the 1950s, as well as an American business critic. In 1957 he conducted an extensive investigation of the advertising business for his book, *Madison Avenue*, in which he interviewed dozens of advertising executives. Despite the breadth of his research, Mayer found only one man who thought Dichter’s research was valid and could be duplicated. Rosser Reeves, chairman of the board for the Ted Bates and Company advertising agency throughout most of the 1950s, objected to the idea of motivation research on scientific and moral grounds, writing that “good advertising men, like good scientists, want research that is duplicable,” and that “advertising works openly, in the bare and pitiless sunlight,” echoing a popular sentiment that made Dichter the black sheep of Madison Avenue.

Dichter’s lack of validity was compounded by the fact that he was a known liar. Perhaps his most famous maxim on motivation research was his supposed finding that men preferred convertibles to sedans because they thought of the convertible as their mistress and the sedan as

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32 Martin Mayer, *Madison Avenue*, p. 239.
their wife. Dichter often connected this to his part in one of the most famous and successful
advertisements of all time: Chrysler’s famous “Look at all three” advertising campaign. In fact,
Dichter played no role in the campaign, as the advertisement ran in 1932, six years before
Dichter arrived in the United States from his native Netherlands.\footnote{Martin Mayer, Madison Avenue, p. 243.} Rosser Reeves recited the
story of Dichter’s time at Chrysler more accurately when he wrote that “[motivation]
“research”…revealed that motor cars were actually phallic symbols, and that people wanted
them bigger and better than ever…. the public, unaware of so hidden a motivation, proceeded to
buy small cars by hundreds of thousands, costing Detroit millions of dollars.”\footnote{Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 72.}

The other half of the duo behind Vance Packard’s indictment of advertising was James
Vicary, who had been proclaiming the benefits of psychological techniques in advertising since
1951. That year he wrote an article in Printers’ Ink, one of the major advertising trade journals,
in which he explained “how psychiatric methods can be applied to market research” through
“vague questions” which force the respondent back upon “his own inner psychological
resources,” thus revealing hidden and subconscious motivations.\footnote{James M. Vicary, “How to Use Psychological Methods in Market Research,” Printers’ Ink, Volume 235, number 6, May 11, 1951, pp. 39-48.} It is worth noting that most of
the popular topics featured in Printers’ Ink lead to editorials, letters, and follow-up articles in
future editions. Vicary’s article produced none of these, and his psychological approach was
ignored throughout the world of advertising. Indeed, from 1951, the year of Vicary’s first article
on psychological methods in advertising, until 1960, the topic was mentioned in no more than
twelve articles out of the roughly nine thousand that were run by Printers’ Ink.\footnote{Printers’ Ink, see generally from 1951 through 1959. The journal was published weekly, and each issue contained roughly twenty articles.}
In 1957, perhaps because he was unable to find an advertising agency that would allow him to conduct a subliminal messaging trial, Vicary set up an experiment at a movie theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in which he and his colleagues flashed the phrases “eat popcorn” and “drink Coca-Cola” on the theater’s screen. The images flashed at a rate that, as Vicary put it, could not consciously be seen but would register subconsciously with theatergoers. They subsequently reported that their experiment had led to a significant spike in popcorn and soda sales.38

This experiment caused an immediate public outcry as soon as Vicary went public with it. He was careful in his wording, telling *Printers’ Ink* that the point of a subliminal message was to do away with “the whole barrage of advertising” because a “light touch is better.”39 This did little to sway the public, however, whose opinion of the event ranged from skepticism to paranoia. Almost immediately, major television networks, including CBS, NBC, ABC, and the National Association of Radio and Television broadcasters informed the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) that they would not use the technique.40 Negative sentiment was also directed against the advertising community as a whole, which *Newsweek* sardonically, and incorrectly, noted was “flocking to [subliminal messaging] like so many popcorn lovers.”41

The subliminal message paranoia reached a fever pitch in January 1958 when Vicary agreed to perform the experiment on a select group comprised of members of Congress, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In this trial, the committee watched a Civil War-themed television show while Vicary flashed the

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41 “Devilish?” *Newsweek*, 10/14/57, p. 100.
subliminal messages.\textsuperscript{42} The result was a resounding failure, as no audience members reported any urge to do what the messages had instructed them to do.\textsuperscript{43} After the viewing, FCC commissioner Robert E. Lee, notorious for his hard stance on the advertising industry, said that he “refuse[d] to get excited about it,” and that he was now convinced the technique would not work.\textsuperscript{44} After humiliating himself in front of the country, Vicary vanished from the public eye, and in 1962 he admitted in an interview that he had falsified the results of the initial tests for publicity reasons.\textsuperscript{45}

As for the rest of the advertising world, many advertisers were angered that Vicary’s publicity stunt had done such seemingly irreparable harm to the industry. David Ogilvy referred to subliminal messaging as a “gimmick,” firmly stating that “no advertiser has ever used it.”\textsuperscript{46} Indeed, he lamented the fact that it had ever gained credibility at all. “Unfortunately, word of [Vicary’s] hypothesis found its way into the public prints, and provided grist for the mills of the anti-advertising brigade,” but subliminal messaging “did not exist,” Ogilvy wrote in his memoir.\textsuperscript{47}

Other advertisers were quick to claim that subliminal messaging and motivation research were not only gimmicks, but that they had never been widely accepted by the industry. Rosser Reeves, who was chairman of his own agency and one of the most respected men on Madison Avenue, wrote his 1961 book \textit{Reality in Advertising} to dispel popular myths and misconceptions about the advertising industry. In it, he retorted against both Packard and Vicary, writing that “there are no hidden persuaders…. As all top advertising men know, such talk is the sheerest

\begin{itemize}
\item[42]“Ghostly Ad Device Has Demonstration,” \textit{Washington Post}, 1/14/58, B14.
\item[44]“Subliminal has a Test; Can’t See if it Works,” \textit{Printers’ Ink}, Vol. 262, no. 3, 1/17/58, pp. 4-5.
\end{itemize}
nonsense.” Rosser Reeves also noted that the public had no reason to fear subliminal messaging or motivation research because no industry he knew of was using it. “They believe that we are manipulating people, that we have sunk pipelines down to the pre-Oedipal wellsprings, that we are practicing some dark, mysterious necromancy…. But [motivation research and subliminal messaging] play no part.”

The fact of the matter is that motivation research was non-existent within the advertising industry outside of the two extraneous examples represented by Dichter and Vicary. Both men represented a fringe group within the industry, and their techniques never became mainstream because advertisers felt that it was unethical and that it didn’t work. Neither man was seen as a visionary. Indeed, both men were ostracized as black sheep who gave advertising a bad name. In the end, they came to represent a very small, but very noisy, minority in the advertising business.

Part Two: The Ethics of Corporate Citizenship

As difficult as it was for advertisers to convince the public that the industry meant no harm, they had an even bigger challenge in convincing the federal government. Contrary to the claims made by many of its critics, the advertising business was far from an industry rotten with power and free to impose its will on an unsuspecting populace. The truth of the matter was that the industry was tightly regulated. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a government regulatory body responsible for monitoring interstate commerce and consumer protection, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a regulatory body responsible for monitoring media such as radio and television, both closely monitored the advertising agency during the 1950s, resulting in frequent and extensive legal battles, as well as several skirmishes in the

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48 Rosser Reeves, *Reality in Advertising*, p. 70.
Supreme Court. Advertisers were mystified by what they saw as the over-zealous nature of the government’s regulators of commerce and communications, portraying themselves as the foremost supporters of capitalism, the makers of the American way of life, and good corporate citizens devoted to the common good.

One of the longest and most bitter of these struggles was the famous “antihistamine case” of 1949-1950. In 1949 the FTC brought a false advertising suit against five corporations, among them the powerful Bristol-Meyers Company, for a claim made in several advertisements about a new antihistamine pill. The advertisements in question featured copy claiming that the new pill was specially formatted to cure symptoms of the common cold. The FTC asserted that the advertisements were misleading because the common cold was, in fact, incurable. As such, the FTC concluded that the advertisements violated federal policy on false advertising.

To the advertising industry, the case appeared trivial enough, a technicality rather than anything intentionally malicious. Problems arose, however, when the two sides disagreed over what penalties would be assessed and how the ads would be changed, and the case was drawn out for over a year. Most advertisers agreed that the advertisements presented a claim that was false, and that the FTC had the right to ban them. Indeed, some of them even praised the FTC for its “quick crackdown” on the initial set of advertisements. They disagreed, however, with the FTC’s decision that the advertisements should make no mention of the pill’s effect on the

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common cold. The case was finally settled; the FTC agreed to drop the charges and the advertisers changed the word “cold” to “hay fever.”

The antihistamine case was only one of many examples of the FTC’s careful monitoring of the advertising industry. In 1957, the FTC probed the advertising practices of the tire industry after a series of complaints over alleged abuses. But this probe had nothing to do with the industry’s abuse of power, or of anything that may legitimately be considered unethical. Rather, the investigation had to do with the use of too many superlatives in tire advertisements. The FTC’s sole reason for conducting the investigation was due to consumer complaints that words such as “super,” “de luxe,” “champion,” and “safety,” were causing confusion among consumers and should not be used in tire advertising because they bore no relevance to the product.

Similar cases occurred throughout the decade, such as in 1951 when the FCC banned several Ovaltine radio commercials due to false advertising. According to the FCC, Ovaltine had misled the public with a false health claim when they told consumers that Ovaltine makes people feel “fresh, vigorous, vital” in the morning. In 1957 the FTC listed a formal complaint against Helene Curtis Industries of Chicago based on a false advertising claim in one of its shampoo commercials. The FTC considered the commercial’s claim that its shampoo would “end your dandruff problems once and for all” misleading because the shampoo would “not have any lasting effect if regular use is discontinued.”

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Those within the advertising business were stunned by the heavy-handedness of both the FCC and the FTC. Most of the citations for false advertising were based on little more than the fact that the colloquialisms and expressions so prevalent in advertisements could not be counted on to be literally true. In essence, the FTC and the FCC were asking a business that relies on figurative language to produce copy that was completely literal. To realize why advertisers were so upset about this, it may be useful to return to the antihistamine case. One of the core principles of advertising is that printed advertisements must be simple enough and short enough to quickly convey a message to the consumer. If they are not, consumers will either lose interest, or not read them at all. An advertisement that reads “Cures cold symptoms” is likely going to receive more attention than a slogan that reads “May reduce hay fever symptoms if taken correctly over a sufficient length of time, but will not cure the body of the flu virus.” The first slogan is not necessarily untrue, so much as it is a shorter, more figurative way of explaining the latter slogan.

Furthermore, none of the government’s claims of industry misconduct were based on accusations of purposefully and maliciously unethical behavior. Neither Vicary’s subliminal messaging nor Dichter’s motivation research was ever cited by the FCC or FTC as the reason for banning or investigating an advertisement, which is not surprising considering that neither method ever made it out of the laboratory. Advertising only ever got into trouble with the FCC or FTC when technical matters concerning improper or misleading use of language were involved, and the advertising industry was quick to point out that trifles over the language of an advertisement cannot be confused with intentionally misleading the public. “If there are still any natural-born liars in advertising, we are under control. Every advertisement we write is scrutinized by lawyers, by the National Association of Broadcasters, and other such bodies,”

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60 This principle is established in every source the author compiled on the advertising industry.
wrote David Ogilvy. He concluded that “even if I wanted to manipulate you, I wouldn’t know how to circumvent the legal regulations.”

In fact, fear of the Federal Trade Commission throughout the 1950s made advertisers more conservative than ever before. As David Ogilvy attested, “fear of becoming embroiled with the Federal Trade Commission, which tries its cases in the newspapers, is now so great that one of our clients recently warned me that if any of our commercials were ever cited by the FCC for dishonesty, he would immediately move his account to another agency.” In a separate incident that occurred while Ogilvy was working on an advertisement for barbeque sauce, he was told by a lawyer at General Foods that he had to “prove that Open-Pit Barbeque Sauce has an ‘old-fashioned’ flavor before [the lawyer] would allow us to make this innocuous claim in advertisements.” These first-hand experiences with the FTC and the fear it instilled in advertisers throughout the country led Ogilvy to conclude that “the consumer is better protected than she knows.”

Advertisers had a difficult time understanding why their industry was subject to constant penalties and punitive action by federal regulatory bodies. Far from a rogue industry in need of constant regulation, they saw their industry as being vital to the national economy and they saw themselves as honest corporate citizens. In 1957, Printers’ Ink published a special report on how to keep Washington out of advertising. The article warned that “the stage is being set for another smear of advertising through the threat of new laws…. Regardless of what it might do to the

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63 David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, p. 175.
64 David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, p. 175.
national economy.”\textsuperscript{66} The “new laws” referred to in the article were a set of new postal laws which would have increased postal rates, thus impeding efforts by magazines and newspapers, major vehicles of advertising, to sell by mail. Also worthy of note is the fact that the article mentions the national economy, implying that what is good for the advertising industry is good for the economy, and the nation as a whole. The article concluded that “there is a general lack of understanding of the part advertising plays in the economy,” and that the best remedy would be to “educate” Washington officials and the general public to the large part advertising plays in increasing the American standard of living and moving goods and services through the economy.\textsuperscript{67} Inherent in this argument is the idea that advertisers had a duty as corporate citizens to promote the economic well being of the American public and the American economy. They reasoned that if they could somehow reveal this fact to the federal government, it would result in less government meddling in the affairs of the advertising business.

The industry was also quick to point out that, from their point of view, they were far more honest and upfront with the American people than the government was. “There is one area of advertising that is totally uncontrolled and completely dishonest: the television commercials for candidates in Presidential elections,” David Ogilvy wrote.\textsuperscript{68} “The nine federal agencies which regulate advertising for products have no say in political advertising…. The networks are obliged to broadcast every political commercial submitted to them, however dishonest.”\textsuperscript{69} Ogilvy refused to do political advertising, which he called the “ultimate vulgarity,” and he lamented the fact that his friend Rosser Reeves had worked for Dwight Eisenhower’s campaign in 1952, advertising

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{68} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 209.
\bibitem{69} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 211.
\end{thebibliography}
the future president “as if he were a tub of toothpaste.”70 He also took issue with advertising for federal programs, such as bonds: “How odd that the [Federal Trade] Commission does not monitor the advertising put out by departments of the U.S. Government…. The amount received on maturity [of a bond] would buy less in goods and services than the amount paid for the bond, and [the buyer] has to pay taxes on the mislabeled interest. Yet the treasury continues to advertise bonds as a ‘gift that keeps on giving.’”71

C.B. Larabee, the publisher of Printers’ Ink, echoed this sentiment when he wrote that “The Federal Trade Commission is very strict about the way in which advertisers employ the word ‘free.’ Why shouldn’t the United States government be required to meet the same standards when it uses the word ‘free?’ When talking about the ‘free health programs,’ why shouldn’t they have to qualify this by saying: ‘subsidized by taxes on the public.’”72 To advertisers, advertising only became dishonest when the government was involved.

Many advertisers also pointed to their records of public service, and to the Advertising Council, as proof that they were not nearly as terrible as they were made out to be. The Advertising Council, popularly known as the Ad Council, was conceived of during World War II as a way to use the advertising industry in aiding the war effort. By the 1950s, the Ad Council had become a nonprofit group of over 140 national advertising agencies whose work included public service announcements and information campaigns.73 Notable Ad Council campaigns included advertisements for the Armed Forces, the Fight Inflation Campaign, Student Nurse Recruitment, Steel Scrap, Home Fire Prevention, the American Red Cross, and Civil Defense

70 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, pp. 176-177.
71 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 208.
programs. Time and again, advertisers would refer to it as the ultimate proof of their goodwill towards the American public and their commitment to corporate citizenship. The Ad Council grew in terms of membership and expenditures for every year of the decade of the 1950s.

Individual agencies also worked for charitable causes and to promote social initiatives. Ogilvy & Mather in particular established a reputation for charity. In 1957, with the New York Philharmonic struggling terribly, Ogilvy & Mather became a consultant free of charge, and began publishing advertisements in the New York Times. The next season, every New York Philharmonic concert sold out Several years later, the agency advertised free of charge in sixteen countries for the World Wildlife Fund.

In addition to their charity work, advertisers saw themselves as patriotic capitalists and Cold Warriors, dispelling the evils of communism throughout the United States by showing the public all that a consumer economy had to offer. “The American people will be engaged in two great battles in 1951 – the fight against world communism and the fight against inflation. Advertising can and must do all within its power to help win those battles,” Eldridge Peterson wrote. Such words were likely spoken all throughout the United States in 1951, but the advertising industry seemed truly invested in this Cold War endeavor. The industry was also in a unique position in relation to the Cold War. American advertising typically extolled the benefits and comforts of consumer culture, which was a hallmark of American capitalism.

Advertisers could also use their role as communicators to promote the ideas and display the benefits of capitalism abroad. In May of 1950, a group of American advertisers started a

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76 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 150.
77 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 150.
radio program that advised all people in the United States and Western Europe to send care packages to West Berlin so that it may “stay free.”\(^7^9\) In a similar effort, Ogilvy & Mather created the first campaign for Radio Free Europe, the European anti-communist radio program.\(^8^0\) Some advertisers even believed that ending the Cold War was in their hands, if they could only show the communist peoples of the world how much capitalism has to offer: “Older than the United Nations itself is the notion that, if advertising men only had a chance, they could help promote the welfare of mankind as they help stimulate the sale of goods.”\(^8^1\)

Advertisers who clung to these charitable and patriotic claims had a difficult time understanding why they came under such criticism, both cultural and regulatory, throughout the 1950s. And in fairness, it seems that they did nothing to spark the zealous nature of the FTC and FCC that haunted them throughout the decade. They felt that they did their share to help the country, and a large majority of advertisers did their best to be honest and upfront with American consumers.

Part Three: Honesty and Simplicity – The Real Methods of Advertising in the 1950s

The advertising methodologies of the 1950s were, in fact, more mundane, simplistic, and, ultimately harmless than either Vance Packard or the federal regulatory bodies seemed to suggest. The research methods performed by advertising agencies more closely resembled the basic and unobtrusive methods pioneered by George Gallup, rather than the more ominous methods pioneered by Ernest Dichter and James Vicary.\(^8^2\) Rather than delving into the minds of

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\(^8^0\) David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, p. 177.
\(^8^2\) Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy, and Martin Mayer all claimed that nearly every advertising agency in America followed Gallup’s method of market research.
consumers through Freudian psychology, advertisers instead relied on simple methods such as point-of-purchase advertising and split-run tests to increase sales. Simply put, point-of-purchase advertising is a methodology that relies on displays designed to catch the consumer’s eye at the point of purchase, such as a window display or a display that is in some way adjacent to where the advertised product was being sold. It is one of the oldest, and most successful forms of advertising. Split-run tests are a method of advertising whereby two different advertisements for the same product are run in the same issue of a magazine or newspaper, data is then collected as to which ad was more successful, with the less successful ad being discontinued. It was widely believed throughout the advertising world that these more simple and honest advertising techniques resulted in the highest sales because they were easy to understand and instilled consumer trust in the product.\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, pp. 54-59.} Furthermore, most advertisers believed that the best way to improve sales was to improve the product, and that no advertising, no matter how persuasive could sell a bad product over a long period.\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, pp. 58-60.} As Rosser Reeves attested, “Advertising stimulates the sales of a good product and accelerates the destruction of a bad product.”\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 61.}

One of the visionaries of 1950s advertising was George Gallup, who pioneered the methodology of market research. Gallup’s research methods focused on hundreds of interviews with consumers of every demographic, and attempted to measure what Gallup called the “recall” of an advertisement through tests in which a participant was shown an advertisement and then asked at some later point in time to explain the specifics of the ad, such as the copy, the image, and what product was being advertised.\footnote{Martin Mayer, \textit{Madison Avenue}, p. 266.} Such research was based on the theory that consumers could only be affected by advertisements they could remember. Through Gallup’s research, “the
advertiser learns what percentage of people…remembered something about his ad, what percentage had a favorable reaction to the ad, and which sales arguments came through to the most people.”87 Not only was this kind of research completely ethical, it was also far more effective than either motivation research or subliminal messaging. “If you were a client, how would you rather we risked your money? On motivations we can measure, where the research is duplicable? Or on motivations we can measure very imperfectly – if, in the mass, we can measure them at all,” Rosser Reeves wrote.88

Interestingly, David Ogilvy broke into advertising by working as the head of Gallup’s Audience Research Institute.89 Ogilvy attested that Gallup’s research on what makes people “read advertisements, and remember what they read” was one of the pillars upon which he, and almost every other advertiser in America, based their advertising.90 It was through Gallup that Ogilvy discovered that the most important factor in convincing consumers to buy a given product was very simple: it depended almost entirely on “what benefit you are going to promise” to the consumer.91 Rosser Reeves echoed this when he wrote that “each advertisement must say to each reader: ‘Buy this product, and you will get this specific benefit.’”92

In offering a benefit, it was critical that the claims made by the advertisement were factual. False advertising was considered unethical for obvious reasons and consumers who felt they had been fooled would never buy the product again. This meant that advertisers had no choice but to be honest. “The public believes that an advertising man can tell almost any lie and get away with it. The exact opposite is true. Such a course leads, at the least, to wasted money,

87 Martin Mayer, Madison Avenue, p. 267.
88 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 73.
89 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, p. 68.
91 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, p. 110.
92 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 47.
and at the most, to commercial suicide,” Rosser Reeves wrote.\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 61.} “To make a claim which the product does not possess merely increases the frequency with which the consumer observes the absence of the claim.”\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 61.} There was no benefit to lying, but there was a benefit to being truthful, which created consumer trust and confidence. “The more people trust you, the more they buy from you,” noted David Ogilvy.\footnote{David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p.149.}

Researchers agreed that the best advertisements were simple, sincere, and based on a factual claim of a product’s benefit. This was proven repeatedly in split-run tests, in which two different advertisements for the same product were run in the same publications on different dates. The editors of \textit{Printers’ Ink} noted that their split-run tests often resulted in no discernible difference in reader interest between two different ads for the same product because “the content of the ads is what really counted.”\footnote{“Which Ad Pulled Best,” \textit{Printers’ Ink}, Vol. 230, no. 1, 1/6/50, p. 38.} Simplicity was also valued in advertising, largely because advertisements are structured to get their points across quickly and to be understood by a wide variety of people. Advertising research consultant and \textit{Chicago Tribune} writer Pierre Martineau put it succinctly and condescendingly when he noted that the average American, “brought up on an intellectual diet on Grade B movies, comic books, sports pages…is not equipped to cope with the professional communicator.”\footnote{Pierre Martineau, \textit{Motivation in Advertising} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. 32.} Rosser Reeves agreed that advertising copy should be simple, easy to read, and should contain no “semantic nonsense.”\footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 114.} Such beliefs resulted in advertising that was relatively conventional. There were no hidden meanings, complex psychological phrases, or other tricks. There was only honest copy.

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  \item \footnote{“Which Ad Pulled Best,” \textit{Printers’ Ink}, Vol. 230, no. 1, 1/6/50, p. 38.}
  \item \footnote{Pierre Martineau, \textit{Motivation in Advertising} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. 32.}
  \item \footnote{Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 114.}
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The fact of the matter is that advertisers had no reason, monetary or otherwise, to dabble in any unsavory techniques. Consumers were not sheep that would simply bend to the will of the advertising business. Most people understand when they are being cheated and lied to, and advertisers knew this. Selling a product on false pretenses could never work, and, despite the claims of the FCC and FTC, advertisers never tried it. Nor did advertisers ever take Ernest Dichter or James Vicary seriously. Instead, they sought out the much more principled and effective methods of George Gallup, often with great success. It is worth noting that the Gallup Poll has become one of the most important tools for measuring the pulse of the American public, whereas Dichter and Vicary have been lost to the annals of history. If these two men had the influence Vance Packard claimed they did, this would not be the case. Similarly, if advertisers were as dishonest as can be inferred by the claims made against them by the FTC and FCC, they would have gone out of business, because consumers would never have kept buying the goods they were advertising.
Chapter Two: Advertising and Consumer Culture

Advertising represented one of the core pillars of consumer culture. And as consumer culture grew dramatically throughout the 1950s, so did advertising. But there were some who found the growth of consumer culture, and advertising in particular, disquieting. These critics saw advertising as becoming an increasingly pervasive force in American society, playing an ever-greater part in influencing cultural norms and standards. This was dangerous and disturbing, they reasoned, because advertising elicited negative behavior, such as materialism, sexism, lewd conduct, and conformity. Importantly, this list of critics included some of the most prominent and influential figures of the 1950s, including media critic Marshall McLuhan, feminist writer Betty Friedan, social critic and writer Vance Packard, and economist John Galbraith.

In the social and cultural sense, McLuhan, Packard, and Friedan believed that advertising was homogenizing American society, turning citizens into consumers while encouraging the American people to live increasingly materialistic lives. McLuhan in particular saw advertising as a means of shaping culture. Advertising “takes on the character of social engineering and education,” he wrote in 1951.99 Together with film and radio, McLuhan referred to advertising as the “folklore of industrial man.”100 Friedan echoed this sentiment from a feminist perspective, hypothesizing that advertisers were attempting to educate women through advertising to strive to be housewives and homemakers.101 Packard implicated advertising in turning the American people into a nation of “status seekers.”102

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100 *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* is the name of McLuhan’s 1951 book, which explores film, radio, and advertising.
At least one economist was also alarmed. John Galbraith, an influential postwar economist, believed that advertising was sapping the nation’s wealth by causing Americans to spend their money on intrinsically useless consumer products rather than for causes that would promote the common good. This erosion of the nation’s wealth, he reasoned, would ultimately harm the economy. Galbraith based these ideas on his belief that advertising produces nothing more than the selfish goal of obtaining the “highest standard of living” possible. Essentially, Galbraith saw advertising as a force that could quietly rob Americans of their wealth while also inducing them to live more selfishly and materialistically. This made advertising a deceptively dangerous economic force.

The advertising business argued that advertising was actually a positive force for the American economy, facilitating a healthy exchange of money, goods, and services. Printers’ Ink took the lead in explaining how advertising helped, rather than hindered the economy. Throughout the decade there were dozens of separate articles espousing the economic benefits of advertising. Indeed, most issues contained at least one article related to advertising’s positive effect on the nation’s economic health. One of their chief arguments centered on their belief that advertising kept numerous major industries, including radio and television, afloat by creating a steady flow of consumer dollars. As Nathan Kelne, an associate editor of Printers’ Ink, noted, “reduction of advertising would constrict business; constriction of business would result in fewer tax dollars” and “less revenue for business and the government.” Such articles appeared repeatedly in Printers’ Ink.

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105 *Printers’ Ink*, see generally issues from 1950 through 1959. Most issues contain at least one article on advertising and economics.
As for advertising’s cultural impact, advertisers would argue that it was negligible; believing as they did that advertising existed not as an artistic or cultural force in American society, but simply as a tool to sell products. Rosser Reeves, Chairman of the Board for Ted Bates & Company, summed up advertising’s role in American society in his 1961 book, *Reality in Advertising*, in which he wrote that “The true role of advertising is exactly that of the first salesman ever hired by the first manufacturer…to shift the demand curve between products. This is the American economy. It is also economic liberty.”

Contrary to McLuhan’s assertions that advertising was a pervasive force in American society, Reeves claimed that advertising research had proven that most people had never seen a majority of his, or any other, agency’s advertisements in spite of the fact that they appeared in print, on radio, and on television.

Advertisers also took issue with the criticism they received over matters of sex and gender in advertising. In terms of the use of sex in advertising, advertisers were well aware that many people objected to it, and indeed, they often tried to curtail its use as a sales tactic. *Printers’ Ink* ran numerous articles throughout the decade advocating less use of sex in advertising. Many of these came in the form of editorials, letters from readers, and articles that addressed how the industry might improve its reputation. Rosser Reeves also objected to the use of sex in advertising because he believed it drew the consumer’s attention away from the product.

In facing criticism that they were manipulating the nation’s women, advertisers were quick to point out that they accepted women into their industry, and often gave them the responsibility of managing advertising directed toward the female demographic. Ogilvy &

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106 Rosser Reeves, *Reality in Advertising*, p. 150.
Mather, for example, had women working in all of their departments geared towards products intended for women.¹⁰⁹ Rather than manipulating women, advertisers were actually hiring them.

*Part One: Advertising as a Force for Setting Cultural Standards*

Throughout the 1950s and until his death in 1980, Marshall McLuhan was one of the most revered pioneers of media and communication theory.¹¹⁰ In later years, he received newfound fame and attention for forecasting the invention of the Internet decades before it was developed.¹¹¹ McLuhan’s professional career started in 1951 with the publication of his seminal work, *The Mechanical Bride*, a pioneering study in the field of popular culture. In it, McLuhan examined contemporary advertisements, explained their new role as the shapers of culture, and demonstrated how this new role had allowed them to debase culture and art, objectify the human body, and reduce human beings to mindless consumers.

McLuhan prefaced the book by attesting to the unique situation of postwar America, and of consumer society in general. He wrote that “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind…. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike.”¹¹² The result of this condition, McLuhan postulated, was a world in which culture was shaped by the art of selling products and people were reduced to little more than a flock of sheep. “Today the tyrant rules not by club or

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¹¹⁰ Arthur Asa Berger, *Media and Society, a Critical Perspective* (Roman and Littlefield, 2007), see generally.
fist, but, disguised as a market researcher, he shepherds his flocks in the ways of utility and comfort,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{113}

\textit{The Mechanical Bride} theorized that advertising had not only begun to reshape culture, but that it had taken on a poetry and mythology all its own. “The ad makers take over all the popular myths and poetry” and “ads themselves [become] the main form of industrial culture,” McLuhan wrote.\textsuperscript{114} The reason for this, he theorized, resulted from a lack of authentic culture in industrial society. “Traditional folklore consists of the arts of song and dance…. But an industrial world cannot produce the same folk forms.”\textsuperscript{115} In the absence of authentic art and culture, “the folklore of industrial man,” as McLuhan called it, was the advertisement. This was compounded by the fact that advertising became a seemingly omnipresent force in American society. McLuhan ominously wrote that, in industrial society, we only have “the freedom to listen” to the constant barrage of advertising.\textsuperscript{116} With its newfound prominence, the advertisement becomes a perverse, intrusive art form that trivialized its patrons and made them little more than mindless consumers.\textsuperscript{117}

With the advertisement as its premiere art form, industrial society became morally bankrupt, vapid, and vacuous, and its citizens were dehumanized and homogenized. “A huge passivity has settled on industrial society…. It would require an exceptional degree of awareness and an especial heroism of effort to be anything but supine consumers of processed goods. Society begins to take on the character of the kept woman whose role is expected to be

\textsuperscript{113} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, preface, p. VII.
\textsuperscript{114} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{115} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{117} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, pp. 104-106.
submission and luxurious passivity,” McLuhan wrote.\textsuperscript{118} As for the idea of dehumanization, McLuhan put it succinctly by satirizing an advertisement: “Do you have a personality? Our executive clinic will get rid of it for you.”\textsuperscript{119} Indeed, the entire concept of the “Mechanical Bride” is of a woman who has been objectified and dehumanized by modern advertising practices.\textsuperscript{120} The fact that McLuhan chose this as the title for his book highlights his belief in mass culture, and advertising in particular, as a dehumanizing phenomenon.

Advertisers did not see things this way. For them, advertising was not an art form, or a catalyst for shaping culture. And it was certainly not negatively impacting the American people. “My view is that advertising is no more and no less than a reasonably efficient way to sell,” wrote David Ogilvy.\textsuperscript{121} Ogilvy went even further when he postulated that advertising actually insulates the American people from exploitation on the part of American business. “It may be said that a good advertising agency represents the consumer’s interest in the councils of industry,” he noted.\textsuperscript{122} This was due to the fact that advertising forces industries to “live up to the promise of [their] advertising.”\textsuperscript{123} Rosser Reeves voiced a similar sentiment when he wrote that “advertising is a tool to convey ideas and information about a product.”\textsuperscript{124} Such sentiments were certainly a far cry from the idea that advertising was a depraved and distasteful cultural art form. According to Ogilvy and Reeves, it was purely economic in nature and offered a form of consumer protection.

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\textsuperscript{118} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 21. \\
\textsuperscript{119} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 35. \\
\textsuperscript{120} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, pp. 98-101. \\
\textsuperscript{121} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 206. \\
\textsuperscript{122} David Ogilvy, \textit{Confessions of an Advertising Man}, p. 174. \\
\textsuperscript{123} David Ogilvy, \textit{Confessions of an Advertising Man}, p. 174. \\
\textsuperscript{124} Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 113.
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Advertisers were, in fact, quite disinterested in turning their copy into a form of cultural expression, or of having it contain any sort of social commentary or artistic message, simply because it would distract readers from the product being advertised. Most advertising of the 1950s was descended from Claude Hopkins’s hard sell theories of the 1920s, which focused on simple copy that did little more than tell the reader about the benefits of using the advertised product. Hopkins summed up his technique by writing that “a picture which is eccentric or unique takes attention away from your subject. You cannot afford to do that. Your main appeal lies in your headline. Overshadow that and you kill it.”

Hopkins’s methods inspired Rosser Reeves to coin the term Unique Selling Point, or U.S.P., an advertising method that, by its very nature, was intended to be as devoid of artistic and cultural expression as possible. In simple terms, a U.S.P. is a unique proposition made by an advertisement to the consumer, which offered a benefit that the competition did not offer. Most U.S.P’s were short, easily memorable phrases that appeared in the advertisement’s headline. They were intended to be as rudimentary as possible so that they could be understood by a large segment of the population. Implied in the idea of the U.S.P. is that an advertisement should be all about the art of the sale. Nothing should distract the reader from the proposition. This ran contrary to McLuhan’s idea of advertisements as a modern art form that encouraged Americans to live lives of insipid consumerism. By its very design, a U.S.P. cannot have any form of art or social commentary; it should only make a proposition made to the reader.

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125 Hopkins is referenced constantly in Printers’ Ink and both David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves name him as a source of inspiration.
127 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, pp. 47-48.
The function of a U.S.P., as Reeves put it, was to “make a proposition to the consumer. Not just words, not just product puffery, not just show-window advertising.” It was designed to offer the benefits of the product and nothing more. As such, a U.S.P. was the quintessential hard-sell method, containing little nuance or subtlety. The reason for this, Reeves explained, was because advertising “is merely a substitute for a personal sales force – an extension, if you will, of the merchant who cries aloud his wares. It puts rapidly in print what would otherwise have to be handled by word of mouth.”

Throughout his entire career, Reeves relied on the principle of the U.S.P. to make his agencies advertisements, and he became one of the most respected advertising men of the 1950s.

While the term is never explicitly mentioned, the principles of the U.S.P. method were heavily featured in *Printers’ Ink*. In fact, every issue included a “Which Ad Pulled Best” segment, in which two different types of advertisements for the same product were tested to determine which one was more effective. Many times, the author of the article would theorize that the winning ad was more successful because it was clearer, more direct, and offered a direct benefit. In one such test, which featured two different advertisements for a boat, the author noted that the “content (of the advertisement) is what really counted,” and that the winning ad “contained all the facts” and promised the direct benefit of a “dominant send-no-money, free trial offer.” Another such test featured two advertisements for a cigarette holder. The first advertisement focused on the holder’s low price and showed only the product. The second advertisement focused on the lighter’s style and displayed the product in a woman’s hand. Results compiled for the test showed that the first advertisement was ten times as successful as

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the second. The reason for this, the author believed, had to do with the “dominant product picture,” which was more simple, bold and direct than the other advertisement, as well as the fact that the first advertisement offered the direct benefit of a lower price. Importantly, all of these principles, such as simplicity and the offering of a direct benefit, fall in line with the methodology of U.S.P. advertising.

Advertisers were also angered that critics such as McLuhan would accuse them of intentionally trying to debase American society. David Ogilvy was quick to point out that he never wrote an advertisement he thought would have a negative influence on the people who read it, nor did he know anyone in the advertising business who ever had. “Few of us admen lie awake nights feeling guilty about the way we earn our living. We don’t feel ‘subversive’ when we write advertisements for toothpaste,” he wrote. He continued on, noting that “Nobody I know in advertising would advertise a brothel, and some refuse to advertise booze or cigarettes.” Indeed, Ogilvy believed that advertising had a mostly positive influence on the American people. Concerning advertising for toothpaste, he wrote that “If we do it well, children may not have to go to the dentist so often.”

Advertising, Ogilvy suggested, received an unfair amount of blame for its supposed negative influence on society, but never received credit for the positive influence it exerted, such as persuading millions of Americans that bathing, brushing one’s teeth, and wearing deodorant were beneficial. “If you don’t think people need deodorants, you are at liberty to criticize advertising for having persuaded 87 per cent of American women and 66 per cent of American men to use them. If you disapprove of social mobility, creature comforts, and foreign travel, you

133 David Ogilvy, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, p. 207.
are right to blame advertising for encouraging such wickedness,” he wrote. He concluded, “If you are this kind of Puritan, I cannot reason with you. I can only call you a psychic masochist…. I make no apology for inciting the working class to desire less Spartan lives.” Put a different way, Ogilvy saw the critics of advertising as self-righteous slanderers who had yet to catch up with the times. He could not understand what was wrong with encouraging people to aspire to a life of better material comforts.

When advertising did set a poor example, or became too intrusive, industry leaders were quick to call upon those responsible to mend any wrongdoing. Once again, Printers’ Ink set the tone. In 1951, C.B. Larabee, president of Printers’ Ink, prefaced an issue of the journal with an essay in which he wrote, “It is a minority [of advertisers] that never quite know how to behave themselves. By turns noisy, blatant, and vulgar…. Let’s tell the minority to stop.” Printers’ Ink editor Eldridge Peterson echoed this sentiment in an editorial later in the year, which he addressed to the “offending minority”: “Unfortunately those of us who have crusaded against your kind of advertising have found it difficult to prove factually the harm you have been doing to…your own moral fiber and that of the nation.” Upon becoming president of the Association of Canadian Advertisers, Joseph Gerald Hagey told Printers’ Ink that advertisers had a “responsibility to play fair with the millions of people whose actions are constantly being influenced by the words we write and the pictures we draw.”

Advertisers were also aware that they should never intrude too much into the daily lives of the American public. In January of 1950, a brigade of New York City commuters, led by New

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135 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, p. 176.
139 Joseph Gerald Hagey, quoted in Printers’ Ink, Vol. 235, no. 9, 6/1/51, p. 76.
Yorker editor Harold Ross, began protesting that advertisements should be barred from playing over the intercom in Grand Central Station. The industry response was one of total agreement, and the advertisements were promptly removed. Eldridge Peterson of Printers’ Ink summed up the industry response: “We sympathize with the bus lines and terminals that are seeking added sources of revenue. But we do not believe that it is good public relations for them, or that the cause of good advertising is being served by advertising from which the public can find no refuge unless it denies itself some public service.”

If advertising was the omnipresent and intrusive force Marshall McLuhan had accused it of being, then advertisers may not have acted so swiftly or uniformly in agreeing that the advertisements should be taken off the Grand Central Station intercom. On the contrary, they were eager to remove them, and took great care in seeing to it that they did not intrude upon the commuters in Grand Central Station.

David Ogilvy agreed that advertising suffered from overexposure. “I am enraged by the barrage to which I am subjected,” he wrote of television commercials. “It is television advertising which has made advertising the arch-symbol of tasteless materialism,” he further lamented. But Rosser Reeves disagreed. Addressing the issue of repetitive commercials, he noted, “While a few commercials do reach an enormous number of people, we find that on the average seven out of ten people are not even aware of having seen the advertising at all.” If Reeves’s statistics are to be believed, then seventy percent of the population was unaffected, and therefore unimpeded, by televised advertising. These numbers are inconsistent with a force they may be considered omnipresent. It is also important to note that television is not a necessity, and that a person can watch a television program without watching a majority of the commercials.

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141 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 208.
143 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 98.
Ogilvy’s argument against televised advertising appears simply to be a matter of subjective taste, especially when compared with the objective statistics presented by Reeves.

Whether advertising was overexposed during the 1950s is debatable. But what is not debatable is the fact that advertisers had no interest in culture. They were in the business of selling products and that is where they focused their interests. And when they felt that they were setting a bad example, had gone too far, or were being too intrusive, they were all too willing to pull back.

Part Two: Sex and Gender

The 1950s is often viewed as the era of postwar domesticity, when women returned to the home to pursue the life of the homemaker. While most men worked, many adult women were involuntarily cast into the role of mother and housewife. As keepers of the home, women often took up the responsibility of buying many of the family’s consumer goods. This made housewives one of the advertising industry’s most important demographics. It also made the advertising industry a target for the emerging feminist movement.

In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was published, and it quickly became a touchstone of feminist literature and one of the most important nonfiction books of the twentieth century. Today, it is widely regarded as the catalyst for second wave feminism in the United States. *The Feminine Mystique* touches on the emptiness and inequality women had suffered through throughout American history. A particular emphasis is placed on the culture of the 1950s, and how women’s return to domesticity had created a void in their lives, and had marginalized them from mainstream society.
Friedan was especially critical of the role advertisers played in this return to domesticity. It was McLuhan who put forward the idea that mass culture turned all Americans into mindless consumers, but Friedan expanded upon this by pointing out how it was especially detrimental to women. Advertisers, she wrote, intended to “manipulat[e] the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business.” Through their advertisements, the industry attempted to create an idealized type of housewife, which they called the “balanced homemaker,” to which all American women would aspire. The idea behind this “balanced homemaker” was that of a woman who would embrace her role as a housewife, but who would also acquire consumer goods to increase her status, and to help her in her role as the homemaker, thus making her an ideal consumer who could easily be sold to. Friedan theorized that this resulted in social pressure for women to conform to a certain standards, and created a dehumanizing conformity amongst American women.

But the idea of an “ideal housewife” archetype is incongruent with the known advertising methods of the 1950s, which focused on market research and demographic study. Advertisers cannot create demographics, such as an “ideal housewife” demographic, through powerful cultural messages and symbolism. If they could, there would be no need for market and demographic research. Instead, advertisers identify demographics and then attempt to uncover what it is that interests each individual demographic. In the 1950s, advertisers identified the housewife demographic, just the same as they identified demographics for farmers, businessmen,

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suburbanites, rural citizens, and urban citizens.\textsuperscript{147} Advertising was not creating culture, it was responding to it.

The question of intent is also a subject for consideration. Just as advertisers found it hard to believe that Marshall McLuhan could accuse them of intentionally debasing American society, they were astonished that they could be accused of using American women as a means to an end. On the issue of advertising directed towards women, Ogilvy put the subject in succinct terms: “The consumer isn’t a moron; she is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume you can persuade her to buy anything.”\textsuperscript{148}

Rather than attempting to create an idealized housewife archetype to appear in their advertisements, advertisers spent their time trying to figure out what it was that interested their female demographic. This was important, they believed, because women purchased a large percentage of consumer products. “Sell a woman, sell her family,” ran a \textit{Printers’ Ink} headline.\textsuperscript{149} “Women control 70\% of the nation’s wealth…they have a very large influence on the disposition of the other 30\%,” wrote Ben Donaldson, head of institutional advertising at the Ford Motor Company.\textsuperscript{150} Indeed, advertisers had a wide variety of data to support their claim that women drove the consumer market. “Women buy 90\% of all household supplies…they make 85\% of all consumer purchases…they outnumber and outlive men.”\textsuperscript{151} Such numbers led advertisers to ask, “Who said this was a man’s world?”\textsuperscript{152}

There was also a popular misconception that the advertising industry was made up entirely of men, and that these men spent much of their time finding new ways to manipulate,

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Printers’ Ink}, “National Advertising Index,” see generally.
\textsuperscript{148} David Ogilvy, \textit{Confessions of an Advertising Man}, p. 113.
objectify, or otherwise degrade the American woman. In reality, the advertising industry of the 1950s had a fair share of women, and these women were often responsible for market research on the female demographic. At Ogilvy & Mather, the prevailing maxim was, “Don’t let men write advertising for products which are bought by women.”\textsuperscript{153} Printers’ Ink had two women, Roberta Gerry and Beatrice Adams, on their twelve person staff; Gerry was an associate editor and Adams was a staff writer.\textsuperscript{154} Both women regularly contributed articles to the journal on a wide variety of topics, including advertising philosophy, economics, and selling to female demographics. In 1950, the Advertising Federation of America named Beatrice Adams “Advertising Woman of the Year” for her work as the executive vice-president of the Gardner Advertising Company.\textsuperscript{155} Describing her approach to advertising, she told Printers’ Ink that her focus was to appeal to the needs of the average American housewife, who she described as “a very human person who wants to be talked to in a language she can understand and who can spot insincerity a mile off.”\textsuperscript{156} Grace Jones, vice-president and director of advertising for Hanes Hosiery Inc., had been in advertising for nearly forty years when she told Printers’ Ink in 1957 that the secret to her success was a “woman’s touch.”\textsuperscript{157}

Closely related to the topic of gender was the topic of sex. Critics of advertising constantly assailed the industry for its supposed exploitation of sex in the selling of products. Such exploitation, they claimed, desensitized the public, corrupted its morals, made lewd conduct acceptable, and objectified the human body. Betty Friedan referred to the advertising industry’s attempted manipulation of woman as “the sexual sell,” explaining how advertisers

\textsuperscript{153} David Ogilvy, \textit{Confessions of an Advertising Man}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{154} The \textit{Printers’ Ink} staff is listed on the first page of every issue.
\textsuperscript{155} Bea Adams, Advertising Woman of the Year, Directs Copy to Average Housewife,” Printers’ Ink, Vol. 231, no. 9, 6/2/50, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{156} “Bea Adams, Advertising Woman of the Year, Directs Copy to Average Housewife,” Printers’ Ink, Vol. 231, no. 9, 6/2/50, p. 80.
were objectifying women in attempting to make them conform to certain standards.\textsuperscript{158} Marshal McLuhan referred to modern mass culture as “a dominant pattern composed of sex and technology.”\textsuperscript{159} Advertising, with its glorification of industrial culture, and its penchant for sexuality, created what McLuhan called a “replaceable parts cultural dynamic” of objectified sexuality and dehumanizing consumerism.\textsuperscript{160} Advertising thus creates “the view of the human body as a sort of love-machine capable merely of specific thrills…. Which reduces sex experience to a problem of mechanics and hygiene.”\textsuperscript{161}

The existence of sex in 1950s advertising is irrefutable. But there is also evidence to suggest that advertisers in the 1950s were trying to rid the industry of it. Sex in advertising was giving them a bad reputation, and they were not convinced it was worth the trouble. Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that sex appeal was actually detrimental to an advertisement, because it distracted the reader from the product being advertised. This, combined with the fact that many advertisers also found overt sexuality distasteful, led some of the decade’s most influential admen to argue against its use.

There was no more outspoken critic of sex in advertising than Rosser Reeves. Reeves despised advertising that relied on sex appeal simply because he believed it did not work. He referred to sex, and other such things, as “Vampire Video,” because they literally sucked the life out of an advertisement.\textsuperscript{162} In a case study, Reeves examined advertisements that relied on sex appeal, and measured for what he called “penetration,” defined as a percentage of the number of people who can recall the advertisement and its U.S.P. – Unique Selling Proposition. One such

\textsuperscript{158} Betty Friedan, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, p. 299.
\textsuperscript{159} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{160} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Mechanical Bride}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{162} Rosser Reeves, \textit{Reality in Advertising}, p. 103.
advertisement was a commercial that featured a model in a white bikini performing a swan dive off of a springboard in slow motion. The product being advertised was a home gardening kit. Reeves found that “the penetration was 65% on the girl. It was less than 10% on the U.S.P.”163 The results of such research led Reeves to surmise that sexuality in advertising “can cripple a television commercial. It can almost completely wipe out, hide, or obscure the U.S.P. It can take $1,000,000 worth of television time and make it worth $100,000 – or less.”164 Any advertising agency that relied on penetration statistics and the use of a U.S.P. likely came to the same conclusion.

Many advertisers agreed with Reeves’s conclusions, not only because sex appeal produced poor advertising, but also because it was distasteful. *Printers’ Ink*, one of the industry’s most important voices, led this charge to remove sex from advertising. C.B. Larabee, president of *Printers’ Ink*, prefaced an issue of the journal with an essay declaring that all sexuality, explicit or implied, should be removed from advertising. In this essay, Larabee advocated for the end of what he called the “never, never land of advertising,” in which “the sole purpose for the young girl is to get the man, the goal of the young man to clasp the girl of his dreams in his arms,” all of which can be achieved through the use of “whatever product happens to be the advertiser’s delight.”165 He was quick to point out that advertising of this sort was the work of the “half-wits and dim-brains” who comprised only a small minority of advertisers.166 Such advertising, he claimed, led to “nausea and disgust on the part of the people” and had no place in modern America.167

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164 Rosser Reeves, *Reality in Advertising*, p. 103.
Other writers for *Printers’ Ink* voiced similar sentiments. Thomas M. Jones, the journal’s news editor, wrote that “the chief complaint against objectionable advertising is over-emphasis on sex,” and that “care in the selection” of new advertisements must be taken to ensure that no objectionable advertisements are printed.\(^{168}\) Indeed, of all the articles written for *Printers’ Ink* on the topic of sex in advertising during the 1950s, only one explicitly endorsed its use. This article was written by Philip Lennen, Chairman of the Board of Lennen & Mitchell Inc., as a response to C.B. Larabee’s essay calling for the removal of sex from advertising. Lennen embraced the use of sex in advertising because he believed it promoted personal hygiene. “For decades…romance has been helped along by increasing the personal fastidiousness of our young [people]; by encouraging more intelligent and hygienic care of the hands, the skin, the teeth, the hair, and the body generally. No small part of this improved and regular body and beauty care has been induced by the advertiser,” he wrote.\(^{169}\) Regardless of his reasons for doing so, Lennen stood alone as the only advertiser to explicitly endorse sex in advertising in the pages of *Printers’ Ink* during the 1950s.

David Ogilvy, like Rosser Reeves and the staff of *Printers’ Ink*, also believed that sex had no place in advertising. He found nudity acceptable, however, as long as it was done for a relevant and functional reason. “To show bosoms in a detergent advertisement would not sell detergent. Nor is there any excuse for the sexy girls you sometimes see draped across the hoods in automobile advertisements, On the other hand, there is a functional reason to show nudes in advertisements for beauty products,” he wrote.\(^{170}\) The “functional” reason Ogilvy referred to is that there may be no other way to demonstrate how a product works unless it is demonstrated on

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\(^{168}\) “Chief Complaint is Sex,” *Printers’ Ink*, Vol. 231, no. 1, 4/7/50, p. 80.

\(^{169}\) Philip Lennen, “Sex Appeal, Mr. Larabee, is Here to Stay,” *Printers’ Ink*, Vol. 234, no. 3, 1/19/51, p. 37.

a nude model. In short, relevant nudity was acceptable, but sex never was.\textsuperscript{171} He was quick to point out, however, that sex in advertising was far from detrimental to society, and that it was relatively tame compared to forms of cultural expression such as literature. “Advertising \emph{reflects} the mores of society, but does not \emph{influence} them. Thus it is that you find more explicit sex in magazines and novels than in advertisements,” he noted.\textsuperscript{172} He also observed that obscenities were acceptable in film and in some magazines and newspapers, but were never found in the print of advertisements.\textsuperscript{173} The reason why advertising took a far greater share of the blame for the corruption of American morals than these other forms of media and entertainment is something that befuddled Ogilvy and many other advertisers.

\textit{Part Three: Economics and Culture}

Some economists and social critics were also quick to proclaim the evils of advertising. One of the most prominent economists to decree the evils of an economy based on mass consumption was John Galbraith. Galbraith was one of the most influential liberal economists of the postwar era. As a writer, he penned many important essays on the nature of postwar American affluence, and on postwar economics, including “The Affluent Society” (1956) and “The Dependence Effect” (1957). At the heart of both of these essays was the theme that an economy based on mass consumption and consumerism was inherently unstable and ultimately harmful to the people who took part in it.

In explaining the nature of the American economy, Galbraith argued that, due to postwar affluence and the increasing spending power of the middle-class, additional wants could be

\textsuperscript{171} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 27.  
\textsuperscript{173} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 27.
synthesized by those who controlled the means of production. “Many of the desires of the individual are no longer evident to him. They become so only as they are synthesized, elaborated, and nurtured by advertising and salesmanship,” he wrote in his famous essay, “The Affluent Society.”174 “Our proliferation of selling activity is the counterpart of comparative opulence. Much of it is inevitable with high levels of well-being…. it is waste that exists because the community is too well off to care.”175 In short, a rise in spending power means a rise in production and a rise in the movement of goods and services. Because this rise in production produces goods and services that are extravagant, the system is inherently wasteful.

This proliferation of economic productivity based on the spending power of the general population created what Galbraith referred to as the “Dependence Effect,” an economic phenomenon in which the system of production creates the wants it seeks to satisfy.176 For Galbraith, this had far-reaching implications for American culture because it created a society of rapacious, materialistic consumerism that “sets great store by its ability to produce a higher standard of living,” and “evaluates people by the products they possess.”177 Essentially, the advertising industry, the people in charge of “creating the wants,” were creating what Galbraith saw as an undesirable, unsustainable, and unstable consumer-driven society in which culture and economics were inexorably linked.

Vance Packard, the renowned social critic who had previously attacked the advertising industry in his 1957 book, The Hidden Persuaders, attacked the industry again in his 1959 book The Status Seekers. Written about the socio-economic reasons behind the increasing rootlessness of many Americans, The Status Seekers still managed to attack the advertising industry for its

role in turning Americans into a nation of status seekers. Just as Galbraith argued that the American economy had produced a society that obsessed itself with obtaining an ever-higher standard of living, Packard argued that the primary goal of American life had become the quest for upward socio-economic mobility. The reasons for this trend, he reasoned, had much to do with the work of the advertising industry. “Billions of dollars are being spent by advertisers to persuade Americans to ‘upgrade’ themselves through consumption. Advertisers are our most ardent crusaders for more upward striving at the material level,” he wrote. The “upgrading urge” was the general term Packard used for the constant upward economic mobility sought by the American people, and he believed that advertisers were constantly seeking anything that would “tap that urge.” The end result, Packard believed, was that Americans would end up both morally and financially bankrupt, as they slaved their savings away chasing an ever-higher standard of living.

If advertising was adversely affecting the economy, it did not show in the data, as the American economy grew at an exceptional rate throughout the 1950s and Americans enjoyed unprecedented affluence. This left many advertisers wondering why economists such as Galbraith, and critics such as Packard, were predicting that consumerism, facilitated by advertising, would eventually harm the economy. Tom Campbell, senior editor of Printers’ ink, referred to the negative feelings surrounding the consumer economy as a “virus…which may be called the ‘fear of living.’” He went on, “There are some who say this virus is the result of

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severe scar tissue carried over from the depression of the 1930’s.”

Put simply, Campbell postulated that memories of the Great Depression had left many Americans apprehensive about the state of the economy, and unwilling to engage in consumer spending. Campbell then called on the advertising industry to encourage consumers to pump money into the economy, a difficult but necessary task with memories of the Great Depression still fresh in the public mindset.

Rosser Reeves attacked critics such as Galbraith more directly, questioning the very principles upon which Galbraith had based his economic theory. “The picture Mr. Galbraith paints is a frightening one…. a classic Greek drama where men go willy-nilly to their fate…. a capitalism gone mad.” But Reeves insisted that Galbraith was wrong. “There is no such witchcraft in advertising…Countless agencies, thousands of manufacturers, and legions of bankrupts will take the stand and testify: If the product does not meet some existing desire or need of the consumer, the advertising will ultimately fail. Mr. Galbraith has his facts backwards. Advertising does not synthesize desires. Desires instead synthesize advertising.”

According to Reeves, Galbraith’s idea of a “dependency effect” was fundamentally flawed. Desires cannot simply be synthesized, as Galbraith had postulated. All products, no matter how seemingly frivolous, are the result of an existing desire or need. As a result, there is nothing inherently wasteful about advertising, or the American economy in general. Unlike Galbraith, Reeves had an inside view to how advertising works, and he never once saw a product that did not fulfill some existing desire become successful. If the Dependence Effect were a sound economic theory, this would not have been true. As for the “synthesized” desires that Galbraith theorized were produced by a capitalist economy, Reeves quipped sarcastically that perhaps not all of them

185 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 139.
186 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 141.
were so terrible or wasteful. “People don’t really need these things. People don’t really need art, music literature, newspapers, historians, wheels, calendars, philosophy. All that people really need is a cave, a piece of meat, and possibly a fire.”

David Ogilvy also felt that advertising was receiving unfair criticism from Galbraith and other like-minded economists. Like Reeves, he reasoned that some of these “synthesized” desires were not so terrible. “Left-wing economists, ever eager to snatch the scourge from the hand of god, hold that advertising tempts people to squander money on things they don’t need. Who are these elitists to decide what you need? What the Calvinistic dons don’t seem to know is that buying things can be one of life’s more innocent pleasures.” He expressed no regrets about persuading consumers they needed a reliable car to get them to and from work everyday, or that they needed deodorant. If consumers could afford luxury items, then there was nothing wrong with advertisers convincing them to put the money back into the economy. If consumers were buying things they could not afford, then perhaps it was the availability of easy credit, not advertising, that was to blame.

Rather than harming the economy, advertisers believed they were helping it grow by facilitating a healthy exchange of goods and services. They also believed they were helping it adjust to socioeconomic changes such as suburbanization and the baby boom by influencing the consumer buying patterns. Throughout the 1950s, *Printers’ Ink* ran dozens of articles on topics such as these. One such article came from Edward Dever, an associate editor of *Printers’ Ink*, who wrote that “Among the all-time highs being set these days there is one – the number of children in the U.S. – that offers tremendous opportunities for manufacturers, the service

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188 David Ogilvy, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, p. 207.
industries, retailers, and advertising media.” But this was more than just a marketing opportunity. Advertisers had a duty to help the economy adjust to this fact and to succeed where other institutions had failed. As Dever explained, “It was not until the record numbers of children began to reach school age that the effects of lack of planning – the desperate inadequacy of our education facilities – were felt. There are not and will not be for some years to come enough schools, classrooms, or teachers.” Unlike the public school systems, which had failed to adjust, advertising could aid in adjusting the economy to this demographic shift. After all, Dever reasoned, there was not “a product or service that will not be affected in one way or another by the record number of children in the years ahead.

Another article, this one by William Black, a distribution consultant for J. Walter Thompson, explained how advertisers might aid the nation and the economy in adjusting to new demographic and socioeconomic developments. “Postwar consumption has risen along with employment and personal incomes… [These] changing living and buying patterns challenge every marketer,” He noted. His advice on the matter was to pay “special attention to the youth buying market,” as well as the new “suburban shopping centers,” and “new brides.” Such changes, he reasoned, would help to “re-orient the economy towards the coming decade’s 15% rise in population” James Quinn of the Gardner Advertising Co. asked the readers of Printers’ Ink: “Did you see the latest population estimate from the Bureau of the census? 150,000,00 and

still getting larger. There are still a few million families who do not own electric ranges, or irons, or mixers, or radios – or television sets. Do you have any idea how many people still live with their in-laws because there aren’t enough houses around? They’ll need rugs and radios and washing machines and TV’s…. Let’s stop looking backward and look ahead – to an age of opportunity that presents the greatest challenge in our history."^{195} Clearly, the advertising industry, given a voice by the writers of *Printers’ Ink*, took great stock in its ability to move the American economy forward. Nevertheless, advertisers were responding to changes in the economy and in society, not creating them.

Advertising was not truly a creator of culture, but a mirror of it. Indeed, the men and women of the advertising industry believed that advertising and culture never converged because advertising was a purely economic phenomenon. As for the economists who believed that advertising was bad for the economy, industry leaders saw them as being out of touch with the times. Advertisers saw themselves as being catalysts in helping the country and its economy adjust to the changes of the 1950s. They were not facilitating reckless spending, but a necessary injection of consumer dollars into one of the healthiest economies in American history.

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Chapter Three: Criticism of the “Adman”

It was not just the institution of advertising that received criticism during the 1950s. Much of the criticism found its way to the “admen” themselves. If advertisements were in some way detrimental to American culture and society, then it must also have been true that the people who created them were in some way depraved or morally corrupt. The first man to make this connection was Frederic Wakeman, who started a literary phenomenon in 1946 with his book *The Hucksters*, a thinly veiled attack against the people who worked in the advertising business. The term “huckster” had been used before the book’s publication to describe an immoral and off-putting trickster, hawker, or peddler of wares. After the book’s publication, the term “huckster” was forever established in the United States as a connotation for a morally dubious advertiser. A wave of successful literature from various authors followed, attacking the advertising industry either directly or indirectly. Some of them, such as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, became cultural touchstones. Many of them share common themes and archetypes, including a portrayal of the advertising man as a person of dubious morals, leading a vapid and empty life, and longing for some greater meaning beyond the conformity and materialism that characterized a career in American business.

But a closer look at the advertising industry reveals that the negative stereotype that came to be associated with the adman was based more on exaggeration and sensationalism than on truth. Many of these writers never worked for an advertising agency, and the few who had did not work there for long. Wakeman’s work in particular was likely the result of a bad personal experience he had while working in the industry. As to the reasons why the “huckster” stereotype became so popular, it is likely due to the fact that a career in advertising was conducive to sensationalism. As the promoters of consumerism and material comfort, advertisers symbolized
both the good and the bad aspects of postwar consumer culture. A career in advertising was also notorious for its intense pace, high pressure, and lucrative earnings. Together, these factors made the advertising man a perfect anti-hero, or sometimes, a perfect villain, as well as fodder for popular fiction.

These unflattering works of fiction did not go unnoticed by the advertising business. Indeed, many advertisers were quick to deny that they were anything like their fictional counterparts. *Printers’ Ink* ran several articles on the topic, calling out the writers of these novels as being frauds, hacks, and slanderers. Rosser Reeves denounced all such works of fiction, calling them the “Madison Avenue Myth.”196 “Here – shrouded in mystery and dealing in the devil’s own secrets – is a man endowed with powers that ordinary mortals do not possess,” he wrote, mocking the fictional admen.197 David Ogilvy also viewed the fictional portrayals of advertising men as being inaccurate. Indeed, he believed that he and most other advertisers were good, sincere people trying to earn an honest living. “Running an agency takes vitality…affection for one’s henchmen, and tolerance for their foibles…and morality, he wrote.”198 Advertisers did admit, however, that a life in advertising was a stressful one. Ogilvy noted that a career in the advertising industry was characterized by exhaustion, stress, insecurity, and demoralization.199

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Part One: The “Huckster” Stereotype

In 1945 Frederic Wakeman took a job at the Foote, Cone & Belding advertising agency, where he worked on the account for Lucky Strike cigarettes.200 During his time there he wrote a novel partially based on his experiences in the industry. He named the novel The Hucksters, and it was published in 1946. The book was an immediate sensation, selling 750,000 copies and taking the top spot on the bestseller list.201 It received distribution in the Book-of-the-Month Club and Reader’s Digest, and the rights to the story were eventually sold to the MGM film company for $250,000.202

The protagonist of The Hucksters was the thoroughly unlikable, aloof, and prickly Victor Norman. Norman had a lucrative job in advertising, an apartment in New York City, and a long list of female lovers, some of whom were married, and yet he was not happy. He lived a life of quiet agony, struggling to find meaning in his job as an account manager for the Kimberly & Maag advertising agency. Whereas many of the men of his generation served valiantly in World War II, Norman’s answer to what he did during wartime was that he “sold a little soap.”203 This hammered home the point that advertising was an essentially useless occupation, as even during wartime the most important job the industry had was to sell soap. While his friends were risking their lives at war, Norman was selling soap to their wives. Clearly, this was a literary metaphor meant to symbolize that Norman was both effeminate, and a coward.

At the heart of Norman’s unhappiness is his inability to reconcile his own belief of right and wrong with the obligations of his job. “You can’t wear the old school tie and follow the knightly codes,” he lamented, implying that his job in advertising had reduced him to something

200 Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers, p. 201.
203 Frederic Wakeman, The Hucksters, p. 252.
less than a man, and had rendered him unable to behave in a way that may be considered proper. In the end, he is only able to find peace after leaving the advertising business and ending an affair with a married woman.

_The Hucksters_ implied that Victor Norman is the typical advertising man, the quintessential “huckster.” He is dishonest, selfish, immoral, and does not attempt to hide the fact that he is in the business of manipulating people. “We’re all a bunch of hustlers and connivers in this business,” he admitted. When Norman asked one of his co-workers how he should cope with the stress of his job, he was told to “spend the firm’s money on whores.” Norman concluded that “Most presidents talk about money and think about whores.” Such dialogue, which likely shocked many readers in 1946, went a long way in painting a picture of the advertising industry as being corrupt, vacuous, and overtly sexual in nature. The term “Huckster” quickly became a popular stereotype for the adman, and carried with it a host of negative connotations.

Many advertisers came to loathe Wakeman and his novel for what they saw as an unfair portrayal of the industry. They came to believe that Wakeman’s disillusionment was the result of a common problem in the advertising industry: the conflict between agency executives and copywriters. Wakeman had worked as a copywriter and it was possible that he had a conflict with an executive over the content of an advertisement. “The writers and artists struggle against their distaste for the businessmen…. Frederic Wakeman wrote _The Hucksters_ only after some years of servitude in the copy department at Foote, Cone & Belding. It is the disgruntled advertising copywriter rather than the malign intellectual critic who has given the industry the

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204 Frederic Wakeman, _The Hucksters_, p. 253.  
205 Frederic Wakeman, _The Hucksters_, p. 8.  
206 Frederic Wakeman, _The Hucksters_, p. 89.  
207 Frederic Wakeman, _The Hucksters_, p. 89.
unfortunate part of its reputation,” wrote Martin Mayer.\textsuperscript{208} David Ogilvy claimed that one of the most important things an advertising agency can do is to “avoid hiring unstable, quarrelsome executives. Madison Avenue is full of masochists who unconsciously provoke rejection.”\textsuperscript{209} Implied in such sentiments is the idea that Wakeman simply had the misfortune of working under an overbearing executive, a turn of events that could occur in any job.

Whatever Wakeman’s reasons, advertisers were quick to dispel the accusations that had created the “Huckster” stereotype. As in most cases, \textit{Printers’ Ink} took the lead in defending the industry. In describing an emergency meeting of the American Association of Advertising Agencies in response to the onset of the Korean War, Eldridge Peterson, editor of \textit{Printers’ Ink}, wrote that “Hucksters of the type portrayed in novels and motion pictures during the past few years must have been somewhere else during the recent meeting of the American Assn. of Advertising Agencies. Those who attended saw a group of serious businessmen tackling the problems of their own business. But even more important, they saw this same group of men fully aware and deeply concerned about their particular responsibilities for the nation’s future.”\textsuperscript{210}

Whereas Victor Norman had been content to sell soap during World War II, most advertisers, according to Peterson, recognized advertising’s special role in a wartime economy, as well as in the nation in general. At that same meeting, “Agency and association executives urged members of the association to take the lead in promoting higher standards of morality, ethics, and principles in American life, to take the lead in governmental activities related to advertising…and to [provide] a deeper understanding of [advertising’s] role in our mobilization

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{208} Martin Mayer, \textit{Madison Avenue}, p. 30.
\bibitem{209} David Ogilvy, \textit{Confessions of an Advertising Man}, p. 78.
\end{thebibliography}
Contrary to Wakeman’s portrayal of the typical advertising man, advertisers seemed to be ready and willing to use their industry in any way possible to aid the country during wartime. They also believed, unlike Wakeman, that advertising could be useful in some capacity to the American people, as well as to the government, both in wartime and in peace.

Advertisers were aware of the hit their reputations had taken in the aftermath of *The Hucksters*, but they could never understand why. They always saw themselves as honest salesman. “Those of us who study public opinion polls are aware that the lay public thinks we admen are rascals,” lamented David Ogilvy. When George Gallup organized a poll asking participants to rank twenty-four professions for honesty, clergymen finished first and advertisers finished last. “The stereotype of the ‘huckster dies hard. But I don’t think our poor image keeps many of us awake at night. I have never felt any inclination to give up my job and become a clergyman. I enjoy my work, and sometimes feel proud of its results,” Ogilvy wrote. He concluded, “Most of the people I know in agencies strike me as well cast for their work and reasonably happy with it. Whenever I think that someone is wasting his talents in advertising, I tell him so.”

Other advertisers took to mocking Wakeman. Indeed, they often implied that he had been a hack in the advertising business and had taken to literature to vent his frustrations. “The copy writer, too, has nine lives,” wrote Sherman E. Rogers, copy chief at the Anderson & Cairns agency. “His *escape* life…in the quiet of his own little den or nook where he can indulge in therapeutic philately, or something equally away-from-it-all” has produced a “Wishful-future life

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– having to do with top-level creativity – the great American novel…copious notes for which lie accumulated in the moldy recesses of the mind…the I’ll-show-‘em-all-someday life.”

This thinly veiled satire of Wakeman portrayed him as a holier-than-thou malcontent who had never wished to do anything more than write his book. Unfortunately for the advertising industry, as Rogers attested, Wakeman had taken to writing his book by exaggerating and distorting “the magic of the advertising business, which has to be acted out for the curious and/or impressed outsider who asks, ‘What do you do?’”

What was needed, wrote Cameron Day of Printers’ Ink, was “a thorough, adult study of the business, not an effort like ‘The Hucksters.’” Overall, there were close to two-dozen articles in Printers’ Ink from 1950 through 1959 related to The Hucksters. They were all relatively similar in tone, acerbically dismissing the book and its author.

Advertisers seemed either to feel sorry for Wakeman, as Ogilvy did, regretting that he seemed to have had a bad experience in his time in the advertising industry, or to view him as a disgruntled troublemaker who had hoped to reach literary stardom by demonizing the advertising industry. Either way, they all agreed that his assertions about the industry were not in line with reality.

Part Two: Advertising in Popular Literature

The Hucksters was responsible for creating a literary craze focusing on the life of the advertising man. Many of these novels were stories of scandal, sex, and of course, a protagonist’s fall from grace. Always at the center was the morally dubious adman. One such

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novel, Eric Hodgins’ *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, was released the same year as *The Hucksters* – 1946.

*Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* was not the quintessential story of the decadent adman. Instead, the protagonist, Mr. Blandings, was a more relatable, if somewhat dim-witted, copywriter looking to build his dream house in the countryside. The drama of the plot came from his dissatisfaction with his job, which he realizes is bringing him little satisfaction. As Hodgins wrote, “Mr. Blandings was in a state of what seemed to be permanent depression, mixed with alternations of lethargy and irritation. That a Christmas bonus was coming in several months to signalize one of the best years in the history of cathartics did not buoy him up.”

Mr. Blandings ultimately found the comfort and satisfaction he desired in his new home, a metaphor, perhaps, for breaking away from the conformity of 1950s suburbia. The book was so successful that it spawned both a movie, released in 1948, and a sequel, published in 1950.

The sequel, *Blandings’ Way*, picked up on the themes of the first book. “The local community is losing its significance. The home’s disintegrating. Who the hell’s more responsible than an advertising copywriter? He’s the guy with the tricky arguments,” Blandings thought to himself. In an odd twist, Blandings gave up his new job to return to advertising. His only rationale was that he simply had resigned himself to his fate. “Perhaps in asking that my destiny should give me pleasure I have asked too much,” were his only words on the subject.

Advertisers did not look upon Hodgins’ work any more kindly than they did Wakeman’s. Hodgins had spent very little time in the industry; his only experience came from a brief stint

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with an agency early in his career. This did little to promote the idea that his book was based on actual experience. Perhaps the book, which had its share of deadpan humor, was meant to be a harmless satire. But if it was, advertisers didn’t find it funny.

Indeed, *Printers’ Ink* had a name for the soiling of their reputation by way of literature – “Blandings’ Disease.” “There is a new disease in the land, an epidemic of books about advertising. The latest is *Blandings’ Way* by Eric Hodgins. Of all the books about advertising, this, even more than *The Hucksters*, is the most serious symptom,” wrote Dan Loden of the VanSant, Dugdale & Co. advertising agency. “[Mr. Blandings] has the guilt complex about the advertising profession that is perhaps its greatest occupational hazard. And deeper in his heart, he has the same misgivings about a way of life that enables him to have a home, and freedom, and a highly paid job.” Indeed, many advertisers had a hard time understanding why they should feel guilty about what they were doing. They certainly did not believe they were hurting anyone, nor did they feel the guilt that literary characters such as Norman and Blandings felt. “I must also say that [the book] doesn’t exactly check with the facts of my own experience in advertising,” Loden noted. As for the cure to “Blandings’ Disease,” Loden concluded that it might be found in “reciting the long list of advertising professionals who have thrilled to the profession, live it, love it, and keep its standards high.”

Three years after *The Hucksters* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* were published, playwright Arthur Miller submitted his own piece of advertising literature in 1949 with *Death of a Salesman*. While the story’s protagonist, Willy Loman, is not an advertiser in the

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purest sense of the word – he does not handle printed advertising – his career as a door-to-door salesman is closely related to advertising. Both cases involved the art of selling products. As Rosser Reeves noted, an advertisement is simply “salesmanship in print.”\textsuperscript{229} Death of a Salesman became wildly popular. It served as a sort of cultural touchstone, a bleak representation of the postwar American dream gone wrong. Important to note is the fact that at the center of this tragic story is a hopelessly flawed man in the business of selling consumer goods.

Willy Loman, the anti-hero of Death of a Salesman, was a particularly unsavory character. He was adulterous, unsupportive of his family, and cared only for the material comforts of life. He was obsessed with the concept of the honorable “death of a salesman,” as exemplified by a man named Dave Singleman, a successful salesman who died while on the job.\textsuperscript{230} Loman is ultimately driven mad by his inability to reconcile his dreams of material comfort to the reality of his meager existence as a travelling salesman. When he realized he was worth more dead than alive, he committed suicide. After his death, his neighbor, Charley, laments that “no man needs only a little salary.”\textsuperscript{231}

Similar to Death of a Salesman was Sloan Wilson’s 1956 novel, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. Both works would become among the most influential literature of postwar America. The protagonist of Wilson’s novel is Tom Rath, the angry, discontented suburbanite whose feelings of emptiness and longing for meaning caused him to question the very nature of postwar society. When filling out a questionnaire during an interview for a job at a large broadcasting corporation, he was met with an interesting question: “What is the most significant thing about you?” to which he replied, “The most significant thing about me is that I detest the

\textsuperscript{229} Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{230} Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{231} Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, p. 137.
United Broadcasting Corporation, with all its soap operas, commercials, and yammering studio audiences, and the only reason I’m willing to spend my life in such a ridiculous enterprise is that I want to buy a more expensive house and a better brand of gin.”

Tom Rath was not an advertiser in the strictest sense of the word, but he did work in the business of mass media and he was absolutely appalled by every facet of it. The conformity of mass culture was revolting to him, and he despised the triviality of advertising and of consumer culture in general. Tom did eventually find happiness, and was able to fix his broken marriage, but he never truly found satisfaction or intrinsic value in his occupation.

Another just as acerbic, but lesser known, novel on the life of the adman was James Kelly’s *The Insider*, published in 1958. Much like Victor Norman of *The Hucksters*, the protagonist of *The Insider* was a thoroughly unlikable rake by the name of Mortimer Noyes. A friendless, alcoholic fraud, Noyes cared only for his rank within the agency and how much money he made. “Friendship is for college boys – not us grown-up agency operators,” he coldly tells an associate. As undesirable as Noyes may seem, he is also acutely aware of the intrinsic meaninglessness of his job. Nobody on Madison Avenue “makes anything you can put your hand on,” he told a friend. After he left the business behind, he reflected on his life and regretted not having chosen a different path in life, a path that wouldn’t have led to “stomach troubles…or divorces…or get[ing] fired.”

These are only a few of a wide variety of books and television programs that dealt in the scandal and intrigue of a life in advertising. Other examples include J.P. Marquand’s *Sincerely, Willis Wayde*, Cameron Hawley’s *Executive Suite* and *Cash McCall*, and Rod Serling’s

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Many of these, originally written as books, found their way into television and film. Interestingly, most of these men who wrote these works of fiction had never worked in advertising. After the release of Patterns, Rod Serling admitted that his story “didn’t stem from personal experience,” and that he “was not trying to depict a norm but quite the reverse.”

When asked why he had depicted advertising men in such a negative, Serling admitted, “If everybody were nice, there would be no drama.” As for the writers who did have experience in the business, none of them lasted very long, and their subsequent works of fiction were likely the result of a bitter experience. Frederic Wakeman became a full-time writer. James Kelly moved to a small Mexican village, where he lived in an adobe hut with no electricity or running water.

The protagonists of these various works of fiction, none of which were so different, blended together and became an archetype for the 1950s culture of conformity. The men who worked in advertising were perhaps tailor-made for this sort of fictional treatment, as advertising was seen as an integral part of mass culture. Admen, therefore, were seen as being especially susceptible to its perils. Advertisers knew of this, but none of them believed it to be true. “I don’t think this ‘image ‘ business is at all serious. Writers of TV scripts can have their villains if they want. I don’t see it as any kind of threat to free enterprise,” an agency personnel manager told Printers’ Ink in 1957. “It [is] 50 years out of date. It never rang true,” a retired advertising manager said of the stream of books and television programs that enforced the stereotype of the “huckster” or of “the man in the gray flannel suit.”

239 Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers, p. 207.  
Some men in the industry simply dismissed the criticism out of hand. “We are not concerned here with the advertising man of the novelists and the Sunday supplements. This apparition dresses in gray flannel suits; his diet is gin; his hobby is adultery; his vocabulary is jargon; and his intelligence – if all these things are true – is not too high,” Rosser Reeves scoffed.242 Cameron Day, a writer for Printers’ Ink, referred to the stream of literature against advertising as the work of “hacks.”243 Of the books themselves, he wrote that they were simply not worth the industry’s time. “These [books] continue to appear monotonously, almost all of them short on skill and long on ridicule.”244 All in all, they seemed to have believed that these works of fiction were little more than inflammatory slander, written by attention-hungry authors of little skill, with no basis in reality.

Part Three: The Realities of Life in Advertising

Most admen were not the kind of undesirables portrayed in the popular literature of the 1950s. Indeed, many of them enjoyed their work. They did, however, acknowledge that it was quite stressful, consisting of long hours, a lack of job security, and massive amounts of work. “The pay is good…but there are easier ways to get rich,” David Ogilvy quipped.245 A stressful job, however, did not mean that advertising men were as high-strung, frustrated, or prone to anti-social behavior as their fictional counterparts.

Due to the demands of meeting deadlines, advertisers often worked long hours. “Like most doctors, you are on call day and night, seven days a week. This constant pressure on every advertising executive must take a considerable physical and psychological toll,” David Ogilvy

242 Rosser Reeves, Reality in Advertising, p. 138.
245 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 44.
noted.\textsuperscript{246} Being on call every day of every week meant that the average advertising executive worked double that of the average American worker. Ogilvy claimed that “eighty hours a week are enough” to run his agency successfully.\textsuperscript{247} “I have to admit that I have sometimes found the pressure unbearable,” he acknowledged.\textsuperscript{248}

Pressure also came from the fear of being replaced or of losing a client’s account, as advertising was notoriously competitive. “There’s plenty of risk in this business. The first risk is from the clients. If you don’t do work that satisfies them, you’re going to get fired. The second risk is the head of your own agency. Even when the clients are satisfied, you can get tossed overnight,” claimed William Benton, co-founder of the Benton & Bowles Agency, which was one of the largest in the United States in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{249} “The copywriter lives with fear. Will he have a big idea before Tuesday morning? Will the client buy it? Will it get a high test score? Will it sell the product? I have never sat down to write an advertisement without thinking ‘this time I am going to fail,’” David Ogilvy wrote.\textsuperscript{250} In an environment of such high pressure, alcoholism was a common problem. As Ogilvy noted, “It is reliably reported that seven out of every hundred executives in American business are alcoholics, and it is reasonable to assume that the proportion in your agency is at least that high…. Your alcoholics may include some of your brightest stars.”\textsuperscript{251} It is worth noting, however, that these are problems not exclusive to advertising. Indeed, many business occupations are prone to such problems.

Agencies also tended to be internally competitive. Ogilvy noted that his own agency was a “breeding-ground for sibling rivalry.”252 “The hothouse atmosphere in agencies can cause outbreaks of psychological warfare to rival university faculties,” he concluded.253 Ogilvy’s answer to such problems was to exclude from his agency the kind of people who had become so popular in the contemporary literature. “I despise toadies who suck up to their bosses…. I admire people with gentle manners who treat other people as human beings. I abhor quarrelsome people. I abhor people who wage paper-warfare.”254 This view, he claimed, was common throughout the advertising world. “We admire people who work hard, who are objective and thorough. We detest…bullies and pompous asses.”255 His other way of handling it was to lead by example: “I try to be fair and to be firm, to make unpopular decisions without cowardice, to create an atmosphere of stability, and to listen more than I talk. I try to recruit people of the highest quality.”256

But despite these problems, advertising men still believed that there occupation was one to be proud of, and that the industry was made up in large part of decent, morally sound people. “I’m glad to know, with assurance, that advertising’s ulcers are mostly fictional, a hackneyed cliché that hardly ever gets a laugh anymore,” wrote John M. Handley, Vice-president of Needham & Grohmann, Incorporated.257 He went on, “Advertising has many men whose quiet dignity characterizes their evaluation of principle over percentage…. I’m proud of advertising as my vocation and proud to claim membership in a valiant band of frontier-breakers.”258 Other

252 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 46.
253 David Ogilvy, Ogilvy on Advertising, p. 50.
254 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, pp. 36-37.
255 David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man, pp. 36-37.
advertisers echoed these sentiments. “[Advertisers] are intellectually honest…. They are not bullies,” David Ogilvy asserted.\textsuperscript{259} He concluded that “with few exceptions, they are decent people, and worth knowing.”\textsuperscript{260}

The treatment of advertising men in the literature of the 1950s is a case in point of why it was important to distinguish between the sensationalism of popular fiction and the mundaneness of reality. It went without saying that the advertising world as not nearly as dramatic as writers such as Frederic Wakeman and James Kelly made it out to be. But the world of fiction was only one constituent part of a wider attack against advertising. If the American people could not trust the agency as a whole, then they certainly could not trust the people who worked in it. If the industry was immoral, and unethical, then the people who worked in it must have been as well. Discontent with the advertising industry was widespread and diverse, and yet it proved that the American people had a sort of strange fascination with the business. If they did not, the books would not have sold. Such facts supported the idea that part of the reason why Americans deeply distrusted advertising was because they did not understand it very well. Books such as \textit{The Hucksters} gave Americans a glimpse into a novel world, a world built on selling products through media to the masses. Perhaps many people took comfort in the fact that their suspicions of the industry’s dubious nature were confirmed, or so they thought, in the books they read.

\textsuperscript{259} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{260} David Ogilvy, \textit{Ogilvy on Advertising}, p. 45.
Conclusion

It is important to understand that advertising on the level of mass culture is too complex and dynamic to be assessed in simple mathematical terms as being either a positive or negative force on American society. The argument here is that advertisements, and the people who made them, were, as a whole, fairly benign and ultimately harmless. Advertising was not an omnipotent force that Americans were helpless against. It was not a rogue industry promoting immoral behavior and rampant materialism to further its own ends. Nor was it an industry made up of depraved drunkards and undesirables. Rather, it was an industry made up of real people who believed that their work carried with it at least some intrinsic value.

Advertisers received constant ridicule for the things they were supposedly doing wrong, and received almost no credit for what they may have been doing right, such as promoting better personal hygiene and health. Critics routinely pointed out how advertising was promoting sex and materialism, but seemed to never mention how it was promoting capitalism and the American way of life. This one-sided discourse haunted the industry all throughout the 1950s, and it was never able to rid itself of its bad image.

The irony is that the advertising industry, which was attacked for its supposed role in dehumanizing the American people into a pack of conformist consumers, was itself being dehumanized by its critics. Admen were stereotyped as wicked scoundrels, and the industry was cast as a malicious force willing to do anything to further its own ends. Had its critics seen the industry for what it was – a business made up of rational human beings – they may have had a more difficult time believing that the industry was doing some of the things they accused it of doing.
And yet, for as much criticism as the industry received, it continued to grow. Expenditures for advertising, as well as total number of advertising agencies, increased every year from 1950 through 1959. And for as much as social critics continued to attack consumerism and mass culture, neither trend has ever ceased being a part of American culture. Advertising, it seemed, had a strange relationship with the American society. It was continuously attacked, and yet it continued to grow, indicating that it was, at least in some way, embraced by society.

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261 *Printers’ Ink*, “National Advertising Index.” See generally.
Appendix

Figure 1

David Ogilvy, from the cover of his memoir (*Confessions of an Advertising Man*.
These advertisements, all of which were successful in Printers’ Ink’s “Which Ad Pulled Best” section, did not feature scandalous images. They were simple, focused on the product, and promised the consumer a benefit. Notice the captions below the advertisements (“Six Points That Will Step Up the Pulling Power of Your Ads,” Printers’ Ink, Vol 236, no. 9, 8/31/51, p. 21).
An example of a typical article from *Printers' Ink*. Notice the reference to point-of-purchase advertising ("How to Use Point-of-Purchase Advertising in Oversold Markets," *Printers' Ink*, Vol. 234, no. 12, 3/23/51, p. 45.)
Frederic Wakeman’s *The Hucksters* was a literary sensation and led to a stream of popular fiction focused on the life of the advertising man. This image is the cover of the 1948 edition.

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