

## The subtle poison that we are all hooked on

George Monbiot

Advertising subjects us to ever more pervasive messages to consume, encouraging greater dissatisfaction. Yet this column depends on it.

We think we know who the enemies are: banks, big business, lobbyists, the politicians who exist to appease them. But somehow the sector which stitches this system of hypercapitalism together gets overlooked. That seems strange when you consider how pervasive it is. In fact you can probably see it right now. It is everywhere, yet we see without seeing, without understanding the role that it plays in our lives.

I am talking about the industry whose output frames this column and pays for it: advertising. For obvious reasons, it is seldom confronted by either the newspapers or the broadcasters.

The problem was laid out by Rory Sutherland when president of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising. Marketing, he argued, is either ineffectual or it "raises enormous ethical questions every day". With admirable if disturbing candour he concluded that "I would rather be thought of as evil than useless." A new report by the Public Interest Research Centre and WWF opens up the discussion he appears to invite. Think of Me as Evil? asks the ethical questions that most of the media ignore.

Advertising claims to enhance our choice, but it offers us little choice about whether we see and hear it, and ever less choice about whether we respond to it. Since Edward Bernays began to apply the findings of his uncle Sigmund Freud, advertisers have been developing sophisticated means of overcoming our defences. In public they insist that if we become informed consumers and school our children in media literacy we have nothing to fear from their attempts at persuasion. In private they employ neurobiologists to find ingenious methods of bypassing the conscious mind.

Pervasiveness and repetition act like a battering ram against our minds. The first time we see an advertisement, we are likely to be aware of what it's telling us and what it is encouraging us to buy. From then on, we process it passively, absorbing its imagery and messages without contesting them, as we are no longer fully switched on. Brands and memes then become linked in ways our conscious minds fail to detect. As a report by the progressive thinktank Compass explains, the messages used by advertisers are designed to trigger emotional rather than rational responses. The low-attention processing model developed by Robert Heath at the University of Bath shows how, in a crowded advertising market, passive and implicit learning become the key drivers of emotional attachment. They are particularly powerful among children, as the prefrontal cortex – which helps us to interpret and analyse what we see – is not yet fully developed.

Advertising agencies build on this knowledge to minimise opportunities for the rational mind to intervene in choice. The research company TwoMinds, which has worked for Betfair, the drinks company Diageo, Mars, Nationwide and Waitrose, works to "uncover a layer of behavioural drivers that have previously remained elusive". New developments in neurobiology have allowed it to home in on "intuitive judgments" that "are made instantaneously and with little or no apparent conscious effort on the part of consumers – at point of purchase".

Invention is the mother of necessity. To keep their markets growing, companies must keep persuading us that we have unmet needs. In other words, they must encourage us to become dissatisfied with what we have. To be sexy, beautiful, happy, relaxed, we must buy their products. They shove us on to the hedonic treadmill, on which we must run ever faster to escape a growing sense of inadequacy.