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From mass communication to mass conversation: Why 1984 wasn’t like 1984

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ABSTRACT
Marketers and commercial media alike are confronted by shifts in the social relations of media production and consumption in the global services economy, including the challenge of capturing, managing and commercialising media-user productivity. This trajectory of change in media cultures and economies is described here as ‘mass conversation’. Two media texts and a new media object provide a starting point for charting the ascendance and social impact of mass conversation. Apple’s 1984 television commercial, which launched the Macintosh computer, inverted George Orwell’s dystopian vision of the social consequences of panoptic communications systems. It invoked a revolutionary rhetoric to anticipate the social consequences of a new type of interactivity since theorised as ‘intercreativity’. This television commercial is contrasted with another used in Nike’s 2006 launch of its Nike+ (Apple iPod) system. The Nike+ online brand community is also used to consider how a multiplatform brand channel is seeking to manage the changing norms and practices of consumption and end-user agency. This analysis shows that intercreativity modifies the operations of ‘Big Brother’ but serves the more mundane than revolutionary purpose of generating commercial value from the affective labour of end-users.
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Introduction
If ‘transmission’ was the dominant architecture of mass communication in the twentieth century, then what architecture will ultimately be favored in the present tumultuous mix of global economic restructuring and technological change? The present state of flux in mass communications applications and architectures is not without historical precedent. When radio was ‘new’ there was a sustained period of experimentation (Smulyan, 1994). Even though local influences shaped profound national differences in the institutional and political organisation of radio and then television, transmission still emerged in the twentieth century as the commonsense architecture of broadcast media and the social relations of their constituent audiences and consumer markets (Carey, 1992). Although the agency of audiences was highly constrained by the control architectures of transmission, audiences were nonetheless more successfully theorised as active participants in these cultural circuits than as technologically determined subjects and passive dupes of propaganda (du Gay quoted in Goggin 2006, 7ff.). Now, as Burnett and Marshall (2003, pp. 51-52) observe, ‘interactivity’ is frequently identified in place of ‘activity’ as the crucial point of difference between the social relations of ‘old’ mass communication media and those of ‘new’, convergent, digital, networked media. Interactivity is also frequently invested with the promise of democratising the social relations, not only of media but also of markets, by enabling direct representation and participation (Jenkins, 2006). Rapid diffusion and mass consumer adoption of new technologies (such as the Internet and mobile phones) are both consequences and conditions of economic globalisation. The possibilities of mediated interaction and social participation also proliferate and diversify as globalisation simultaneously favors transnational harmonisation and local variation. Rather than confirming the end of ‘mass communication’ the mass adoption of new platforms such as the Internet and mobile telephony indicate a diversification in the types of interactivity now deployed in post-industrial media and communication systems. This environment challenges media and communication scholars to critically engage with the theorisation of and implications of interactivity.

This challenge is addressed here in three ways. First, I review recent developments in the theorisation of interactivity that seek to systematically identify key techno-economic features of the global informational economy and post-broadcasting mediascape. From this foundation I argue that the present trajectory of change evident in the mass adoption of convergent Internet and mobile phone technologies and services, can be characterised as a broad turn to new media technologies that support conversational interaction. Second, I consider two cases of television commercials and (related to the second case) an online brand community to illustrate a broader argument about the implications of mass conversation media for advertiser-media-consumer relations. The television commercial that launched the Apple Macintosh in 1984 was a modernist dream of how computer-enabled end-user agency would smash the technocultural apparatus of transmission to smithereens. Some twenty years later, the 2006 launch of the Nike+ running system demonstrates the self-reflexivity that is characteristic of a far more complex contemporary reality, but the social relations of consumption depicted in this campaign are far from revolutionary. Conversational interaction and participation in branded media environments are now important market development tools. With a web-based reach these media can now outstrip the capacity of commercial television to propagate and reach global niche markets, and can be as large and as valuable as national mass markets.

From interactive to intercreative commercial media
Within critical traditions of media and communication studies, the typing of mediated interactivity has been strongly resisted for a variety of reasons. Typologies of interactivity can be vexed by the problems of positivist approaches to the field, which include over-determining the cultural and social impact of technology (specifically, closed, engineered communication systems) as well as understating the psychological dimensions of mediated communication (McMillan, 2002; van Dijk, 2006). Mindful of these limits, I argue here that typing interactivity can nonetheless be useful in post-humanist orientations to media and communication studies. By differentiating types of mediated interactivity it is possible to better understand the communications produced by self-organising systems (including, for example, advertisers, commercial media, and consumers) in systematic terms.

Various typologies of interactivity have been proposed over the years. Arguably, the best known of these is Jens Jensen’s development of Bordewijk and van Kaam’s earlier typology of ‘tele-information services’
(Bordewijk & van Kaam, 2003; Jensen, 1999). This theoretical construct seeks to account for the shift from specialist to generic communication systems in socio-cybernetic terms. It differentiates four main types of mediated interactivity: transmission (exemplified by the one-to-many ‘push’ architecture of broadcasting systems), consultation (exemplified by the reliance of newspapers and magazines on readers to select from a menu of pre-determined content), conversation (exemplified by the two-way architecture of telephone systems that facilitate peer-to-peer exchange), and registration (such as subscription television that requires pre-registration and disclosure of personal information to enable billing and collection for service, a feature that is also common to telephone systems and utilities in general). Where specialist analogue media and communication systems, such as broadcasting or telephone networks, were developed to support one or two types of interaction at any given time, general purpose digital networked systems can support an extraordinary array of applications that dynamically mix, disperse and consolidate all four types of interactivity. For the most part, the present article is concerned with conversation as a type of mediated interactivity, although registration is also heavily relied upon to simulate or substitute for conversational interaction (Spurgeon, 2008).

In his analysis of the implications of digital interactivity for citizenship, Miekle extended Jensen’s typology by proposing ‘intercreativity’ as a new type of conversational interaction that is particular to digital networked media. This term was first coined by World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee to describe:

the process of making things or solving problems together. If interactivity is not just sitting there passively in front of the screen, then intercreativity is not just sitting there in front of something ‘interactive’ (Berners-Lee quoted in Meikle 2002, 32).

Intercreativity describes the capacity of an end user to ‘write’ as well as ‘read’ media (Hartley 2009, p. 24). Framed in this way, communication technologies that dynamically facilitate conversation are also inherently intercreative. This is because audiences are additionally afforded the technical means to produce and circulate texts and to propagate audiences. Where transmission-based mass communication has historically favored producers and distributors in linear value chains, the social relations of digital conversational communication technologies such as the Internet and the mobile phone, support intensely dialogic, distributed cultures (for example, Castells, 2002; Goggin, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Spurgeon, 2008) and social network markets (Banks & Humphreys, 2008). They feature socio-cybernetic affordances for intercreative interaction and social participation. As a result of consumer demand for digital conversational connectivity users of conversational interaction knowingly and unknowingly participate in major shifts in the loci of economic and cultural value. These changes are global in scale, as well as local in impact and are historicised here as features of the social relations of ‘mass conversation’ (Spurgeon, 2008).

Meikle and many other new media scholars are principally concerned with the implications of intercreativity and co-creation for questions of citizenship. I share this concern but am also interested in navigating the consequences of intercreativity, which is understood as a type of conversational interaction, for the communication industries and professions of advertising and marketing communication. I also examine the consequences of conversational interaction for the social relations of consumption. In the process of analysing two television commercials and the online presence of a brand community this article contrasts the affective experiences achieved through advertising representations of interactivity with the expanding possibilities of social participation in branded spaces that are supported by mass conversation media, including self-representation and direct participation. In this respect this paper also traces a shift in the focus of media studies in the transitional period that corresponds with the global growth of markets for mass conversation media and communications. As Lash and Lury (2007, p. 29) observe:

Media have come to act less as texts and more as things, as platforms or environments. . . . (C)orresponding to the shift from texts to objects is a shift in how we encounter culture: from reading and interpretation to perception, experience and operationality. As a consequence (media studies) are concerned less with symbolic communication as such than with agency, affect, effect and transformation.

In the first instance, advertising texts are used to ground this discussion of the emerging social relations and cultural circuits of commercial communication in the era of mass conversation. Following the adaptation of
media studies methods in the ways described by Lash and Lury, the focus of this analysis then shifts from television texts to the web-based Nike+ brand community.

Advertising texts provide the starting point for this analysis of interactivity for two main reasons. First, they are particular to commercial media institutions and services. Second, advertising revenues continue to provide the main income for commercial media. This is in spite of the re-positioning in recent decades of advertising within marketing communication discourse as just one of many communication strategies (Cappo, 2003; Schultz, 2000). This development coincides with the emergence of brands as important media in their own right. Even though brands commit increasing proportions of promotional budgets to integrating their market identity and position, advertising is no less important to commercial media, old and new, in the unfolding era of mass conversation than in the preceding era of mass communication. For example, Google, which was first incorporated barely a decade ago and is now one of the biggest media companies in the world, is almost entirely dependent upon the revenues it earns from advertising sales (Spurgeon, 2008). The tensions that emerge as the ‘manufacturing-marketing-media complex’ (Sinclair, 2006) comes to terms with the productive capacity of digitally networked consumers are also apparent in the texts and textual practices of advertising, as well as brand communication strategies. These are traced here using a case study method, which is also widely used as a form of pedagogy in industry-centered marketing communication programs (for example, Patti, 2003).

My particular focus on television and the television commercial (TVC) is due to a mix of pragmatic, pedagogical and theoretical considerations related to the qualities of different media and the ways in which different types of media lend themselves to different types of advertising uses and appeals. Newspapers, for example, were the first commercial media to feel the dramatic consequences of ‘mass conversation’ in the loss of crucial classified advertising market share to Internet-based search. The rise of more user-centered and user-friendly online search media broke the nexus between news and advertising at the core of the advertising-funded newspaper business model (Morris, 1996). The implications for newspapers have been discussed elsewhere (Spurgeon, 2003). It is nonetheless worth noting an important feature of classified advertising is its predominantly informational character. Although in the online world classified advertising is freed from the space constraints of the print form, it presently continues to be heavily influenced by its newspaper antecedents and to be predominantly used for literal, rational appeals to prospective buyers. Television advertising on the other hand, emerged in the 1960s as a favored medium for brand-building and as such has been associated with an expansion of creative repertoires and polysemic techniques of image-based lifestyle advertising (Arvidson, 2006, 62). There are important exceptions to these generalisations; nevertheless, these factors help to explain why I have looked to audiovisual advertising executions, rather than in copy-intensive print-based advertising, to locate the representations of interactivity used to empirically ground this discussion.

The first TVC considered here is widely recognised as a ‘breakthrough’ case for the brand (Apple), the product (the Macintosh computer), and its symbolically rich representation of the social impact of personal computing. The second TVC is for a Nike running system. This system (Nike+) is also linked to the Apple brand because Nike+ footwear accommodates an Apple interface between the running shoe, remote databases, and certain Apple iPods. In this second, later, representation of interactivity, end-user control of computer power is shown to be simultaneously highly personalised, mobile, and ubiquitous. End-user control of mediated environments, like the operation of a treadmill, is demonstrated to be both banal and something that can be easily learned. This particular choice of Apple Macintosh and Nike+ cases grounds this discussion of intercreativity and the social relations of mass conversation media in specific historical and geo-political reference points.

**Representations of interactivity and social participation**

Apple’s 1984 television commercial launched the Macintosh computer into a United States consumer market during the 1984 American Super Bowl (see YouTube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYeefV3ubP8). This execution famously anticipated the demolition by digital media of the one-to-many architecture of transmission media, and the associated social relations of Orwellian thought control. The TVC depicted a stark vision of an authoritarian society organised along centralised command, control, and communication principles and populated by a mass of regimented, undifferentiated human drones. It provided a window through which TV audiences could witness the
moment when this social scenario was symbolically shut down. As the drones are marched into a vast auditorium, all approaches are dominated by a singular screen-based image of Big Brother. The sound of his amplified voice fills the space and lulls the apparently empty human vessels into submission and acceptance of his will. Through this oppressively dreary world runs a colorful flicker of hope for individual freedom, imagination, and agency in the form of an athletic young female. Pursued by a contingent of heavily armed ‘thought police’, she enters the auditorium and, acting intentionally, ‘interacts’ with the screen-based image of Big Brother that dominates the space by throwing a hammer at it, literally smashing the entire technocultural apparatus of transmission to smithereens. The tag line then appears and is supported by a voice over that affirms the Apple Macintosh as the reason ‘why 1984 won’t be like 1984’.

Various interpretations of this TVC have been advanced in advertising industry case studies (Kanner, 2006). Also discussed has been this campaign’s positive impact on the Apple brand and Macintosh sales, and on the development of the Super Bowl as a preeminent television platform for launching new products into the national American consumer market (Garmon, 2008; Kanner, 2006). The interpretation I add to this catalogue is that this TVC, like Orwell’s dystopian vision from which it drew inspiration, strongly suggests authoritarianism and fascism to be path-dependent social consequences (at least in part) of transmission media. According to this vision these media are strongly panoptic and systematically deny peer-to-peer flows of information. The contrasting utopian vision offered by the 1984 TVC suggested that conversational architectures and intercreative media and communications would foreclose the socio-political possibility of authoritarianism. Equipped with the affordances of personal computing, realised in the new ‘control’ technology of the Apple Macintosh (Beniger, 1986), consumers would break free of the prisons created by the old captains of false consciousness (Garmon, 2008) and shape an entirely different vision of the future.

In the second case considered here we find a representation of this future some 22 years on in a TVC produced for the 2006 launch of the Nike+ running system which was localised for broadcast in a number of national markets (for the Australian version, Tune Your Run see, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtoU3hn2UXs; for the Japanese version see, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLtXFLIDkjE&feature=related; for the US version, Running + Motivation see, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHDw5uQvK5Y&feature=related). Although Apple is associated with the product through a non-exclusive co-branding relationship the campaign was driven by Nike. The Apple 1984 TVC was remarkable in two key respects—first because of its high-impact use of a transmission medium to communicate the benefits of personal computing to the largest national commercial television market at the time, and second because of the dramatic alteration to social relations it anticipated and associated with personal computing. The Nike+ TVC was comparatively unremarkable. This TVC contained a number of intertextual references to the Apple Macintosh 1984 TVC. The Nike+ TVC used the image of the runner, but this time a white male, to show how computer-enabled agents could change themselves and their social environments. By using sensory inputs (music) and biofeedback (speed, distance covered, calories burned, heart rate and so on) the TVC showed how Nike+ users could improve their running performance. Music stimulated the runner’s imaginary life and the mundane training experience of the treadmill was transformed into a challenging streetscape. Biofeedback from the shoes, represented as a series of large screen-based barriers through which the runner crashes, is used to achieve a personal-best performance. In the 1984 campaign the interactive act of creative destruction was directed at forces of social control external to the Apple Mac user. In the Tune Your Run TVC this revolutionary individualism is displaced. The subjective benefit of using the Nike+ system is an inwardly directed form of reflexive, self-directed, and self-regulated consumerism that is also highly compliant with the interests of the global brand.

Where the 1984 TVC was strongly ritualistic, not only in its representation of the end of the era of transmission but also in its effect on creating a mass market for the Macintosh computer, Tune Your Run was instructional. It demonstrated the use of the Nike+ system to potential users. Also reflected in this TVC were the complex realities of marketing communication in increasingly fragmented media markets, including the ways in which time and place-shifting technologies are re-writing commercial media and advertising industries. In 1984 it was possible to stimulate the creation of a national market through one window on a television network. By 2006, the media environment had been so altered by proliferating media and entertainment choices that this was no longer a favored marketing media strategy. The
challenges of reaching dispersed conversational media consumers requires new media strategies which stand in stark contrast to the logic of transmission-based mass communication. Like other global brands, Nike spends an increasing proportion of its overall marketing communication budget in new media, where it is possible to establish and maintain more enduring connections with users than is possible with a 30 or 60 second TVC. There are two further noteworthy features of the Nike+ product and TVC. First, the Tune Your Run Nike+ campaign was a departure from Nike’s celebrity athlete strategy, which had dominated Nike brand marketing communication up to this time. Second, as a co-branded product, the Nike+ system represents an unusual adaptive strategy for such hyper-real objects as global brands, which do not usually connect or synthesise with other similar objects (Lash & Lury, 2007, p.17). Importantly, a marginal increase in brand separation was achieved in 2008 with the release of the Nike+ wristband, which meant it was no longer necessary to have an Apple iPod in order to use the Nike+ system, although the Apple RFID chip (discussed below) is still at the heart of the system.

**Intercreativity and the new economy of the Nike+ brand community**

Nike was the first brand to use radio-frequency identification device (RFID) technology (developed by Apple) that enables runners to use the iPod Nano to personalise computer enhancements of the running experience. Thus the so-called Nike+ system is not just a high-end running shoe; it is also a data chip that facilitates end-user control of data collection and, via the Nike+ website, supports manipulation and storage of this information, as well as participation in a branded, globally distributed social media network, or what Adam Arvidsson (2006) calls a ‘brand community’. The RFID sensor retails for about US$30 and fits inside a Nike+ shoe. The sensor uses a Bluetooth protocol to interface wirelessly with the iPod Nano to collect real time data on an end-user’s exercise effort, including run duration, distance and energy consumption. Personal data can be stored and manipulated on the Nike+ website (http://nikeplus.nike.com/nikeplus/) where users can build their own training profile and set and monitor personal goals. Users can also compare their progress with other Nike+ users. Forums allow users to find and communicate with peers and share similar challenges, route information, music playlists and other common interests and passions in running. The website supports the formation of communities of runners who can co-operate in various ways: for example, to create running leader boards and organise runs. Users can also shop for merchandise and music. One year after its launch, Nike claimed that the Nike+ site had members in over 160 countries who had collectively logged 22 million miles (Nike, 2007). According to Neilsen/NetRatings the number of people visiting Nike-owned websites, including NikePlus, reached 2 million per month in July 2007 (Story, 2007).

Nike has subsequently developed a variety of on and offline Nike+ service extensions that go far beyond orthodox merchandising offers. These include customised music compositions and compilations, which Nike (2007) describes as ‘ultimate running soundtracks’ in a ‘new music content category’, sold through iTunes, which is also linked from the Nike+ website. They also include special offers; for example, shirts that mark membership of informal Nike+ 500 or 1000 mile clubs and reflect increased status within the Nike+ community. Offline initiatives include numerous local running events in different markets around the world. The most ambitious of these at the time of writing was a 10 kilometre fun run that took place in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics and was globally coordinated through the Nike+ website. Run in over 28 locations around the world on the same day, and promoted as ‘The Human Race’, Nike claimed that this event mobilised nearly 800,000 runners and raised nearly US$800,000 for three international charities (Speedye 2008). First and foremost, however, The Human Race was a Nike+ promotional event. In addition to paying an entry fee (approximately US$60) entrants were meant to become a ‘human billboard for Nike’ (Story, 2007) by wearing event merchandise. However, numerous posts to Nike+ forums (2008) suggest that the logistics of the event were more challenging than Nike organisers anticipated. Many participants did not get their Human Race t-shirts, which they believed had been included in the entry fee for the race. Other sources of irritation among Nike+ community participants included incomplete and late posting of race results. Take, for example, this post from a Nike+ community participant with the Screen name Old Colt:

Its [sic] nice to see someone is actually reading this at Nike but heres [sic] my gripe:
1> I still haven't seen my run time or placing as a UK run at my place runner, despite receiving confirmation of my upload and a free download of music
2> I still haven't seen anything to do with my Tshirt and would like to know where it is and when I am going to get it (mens size large by the way)
3> When I log in to run the world, neither my screen name (coldcolt) nor my email address is recognised; this despite being logged in as that user name at the time!!!!!
3> While I am here, it would be nice if Nike could get the world leaderboard sorted out so that it works ALL the time shoving [sic] where I am on it, rather than just when it feels like it.
Come on Nike; get a grip!
(Nike Forums, 2008).

Importantly, the relations between forum participants and Nike+ brand community managers are dialogic. The rough-and-tumble of user-generated criticism is as much a feature of the forums as heartfelt brand devotionals, or suggested refinements and innovations. These dialogic relations suggest that both the Nike+ community and brand are very much works in progress. They also suggest that the strength of Nike+ brand equity is linked to the brand’s capacity to mediate a development path that integrates the on and offline worlds of community participants. Conversational interaction also distinguishes the Nike+ brand community as a new kind of branded entertainment medium that has more in common with massively multiplayer online games, than with commercial television. In this instance end-user controlled and managed data account for a significant proportion of the Nike+ website content. In addition to product information, Nike aggregates online community infrastructure in the form of a selection of communications tools on the Nike+ website. The affective labour of users is incorporated into the brand channel in the process of using these tools in conjunction with the Nike+ system. Even unruly users who do not behave as the brand intends can find their way into the Nike+ community. For example, one inventive iPod fan quickly discovered that they could attach the sensor to a different and, in their opinion, more comfortable running shoe and publicised this modification on their iPod fan blog (Shoehacker, 2006). Consistent with the ‘open source’ rhetoric, if not the reality of much Web 2.0 commercial culture, Nike does not appear to be troubled by this. In the first instance, the arrangement with Apple is non-exclusive. Any shoe manufacturer could, theoretically, incorporate the Apple RFID technology into its design. Similarly, access to Nike’s on and offline personal coaching services and brand community is not contingent upon owning Nike-branded apparel or footwear (although it is contingent upon having a network connection).
Nonetheless, in the process of building the Nike+ brand community, Nike is not just creating a branded medium; it is also creating a channel for transactions that facilitates new, on-demand business opportunities that are global in scale. For example, according to one industry observer, Nike began producing ‘500 mile club’ running shirts in response to requests from Nike+ community members ‘who’d earned the honour’ (Doherty, 2008). In effect, the Nike+ brand community aggregates and activates a wider range of demand side market dynamics in large, globally dispersed niche markets (Anderson, 2004) which only become visible when they are conversationally networked. Arguably, however, the Nike+ user’s position in consumer culture remains curiously unaltered by these practices of mass conversation. While users can more easily ‘talk back’ to the product, the brand (Big Brother) derives commercial benefit from valuable user information that is harvested in the process of fostering more in-depth customer relationships. There is little evidence in this brand community of sustained dialogue about the social relations of the brand itself, or the terms and conditions of brand-product-user relations.

**Conversational interaction and the future of advertising-funded media**

The first TVC considered here anticipated a change in the abundance and availability of interactivity as a cybernetic and social resource. In the second TVC, end-user control over customised and personalised media was represented as a banal part of everyday life. Where the protagonist in the 1984 TVC was responding to externally determined limits of interaction, in the Nike+ TVC the protagonist is responding to personally imposed limits. The ‘reading’ of the 1984 TVC offered here is not intended to overstate the influence of technology in determining social relations but, rather, to highlight the role of ‘new’ media in changing advertiser and commercial media rhetoric (if not the actual social relations) of consumer-brand relations. Although powerfully prophetic, a paradox of the Apple 1984 ad arises in the use of network television to showcase the creative destruction that personal computing would augur for centrally organised and controlled media and communications systems (and, by implication, the social relations of mass media and mass markets organised along ‘transmission’ lines). On the one hand, the new Apple Macintosh relied upon the transmission architecture of broadcast television to communicate efficiently with mass markets about stand-alone personal computing. Yet, the mass adoption of personal computing is one
of a number of crucial factors that has contributed to the decline of mass media since the mid-1980s. The TVC also overstated and oversimplified stand-alone personal computing as a social change agent. Although personal computers were increasingly configured in business contexts in local and wide area networks, it was another decade before distributed networking of personal computers became feasible for large numbers of residential consumers, via the user-friendly World Wide Web Internet interface.

Similar paradoxes are much fainter but nonetheless apparent in the Nike+ ad 22 years later. As a mode of interaction, transmission has not disappeared from the mediascape, but fixed, stand-alone transmission media cannot be so confident that their particular offerings of advertising-funded program streams will be as appealing to intercreative consumers as more conversational media offerings. Nor are isolated transmission media services holding their attraction for intercreative advertisers. For example, Nike has discovered that short videos or TVCs released on YouTube can reach millions of viewers worldwide and even be picked up by broadcast media at no cost beyond production to Nike (Story, 2007). These kinds of developments provide a strong motivation for brand advertisers such as Apple and Nike to develop mass conversation techniques to connect with intercreative, not just active, audiences. The New York Times (Story, 2007) recently reported that many big companies are significantly increasing their annual digital media spending, in many cases doubling it. But most of this increase is not being spent on buying paid ads in ‘new’ media. Brands, like Nike, are developing their own platforms for intercreative user engagement, including online social network marketing. Two years after its launch, Nike+ is now celebrated in advertising and commercial media industry circles as a ‘tremendously successful cross platform extension of two brands’, if not ‘a completely new advertising object’ (Doherty, 2008) which integrates TVC, social network and event elements.

Mass, and more targeted niche, communication techniques remain important to advertisers, but within a rapidly diversifying repertoire of brand communication techniques and strategies. This development points to the historical reliance of advertising, as well as commercial media, on the transmission model of communication. Nike no longer runs the high profile television campaigns that created the global brand in the 1980s and 1990s. The overall proportion of its marketing communication spend committed to television advertising is declining, but its overall marketing communication expenditure is increasing, which means that its investments in television time are still substantial, even if the proportion of advertising expenditure is declining.

Thus the historical conditions of mass conversation are not so much a break with the past as a complex layering of new possibilities of interaction and social participation on pre-existing social and technological conditions. Mass communication is still with us, but end-user demand for conversational media and communications systems means that the radical monopoly of transmission is coming to an end.

Transmission media will most likely adapt in this environment by integrating, with more dynamic systems and diverse architectures of mediated interactivity. Advertising-funded media also endure but for the moment the uneasy equilibrium of the transmission era, which favored commercial media control by arm’s length specialists rather than advertisers, has been disrupted. The extent to which commercial media will be predominantly directly controlled (if not owned and operated) by advertisers is a long way from being settled. Another point of critical concern is the power relativities of commercial media owners (including brand community media) and users. The shift from mass communication to mass conversation involves depletions of complexity and agency as well as increases in these environments. Rather than delivering on the promise of freedom from Big Brother, digital intercreativity is more likely to have the effect of rendering the self-reflexivity of consumers more accessible to marketers and more commercially productive. It does not preclude the possibility of conversations about political or creative freedoms, but nor does it substitute for them.

References


