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Conflict and competition in nineteenth-century advertising

At the end of March 1838, a cluster of advertisements for tea merchants appeared in the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*. [slide two] Whitehead's, somewhat incongruously bearing in mind the readers of the paper, announce, and I quote, to the "inhabitants of Leeds, and the nobility, gentry, clergy and families in the North of England" the fact that they are opening a new tea warehouse and shop just down the road from their old establishment. Whitehead's advertise widely in the Leeds press, and their advertisements appear in both the *Leeds Times*, which shares a publisher with the *Northern Star*, and the *Leeds Mercury*, which was the *Northern Star*'s Whig rival. Also on the page is a notice entitled "The Northern Locust and His Dupes!! Or, what is a tea hawker." This claims to be a warning about the system of hawking tea: a note under the title reads "in adopting the above title, and bringing the subject so immediately under Observation [...] we do not aim at the injury of individual interest, for Fame, or Reputation, of any individual hawker in particular [but] to the SYSTEM OF HAWKING GOODS in General, and that of tea, with which we are acquainted in particular." This is, in fact, an advertisement for Ottley's and Co., a tea merchant in Halifax and, even though it claims not to have any individual hawker in mind, the reference to Scottish hawkers and the specific prices quoted suggests that they have a particular itinerant competitor in mind. This advertisement is much more tailored to the readers of the *Northern Star* – it refers to the, and I quote, "young and unsuspecting wife of the industrious mechanic and skilful artisan" – and only appears in this title.

[slide three] The following week the hawkers strike back calling Ottley the “Southgate Puddlecock” and challenging him to prove his claim that he sells 20 chests to their one, wagering £50 that he does not. By calling their response “Scotch Tea Dealers versus Puffers,” they draw attention to the means through which Ottley draws attention to himself. They make explicit that Ottley is in fact advertising his business while pretending to enlighten the public about trading practices. As Ottley has been this disingenuous in public, his character is made fair game, and they delight in exposing Ottley’s voting record in the last two elections – first Tory, and the Liberal – to cast doubt on his claims to be honest and a friend of the people. They claim, and I quote, “Amongst the respectable Tea Dealers and Grocers of the Town, his Advertisement has excited nothing but disgust: an old established member of the Trade was heard to say, ‘That any man who seeks to rise by another’s demerit, must be a despicable character’.” The Scotch Tea Dealers have turned advertising against Ottley: by bringing publicity to the practices of hawkers, and so hoping to advance his own trade, Ottley has made his own public reputation a target for criticism.

The dispute between Ottley and the Scotch Tea Dealers goes on for over a month, with insults and allegation exchanged week by week on the front pages of the *Northern Star*. Ottley claims his Tea Dealers are not playing fair by remaining under the cover of anonymity; the Tea Dealers attack Ottley’s status as a gentleman, and suggest his education was completed by Wackford Squeers, a character familiar to readers of the *Northern Star* as it had extracted the appropriate episode from *Nicholas Nickleby*, then being serialized by Dickens, the previous week. The

dispute between the two tea merchants demonstrates how ideas of conflict underpin advertising in the periodical press. Not only is this a conflict between the two firms, carried out by means of the weekly periodicity of the *Northern Star*, but the two parties play on a number of social conflicts in order to make their points. The Scotch Tea Dealers respond to allegations that they are exploiting the working man by exposing Ottley as a sham gentleman, with a horse, gun, and dog. [slide four] Ottley replies by claiming, and I quote, “we have a dog, and pay eight shillings a year tax, for the rat catcher, a *Terrier*, and not a broken-haired *Scotch*; and horses, not for hunting, but for use in our Trade, and that we have not fired a gun this seven years. It is certainly true that we have license to shoot, not with guns, but with *E-pistles* in *Scotch preserves* wherever they may be; and, depend upon it, it shall be renewed from time to time, so long as we have *powder* left and *Scotch vermin* to *kill*.” The agonizing puns here ensure the continuation of the conflict, but also distinguish these advertisements from those around them. In its early years, the front page of the *Northern Star*, like its competitors, was entirely devoted to advertisements: by including such personal attacks and provocative insults set in boxes larger than many of the other advertisements, both the Tea Dealers and Ottley’s increase their chances of attracting attention through sophisticated advertising strategies despite the more rough and ready approach to publishing demonstrated by other aspects of the *Northern Star*. Indeed, in a guide to puffing published in 1856 entitled *A.B. has returned, or the romance of advertising with tracings from the capital of the second column of the times*, the anonymous author recommends staging a conflict for precisely these reasons.

Rather than insist on the difference between advertising and other types of content, this paper explores how they overlap. The idea of publicity connects both publishing and advertising and, I suggest, this subverts any conflict between what we might call “advertising” and “content.” If advertising is print that presents itself as extra matter that has been inserted for a price and invites readers to buy something; then it is in conflict with content that is freely submitted or paid for on behalf of the proprietor, or that which presents itself as the matter for which readers buy the journal. [slide five] However, this distinction is too rigid: in the tea example from the *Northern Star* for instance, the distinction between news and advertisements is blurred. When Ottley’s first publish “The Northern Locust and his Dupes,” the correspondent from Halifax notices the advertisement in his weekly news column and writes, and I quote, “If *half* the allegations contained in it be true, it is, indeed, high time for the “Dupes” to “Purchase not only Ottley and Co’s Teas, but those of other dealers to see who supplies the best.” The following week, when the Scotch Tea Dealers reply, the same correspondent writes, and I quote “Audi alteram partem, hear both sides, is a very old and very popular adage” and again directs readers to the advertisements in order to do just that. This hints at the common derivation of news and advertising, and indeed their generic similarities: newsheets announce new things, and these could be events or products; this is then exploited by advertisers who might link products to newsworthy events, or make their advertisements appear to be notices for the public benefit, much like news items themselves [slide six; slide seven].

The most notorious textual practice that blurred the distinction between advertising and editorial matter is puffing. As early as 1826, the author of the pamphlet “The

Siege of Paternoster Row” could complain that, and I quote, “Reviews excepting such as have been set up as political engines, are nothing now but vehicles for puffing off trash books. Instead of being free, impartial umpires between writers and readers – between the library and the bookshop – critics, now-a-days, receive a price for the sacrifice of their honest judgement and are the slaves of taskmasters the most sordid and insatiate.” Abaraham Heywood, writing anonymously in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1843 claimed that authors were the third most common advertisers, after peddlers of patent medicines and cosmetics. He claims that, and I quote, “It is considered hardly worth a publisher’s while to publish a cheap or single-volume book, since forty or fifty pounds must be laid out in advertisements to give any publication a chance. Large sums are also frequently paid for paragraphs, which most of the newspapers insert for about a third more than the price of ordinary avowed advertising. In 1894, the other end of the century, Charles Turner laments the connection between advertising and reviewing. In his pamphlet, “Advertising, aesthetically and economically criticised,” he writes “the combination of the labours of the reviewer and the advertising manager in our public journals is not light matter. ‘Give me an advertisement and I will give you a good review’ is a sentence which is often actually uttered and very generally the principle works without the embarrassing necessity for vulgar iteration.”

Puffery arouses such sustained concern as it subverts the fiction that some parts of the text are for sale, while other parts remain untouched by commercial matters. Tomahawk – a satirical weekly rival of *Punch* published between 1868-1870 – satirizes this assumption [**slide eight**]. Reviews – especially in the higher journalism – necessarily efface vulgar reference to the market so that they can offer

instead the considered opinion of the periodical itself. However, as periodicals themselves circulate within the same print culture as the works under review, the advertisement for the work and its review often appear in the same number, just as the review itself might extract from the work under question. [**slide nine; slide ten**].

As advertisements claim an unseemly amount of publicity for an article that remains unseen, it was common practice for literary advertisements to cite favourable reviews in order to invoke their authority as justification for claiming attention.

Tomahawk was aimed at a niche of male metropolitan readers, so its advertisement defending itself against accusations that it derived from the Savage Club is clearly in jest [**slide eleven**].

As the examples I have shown demonstrate, the advertising pages of periodicals are often their most visually striking components. As Ellen Gruber Garvey, amongst others, has acknowledged, nineteenth-century readers, just like readers today, took pleasure in visually consuming the objects advertised in the pages. The *Publishers' Circular*, a long-running trade journal explicitly commodifies advertisements. Like the nineteenth-century press directories, the *Publishers' Circular* was a list of books published but, because it was fortnightly, it could respond to market trends and include review-type articles, obituaries, and gossip. In the 1880s, each number came within a one page advertising wrapper, but at least three quarters of its letterpress was also devoted to advertisements. As its readers were involved in the trade, these functioned as news, advertising publishers lists, as well as promoting certain goods and services. The advertising section of the title was especially striking at Christmas, when an 128 page supplement was published that reproduced the most

striking images from the Christmas numbers of the magazines and annuals [**slide twelve; thirteen; fourteen**]. In this instance, although there is matter other than advertisements, it is for the latter that readers are buying the journal. It was therefore in the interests of Sampson Low et al, the owners and publishers of the *Publishers' Circular* to have as wide a range of high-quality advertisements as possible. They still charged however: a full page advertisement costs 3 guineas; $\frac{1}{2}$ page costs £1 12s; $\frac{1}{4}$ page is a guinea; a 1" banner across the page was 10s 6d; and 4 lines in a column was half a crown. These expensive rates show how coveted advertising space was in the journal, but this was to some extent offset by its subscriptions, which included 6 free advertisements for 6s a year.

Advertisers buy space in media in order to give publicity to whatever is advertised, and this puts them into direct conflict with others who wish to use that space. In an article published in the *National Review* in 1896 entitled "Evolution of Editors," Leslie Stephen posits a line of descent for the periodical from a more simple ancestor to its highly-developed form in the present. In the past, he claims, the editor, proprietor and publisher were one person, and he hired some, and I quote, "inhabitant of Grub Street as a drudge." Throughout the nineteenth century, he suggests, a division of labour has become established with the editor, who Stephen calls "the commander of the periodical," negotiating the differing demands of readers, publishers, printers and proprietors. In the same article Stephen relates how the editors of the *Daily Post* had to pay the theatres £200 a year for notices of their productions, but received most of their news content free from contributors. In the nineteenth century this situation is reversed, with producers paying for the insertion of their notices, and editors and proprietors often paying for the provision their

news. This suggests that both the periodical press, and the advertisements that sustained it, underwent similar processes of specialization and professionalization throughout the nineteenth century. Most histories of twentieth-century advertising, just like most twentieth century histories of the press, begin in the late nineteenth century, and indeed this is the moment when advertising agencies began to establish themselves in London. However, it is important to remember that both journalism and advertising have histories longer that stretch back before their professionalization – for instance the year after the advertising tax was introduced 18 thousand advertisements were taxed – and that these histories – because each relies upon the other – are intertwined.

There were a flurry of guides for potential advertisers published from 1870 on, with a marked increase between 1895 and 1910, often written by advertising agencies and so functioning as advertisements themselves. For instance [slide fifteen] the Mutual Advertising Agency began publishing their annual *Successful Advertising* in 1879 as a guide for those wishing to advertise that emphasizes the expertise of the advertising agent. They claim they will provide advertisers with three advantages: they will suggest the best style for advertisements; they will recommend only media with either the highest circulation or most prestige; and they will prevent advertisers from being charged “fancy” prices, as they keep a register of prices and circulations in their office. Although partly a performative gesture on behalf of a profession trying to establish itself, the existence of such publications and the agencies that created them does demonstrate the need for guidance as to how to advertise effectively in complex media like the periodical press. The reason this is difficult is that the space available for advertising is contested, with different actors demanding

different things from it. For instance readers might find some advertisements interesting, informative or even titillating, but there were others – for instance for the omnipresent patent medicines or hair oils – that were both boring and repetitive. Advertisements for patent medicines were also seen as disreputable: not only did they incur the wrath of medical practitioners, but they also hinted at the immoral acts that resulted in the need for treatment. James Burn, in his anonymous *The Language of the Walls: and a Voice from the Shop Windows, or, the Mirror of Commercial Roguery* equates advertisements for patent medicines with blackmail, and then extends this to advertising more generally. “Their literary production,” he writes, “contains an exposition of the crimes against nature, and opens up to the vulgar gaze the *arcana* of man unmanned. Their phraseology is a compound of cant, bombast, professional technicalities, and scholastic jargon, well calculated to impose upon the weakminded and the ignorant.” Although the voyeuristic thrills offered by such advertisements might appeal to some readers, it is unlikely that such content corresponded with most editor’s notions about the identity of their periodicals. Burn blames the proprietors, writing that, and I quote, “The intellect employed by the editorial department of the British press is of the highest standing. Its research is sufficient to grasp the whole round of human intelligence, while its eloquence is characterized by the charm of conviction – but its proprietary is a mercenary fact.” A letter in response to Leslie Stephen’s article in 1896 makes a similar point, claiming, and I quote “generically the proprietor is a common trader, whose profoundly commercial instincts are the curse of honest journalism. His only use is to sign cheques, and he does that with an ill grace.”

It is such conflicts that structure the textual spaces available for advertisements. Editors had to oversee the contributions of authors, while making available enough space for advertisers to ensure the journal remained solvent while not alienating readers. Printers and publishers were also under pressure. Many of the advertising guides published tables of periodicals, detailing their characteristics: *Successful Advertising* lists price; circulation; price per inch of text for one insertion and for a series of 13; whether double columns or block were taken; politics; when each goes to press; and when each is published. The emphasis on formal features here demonstrates the importance advertisers placed on the appearance of their advertisements. [slide sixteen] This slide, from *Successful Advertising*, shows how ambitious effects could even be created from the printer's case.

This prosopographical approach to space, which emphasizes the relationships that determine the space available for advertising, is not necessarily biographical. Despite the division of labour that underpins periodical production, the same historical actor often occupied a number of roles simultaneously. For instance, the publisher of the *Northern Star*, Joshua Hobson, advertised his offices through the paper, even announcing the arrival of a steam press as news. [slide seventeen] This is not all: when in March 1842 an advertisement for "Farr's Life Pills" – a much-advertised patent medicine – is disguised as an announcement of a "new theory" at the end of a column of "Assize Intelligence," [slide eighteen] Hobson responds the following week with an advertisement for Chartist Pills: a patent medicine that would permit the debilitated working man to forward democracy [slide nineteen]. Hobson is here publisher, printer and advertiser, and in each case he seeks publicity in different ways, whether through the imprint of the paper or more directly through

advertisement. [**slide twenty**] This slide, from the 8th edition of *Successful Advertising* shows the location of Smith's Mutual Advertising Agency on a map of London that also marks the locations of key locations of the print trade. Although it is the desire for publicity that yokes advertising and the periodical press – even geographically – the spaces through which this desire is manifested are structured by concrete economic relationships.