



THE ARCLIGHT GUIDEBOOK
TO MEDIA HISTORY AND
THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: SHARING HISTORICAL ADVERTISING RESEARCH ON TUMBLR

Cynthia B. Meyers

“How good do that booty look though?” This comment was posted online a few months ago, in praise of an [advertisement](#) I had posted on my Tumblr blog (figure 1). The ad, from a 1946 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, consists of a Norman Rockwellesque painting of three children admiring Cellophane-wrapped lollipops. Above them is printed the question, “HOW GOOD DOES A LOLLIPOP LOOK?” and beneath them the answer, “YOU KNOW WHEN YOU *SEE* IT PROTECTED IN CELLOPHANE.” What stood out for the anonymous online commentator, however, was the frilly-underwear-clad rear end of one of the children, a girl apparently about five years old, visible beneath her lifted skirt as she leans over the candy counter. Had I, in my effort to cater to my Tumblr audience, become the unintentional enabler of pedophiles? Or was this commentator simply a disinhibited social media user, anonymously poking fun at an historical image with an intentionally sexually perverse reading? How had I come to this moment of reckoning?

Initially, my intention in starting a blog was not to attract snarky comments but to share materials about our commercial cultural past. I study the history of the intersection of the advertising and broadcasting industries, a particularly rich topic, I think, in that both industries are deeply involved in creating, responding to, and disseminating a variety of discourses and cultural forms,¹ with sometimes distinct but often overlapping resources and purposes. The advertising industry itself is not a single entity but many institutions and individuals with conflicting and contradictory ideas and practices, pulled this way and that by competing assumptions and economic exigencies.² My book, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio*, is the

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

HOW GOOD DOES A LOLLIPOP LOOK?

YOU KNOW WHEN YOU **SEE** IT PROTECTED IN CELLOPHANE

WHY IT PAYS TO BUY CELLOPHANE-PROTECTED PRODUCTS

When you see what you buy, you're sure of what you're getting. Wise shoppers, young or old, select products in transparent Du Pont Cellophane because it reveals the quality . . . shows how many . . . what kind . . .

... Are appetizing. But Cellophane does more than just show. It protects what it shows . . . preserves flavor, keeps things clean, delivers your money's worth of original quality.

MOISTUREPROOF

DU PONT

Cellophane
A PRODUCT OF DU PONT KODAK

SHOWS what it PROTECTS

DU PONT Cellophane

BETTER THINGS FOR BETTER LIVING . . . THROUGH CHEMISTRY

FEB 23 1946

"How good does a lollipop look?" (1946)

#retro #vintage #advertising #vintage ad #Du Pont #candy
#little girl #lollipop #1940s

7 months ago ♥ 291 🔗

[+ Share](#)

Figure 1.

story of the role of advertisers and their agencies in broadcasting from its beginnings in commercial radio in the 1920s to the advent of television in the 1950s, a role which deeply affected, and continues to affect, not just broadcasting's institutional and economic structures but also its myriad cultural forms.³

This subject presents particular challenges to the cultural historian. Unlike print media, a large amount of which has been preserved, electronic media artifacts are scarce. Many live radio and television broadcasts were never recorded; of the recordings that were made, many have been lost or destroyed or otherwise made inaccessible.⁴ So, like many other electronic media historians, I follow a paper trail of written documentation of advertising and broadcast industry practices—memos, correspondence, contracts, house organs (internal newsletters), publicity materials, trade publications,⁵ and the like—that will expose framing assumptions and beliefs about audiences, entertainment, and advertising.

Memos and correspondence from “behind the scenes” are not likely to interest nonspecialist audiences, and the idea of sharing them publicly never occurred to me. However, as I shifted from collecting material by making hard photocopies to collecting shareable digital images instead, I began to pay more attention to the visuality of some of the artifacts. Two events in particular moved me to think the world might benefit if I posted some of my discoveries online. When I searched for images to serve as illustrations for my book as I prepared it for press, I was struck by how much information visual artifacts might supply readers seeking to understand the culture of the time. Advertisements, magazine articles, cartoons, comic strips, illustrations, and photographs vividly represent the role of radio in American culture. Print advertisements often cross-promote radio programs and their star performers. Broadcast and advertising trade publications feature advertisements that represent many of the debates and beliefs common in the industries. I found far too many interesting images



Penny and her mother both whistle this happy little washday song! (1944 Good Housekeeping)

#retro #vintage #advertising #vintage ad #1940s #rinso
 #soap #radio #whistle #penny #laundry #comic strip
 8 months ago 24 Share

Figure 2.

to fit in the book, and I wanted another outlet for them.

At about the same time, I was lucky enough to gain access to private archives that had been maintained for decades at one of the most important ad agencies of the period I study: BBDO.⁶ In this archive I found folders, grouped by client, of several decades of magazine ads from consumer magazines such as *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Look*. These folders allowed me to review in succession ads for the same client from the 1930s through the 1960s and note how the art and copy strategies evolved over time; by posting their contents, I thought, I might draw online viewers into the same historical experience.

I noticed also that the agency would produce a prodigious number of ads based on a single concept or theme, often weekly, yet slightly alter the layout or illustrations or copy. Repeating the same slogan or concept was a basic hard-sell advertising strategy; variation might help prevent such repetition from boring the audience. For example, a 1944 ad shows “lovable little Penny Ann Vickers” and her mother whistling together to celebrate the fact that Rinso made little Penny’s clothes clean as a whistle (fig. 2); a 1945 ad introduces “cute Patsy Anne Heinz” whistling “Rin-so White” in a black-and-white frame while her mother whistles “Rin-so Bright”



Why do you whistle on washday Mom? Because Rinso (1945)

#retro #vintage #vintage ad #rinso #advertising
#amos n andy #radio #old time radio #soap
1 year ago 37

Figure 3.

in an adjoining color frame (fig. 3); and a 1946 ad shows the eight-year-old Lally twins whistling both phrases in color as they bestride a stuffed horse (fig. 4). By showing my online viewers such series, I thought I might represent this common practice of repetition to them.



"Rinso is anti-sneeze—the only granulated soap 98% free of irritating sneeze soap-dust" (1946)

#retro #vintage #advertising #rinso
#soap #vintage ad #twins #sneeze
#1940s #rinso bright
7 months ago 9

Figure 4.

In a sequence of Du Pont ads by BBDO for Cellophane, a word now in such common usage that most of us do not hear it as a brand name at all, I hoped to show how the agency's approach shifted



"How five sharp-eyed housewives got ideas for dinner tonight! Mrs. Nice, Mrs. Mater, Mrs. Phuss, Mrs. Clubby, and Mrs. Newly." (1939)

#retro #vintage #advertising #vintagead #1930s
 #housewives #dudpont #cellophane #bbdo #illustration
 1 week ago 30 0 + Share

Figure 5.



"Today our metal is precious. And lots of use are serving Uncle Sam." "We're frosted foods in cellophane. We'll help to see you through." (1942)

#retro #vintage #advertising #vintagead #1940s #dudpont
 #bbdo #wwii #worldwarii #cellophane #warpropaganda
 2 months ago 47 0 + Share

Figure 6.

to accommodate the national mood during the Depression, the Second World War, and the postwar era. Cellophane evolves in these ads from an aid to thrifty housewives seeking to confirm the quality of their grocery purchases (fig. 5) to a patriotic household alternative to metals needed for the war effort (fig. 6) and a harbinger of futuristic technologies that will transform our lives (fig. 7). My readers would see memorably illustrated—through the ads' rich colors, elaborate layouts, and involved textual appeals—the process by which a large industrial company, Du Pont, was associated with the daily concerns of average consumers.

The intermediary between these pedagogical goals and my disinhibited commentator was the Tumblr platform on which I created the blog <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/wordfromoursponsor>.

Tumblr makes it easy to upload and share a variety of media (text, images, video, animated GIFs, audio, etc.). As Twitter developed as the dominant “microblogging” platform for text, Tumblr emerged as its first visual counterpart.⁷ On a traditional blog, a user must navigate to the web page to see the post. On sharing platforms like Tumblr, users select other users’ blogs to “follow” and then see the posts, in reverse chronological order, of every blog they follow without having to navigate from blog to blog. Like Twitter, Tumblr allows users to apply tags for easy searching. Tumblr’s curators often highlight my posts with the hashtag “advertising” to promote their dissemination to the wider Tumblr community and the general public. My blog has just over 3,000 “followers” at this writing; it is one of several that specialize in “vintage” advertising.

Like all scholars researching the past, I am careful to collect data that might help me understand the context of an artifact, such as its date of creation, original context, publisher, author, recipient, page, archive location, and so on. I try to understand the artifact’s original audience and purpose. Ads from consumer magazines are obviously unlike those from trade magazines; publicity materials are quite different from internal memos or private correspondence. And they must be placed within the wider social, economic,



Figure 7.

“Mrs. Jones flicks a switch on her television set and tunes in the Shopping Tele-column of the Air.” (1943 Du Pont ad)

#retro #vintage #vintage ad #advertising #DuPont #TV
 #television #1940s #progress #BBDO
 #home shopping network
 7 months ago 25 0 Share

and cultural contexts of their production and reception to be properly understood.

Tumblr, I discovered, works to subvert all these aims and habits. Its users see my posts as decontextualized bits in a never-ending reverse chronological feed of all their followed Tumblr blogs, amid arbitrary adjacencies that prevent the building of meaningful contexts, even if a particular blogger tries to provide some. Some libraries and museums have created Tumblr accounts that try to counter these atomizing effects with lengthy commentary and explanation. For example, the [National Archives](#) posts thematically about certain historical topics, sharing documents and then encyclopedia-style entries about them. The Special Collections in Media and Culture based at the University of Maryland–College Park runs a Tumblr called [@Bcast_Md](#) that also provides encyclopedic information about its own posts, especially on the history of local broadcasting stations and specific programs. But these inevitably work against the tendencies of the medium. “The History of Flight” or “The Dedication of Mt. Rushmore” will appear contiguous, perhaps, to “The Worst Cat” or “Survivor: Beyoncé vs. Zombies,” two of the most popular blogs of 2014 according to one site.⁸

Of course most social media users are looking at images for entertainment rather than for historical value, and, as historian/journalist Rebecca Onion notes, “The Internet loves a particular kind of history.”⁹ Certain subjects, eras, and visual elements garner more attention than others. As she selects which historical artifacts to post online at *Slate*’s [The Vault](#), Onion notes, “[S]ometimes I’m like ugh, it’s just too perfect. I can tell people are going to love it, but it’s so pander-y that I almost can’t.” And catering to these proclivities may lead to oversimplification. As Onion explains, “What doesn’t go viral: anything ambiguous, anything that doesn’t tell a really direct story, that’s not easily transmissible. I think the kind of history that does well on the web is the stuff

that's really unambiguous.”

My approach to sharing my historical research on Tumblr has, I fear, led me inevitably in the direction of the “pander-y” and the oversimplified. This process happened gradually. At first I had to learn how to build an audience by tagging and captioning effectively. I conscientiously tagged and captioned some of the basic metadata about the image, such as its year of publication, and highlighted in the captions elements, such as advertising slogans, that might interest users. I usually tagged the name of an advertiser that owned the brand (Lever Bros, for example, owned the Lux soap brand) and the advertising agency that produced the ad. I doubt any of this registered with my viewers. Most vintage-ad Tumblr blogs provide little or no metadata, and what is there may not be accurate; in fact, I sometimes see images tagged with the incorrect decade. My teenage daughter, then an enthusiastic Tumblr user, helped me to a clearer sense of what might attract actual viewers: she suggested I replace tags like “historical” with trendier equivalents like “retro” and “vintage.” I also quickly learned that Tumblr users respond to tags that refer directly to visual qualities, preferably those of certain currently popular styles or eras, so I began including tags like “midcentury modern,” “1950s style,” “black and white” (fig. 8), and “illustration.”

I found myself growing more and more interested not so much in



Figure 8.



Who will be Miss WNBC-TV?

#retro #vintage #1960s #beauty pageant #bathing beauty
 #wimsuit #wnbc #vintage tv #schaesecake
 1 year ago 4

Share

Figure 9.



SPONSOR FEBRUARY 1958

The free premium of a young woman in a box of Soggo cereal is just as impossible as trying to sell Portland with KPTV-12 NBC. (1958)

#retro #vintage ad #vintage tv #advertising #television
 #1950s #portland #kptv #sex sells
 1 year ago 194

Share

Figure 10.

teaching the world as in gaining its attention. I learned the basic metrics Tumblr provides for each post: the number of “likes” (a heart icon) and “reblogs” (when another blogger reposts to his/her own followers). Tumblr does not show the number of “views” (although Google Analytics would do so) but lists the “likes” and “reblogs” as a combined list of “notes” and totals them. Like many social media users, I began to try to anticipate which posts would get the most attention. I began to select images not for their historical significance but because I thought they might attract more “notes.” Often I was wrong. A silly photo of 1960s beauty queens vying for the title of “Miss WNBC-TV” got only four notes (fig. 9), while a 1958 trade publication ad featuring a sexy girl rising from

a box of Soggo cereal—her presence there as a premium is as “impossible” as selling to Portland without KPTV-12—got 194 notes (fig. 10).

I wanted my blog to consist almost entirely of content that was new to the internet, a quality that I thought at first would gain me followers eager for such material. Actually, however, reblogging is more important than originality on Tumblr, because reblogging others’ posts is the best way to get them to follow your blog. The most popular blogs do this regularly and often, such as the Tumblr Klappersacks. Since I wasn’t willing to automate my posts (line them up for automatic posting on a timed basis), post more than one new image per day, or reblog an image that didn’t exactly fit my blog, I had to depend on rebloggers such as Klappersacks to spread my images for me; they became, in effect, my distributors, and therefore my primary audience. While I gain new followers almost daily, I believe most of them find my posts through rebloggers.¹⁰

What pleased these rebloggers? Celebrities. Sex. As a media historian, I prefer to study the unsung and unknown contributors to American commercial culture, who, given the collaborative nature of most commercial cultural production, are I think more important than a few auteurs or stars to the understanding of it. But when I noticed that movie star ads got more hits, I found myself posting more movie star ads. And from my extensive collection of Lux soap ads that featured movie stars from the 1940s through the 1960s, I found myself selecting ads with actresses still famous today (fig. 11). Stars sell, especially stars with currency.

The most reblogged of all my posts was an image of Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk gazing at each other from separate RCA televisions in a manner suggestive of longing (fig. 12). I benefitted, no doubt, from the size of the Star Trek fan community and the longstanding, half-joking supposition that these characters were more than



Figure 11.

just friends.

Sexualized images, and, more surprisingly, sexist images were nearly as popular. Shamelessly I used tags such as “cheesecake,” “swimsuit,” or “sexism” to attract “likes” and “reblogs” (fig. 13).



Spock & Kirk, together at last, on RCA televisions
(1968)

#retro #vintage #star trek #advertising #vintage ad #RCA
#TV #vintage TV #spock #kirk #color tv #1960s

🕒 1 year ago ❤️ 488 🔁

➕ Share

488 Notes / ▾ Hide

Figure 12.

And I found myself searching through my materials for ever more shockingly sexist images. At first I told myself that these images taught a valuable lesson about the bad past. But I began to wonder how they might help anyone actually understand their historical moment in any but the simplest, most reductive terms. Also I be-

gan to wonder what, after all, was their appeal? Was it the camp or kitsch that drew the hits? Was it actual genuine sexism? And then I got the comment with which I began this essay. A scene that for its original audience evoked childhood innocence and small-town wholesomeness inspired a current viewer to ask, “How good do that booty look though?”

Tumblr, I have been forced to concede, is not actually a place to learn very much about history, at least as a scholar frames and presents it. Most of my viewers probably do not care which ad agency created the ad or when or where the ad appeared or what the ad strategy was. Tumblr is a platform to share and circulate images. Rather than an historical archive, it gives us random juxtapositions and serendipitous discoveries. It lets us create and curate our own flow of images, original or reblogged. While Tumblr does allow easy search by tags, there is no way to reorganize posted materials—such as by date, topic, or source—so as to serve as an effective research tool. Furthermore, most of these images are so thoroughly decontextualized, both in how they appear in users’ feeds and in the way most users tag and caption most posts, that Tumblr may seem to confirm the most pessimistic predictions for postmodernist culture.

I don’t think it’s quite this bad. Maybe the odd pedophile or sexist finds some accidental fodder among my images. Maybe most users would rather comment cleverly on perceived sexual allusions than consider how an image would have been received in its own era. Despite my efforts to provide context, I cannot impose historical understanding any more than I can prevent disinhibited online snark. What I prefer to think is that some users may, for a moment, look at the 1946 Cellophane “lollipop” ad, for example, and suddenly imagine a world in which such an ad is designed and distributed *without* the expectation that viewers would instantly sexualize a young girl’s underwear. And a vivid realization of the differences of the past—different norms, expectations, and modes



Talk about impact! (1958)

#retro #vintage #television #advertising #swimsuit #bikini
#cheesecake #1950s tv

🕒 1 year ago ❤️ 74 🔗

+ Share

74 Notes / ▾ Hide

Figure 13.

of reception—may place us briefly outside our own moment and help us understand it and ourselves: a venerable purpose of historical study. It's not history as I take such pains to shape it in my scholarly books and articles, where I can provide the contexts I think my artifacts properly demand, but it's history nonetheless, and I mean to continue to share it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
- 2 John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 3 Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- 4 Michele Hilmes, "Nailing Mercury: The Problem of Media Industry Historiography," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 21–33.
- 5 Key trade publications include *Sponsor*, *Radio Showmanship*, *Printers' Ink*, *Advertising Agency and Advertising & Selling*, *Broadcast Advertising*, *Television Magazine*, *Tide*, and *Broadcasting*.
- 6 For a brief discussion of my research at BBDO, see Cynthia B. Meyers, "Using the Uncatalogued Archive," *In Media Res*, March 20, 2015, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2015/03/20/using-uncatalogued-archive>.
- 7 Instagram, a mobile rather than web application, has probably outstripped Tumblr as the primary image sharing platform as of this writing.
- 8 Madeline Stone, "25 Tumblrs That Went Ballistic in 2014," *Business Insider*, Dec. 3, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-viral-tumblr-blogs-of-2014-2014-12?op=1>.
- 9 Erin Loeb, "Beyond the Archives: An Interview with Rebecca Onion," *Vela*, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://velamag.com/beyond-the-archives-an-interview-with-rebecca-onion/>.
- 10 In the notes, Tumblr indicates which blog a user reblogs from, so it

is possible to see which bloggers are most influential by how many other users have reblogged from them.

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