

# ADVERTISING: IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION. A CRITICAL REVIEW

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*Nikola Vangelov. Advertising: in search of a definition. A critical review*

*Abstract:* Advertising is a term that most people have heard and are basically aware of what it means. However, theory and practice have constantly been making attempts at defining it throughout the years of its theoretical existence. Like society, advertising has also evolved. So has its definition. It is mainly due to its constant efforts to adapt to the ever-changing human needs and desires. Of course, the term is just a word and it would not have been able to progress had it not been for the constant efforts of practitioners and theorists.

The methodology uses content analysis to outline some of the most distinguished definitions of the term. In particular, it examines two studies by Jef Richards, which use the Delphi method to reach a plausible definition. In the end, the author comprises a working definition that generalizes the key elements of advertising while proposing a new understanding of some.

*Keywords:* advertising, PR, marketing communications, technological evolution

## **Introduction**

Nowadays everyone seems to know what advertising is. The general public has an idea of the meaning of the term and is also able to pinpoint some concrete examples. However, the same people would also use pretty much the same definition for public relations, for instance. While it is perfectly fine for the masses to bear this vague understanding of what advertising or PR is, the same does not or should not apply to the academics and practitioners of these marketing communications. But amongst these circles there also is not one generally accepted definition of advertising. Perhaps it is a result of the fact that advertising has been accompanying mankind since its very beginning. If we stretch our imagination, we would most likely call the serpent in the Garden of Eden the first advertiser, since it convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. And during all those years up until the present day, many scientists, industry practitioners, academic organizations, and even celebrities have managed to come up with a definition of the term. One of

the most renowned admen, Leo Burnett defined advertising as “selling cornflakes to people who are eating Cheerios”<sup>1</sup>, Marshall McLuhan called it “the cave art of the twentieth century”<sup>2</sup> and U.S. President Calvin Coolidge referred to it as “the life of trade”<sup>3</sup>. While these definitions may be sound, general and digestible for the mass audience, one could find a more succinct definition in most dictionaries let alone academic literature. To some people, articles like this one do not seem important and are just semantic exercises. However, more than sixty years ago, in 1961, the Committee of Definitions of the American Marketing Association deemed it necessary for uniformity of the marketing terms. This way textbook authors needn’t be wasting time and energy creating and defending their own definitions<sup>4</sup>. Supporting the necessity of having a definition, Andreasen<sup>5</sup> noted that a careful definition of any field is important to the advancement of scholarship and the training of future researchers. The following paragraphs would deal with the necessity of a revision of the definition of advertising, as well as analyzing various definitions from the not-so-distant past. The analysis carefully considers the two thorough studies conducted by Jef Richards and colleagues via the Delphi method. Finally, a new and amended working definition is proposed.

### **Motifs for definition revision**

Perhaps one of the first reasons for the need for a revised definition of advertising that comes to mind is that it needs to be differentiated from other marketing communications, such as public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing and personal sales. It was almost thirty years ago when Rust and Oliver<sup>6</sup> saw the end of advertising, due to the increase in the use of other elements of the communication mix as sales promotion and direct marketing. They proposed a pretty narrow definition of advertising that incorporated a rather limited range of activities under the term advertising. On the other hand, a broad definition could also be problematic. This may lead to the inclusion of any of the other marketing communications under the umbrella of advertising, so that industry practitioners

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<sup>1</sup> BENDINGER, Bruce. Copy Work Shop Work Book, Chicago, IL: The Copy Workshop, 1993, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> FITZHENRY, Robert. The Fitzhenry & Whiteside Book of Quotations, Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1993, p.19.

<sup>3</sup> BRADLEY, John, Leo Daniels, Thomas C. Jones. The International Dictionary of Thoughts, Chicago, IL: J. G. Ferguson Publishing Co., 1960, p 13.

<sup>4</sup> BENNETT, Peter. AMA Dictionary of Marketing Terms, 2d ed., Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> ANDREASEN, Alan. Social Marketing: Its Definition and Domain. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 13 (1), 1994, 108-114.

<sup>6</sup> RUST, Roland, Richard OLIVER. The Death of Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 23 (4), 1994, 71.

would need or rather extend their expertise, eventually planting the seed for territory battles.

A second reason would be technological evolution. As advertising in the past evolved from cave drawings, cartouches in pyramids, coins effigies, pottery images and writings, writing on buildings or other monuments, town criers, the press, the radio and the TV, the invention of the computer, the internet and smartphones has transformed the communication and advertising. Dahlen and Rosengren<sup>7</sup>; Huh<sup>8</sup> and Kerr and Kelly<sup>9</sup> identify five important changes due to the technological evolution in the past ten years.

- The changes in consumer empowerment and connectedness, are mostly due to the usage of smartphones and social networks. Nowadays it is the consumer who drives the necessity for his/her more in-depth analysis since they are the ones to stay connected and act on social network platforms via liking, sharing, commenting, etc. It is through these networks that users stay connected and form a strong bond with each other, whether it be for the purposes of entertainment, leisure, or seeking particular information. As a result, these networks enable users to increase their power as a collective whole rather than as an individual. This, of course, is not to state that the individual is lost in the ocean of the mass group.

- Cross-platform media consumption also includes paid, owned, and earned media when reaching the audience. Due to the rise in social network usage, users have the opportunity to make a choice of where to acquire information from. If we broadly analyze the role of social networks through the prism of them being an information channel, companies or organizations are able to reach their target audience through paid communication, this is any form of advertising, whether it be on social networks or any other platform. The owned media represents all the channels that belong to a company or organization. In this case, there would be no advertising on these mediums, or not that much as in the case of paid media. These channels enable businesses to communicate with their clients in a more direct manner, since the audience has consciously landed on their platforms, meaning that they are more willing to receive any form of marketing communication on behalf of the companies. The earned media is arguably the best with regard to the free distribution of communication in the form of a virus. This is the so-called “viral” communication, which means that it is freely passed on and shared by the users. Thus, the organizations do not have to pay a single dime for it. On the other hand, this enables free media, which would suggest that an interesting marketing

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<sup>7</sup> DAHLEN, Micael, Sara ROSENGREN. If advertising won't die, what will it be? Toward a working definition of advertising. *Journal of Advertising* 45, (3), 2016, 334–45.

<sup>8</sup> HUH, Jisu. Comment: Advertising won't die, but defining it will continue to be challenging. *Journal of Advertising*, 45, (3), 2016, 356–8.

<sup>9</sup> KERR, Gayle, Louise KELLY. IMC education and digital disruption. *European Journal of Marketing* 51, (3), 2017, 406–20.

communication that has gone viral might be reported by various news stations resulting in a much wider reach and added value.

- A change in the advertising practice, its structure, its management and remuneration of the employees. Stuhlfaut and Windels<sup>10</sup> note that due to the need to include new technology in the advertising practice several new structures have evolved. Firstly, there are the dispersed ones, where agencies hire outside firms. Secondly, there are consultative agencies, which are working separately from the interactive or creative departments. Thirdly, there are collaborative structures, which include digital specialists in the creative departments. Lastly, there are holistic structures, which implement everyone and everything in a digital whole.

- New regulatory changes in the global economy and marketplace. This would suggest that the change in the business domain is being reflected in the advertising expenditure, as well as in the growth of the biggest digital companies. The increase in ad expenses turning more and more toward the digital<sup>11</sup> rather than the traditional channels would imply more regulation in the digital sphere than ever before. With Google and Facebook being the leading two giants, this state of being might lead to them being able to shape more and more people's opinions, such as the Cambridge Analytica case not so long ago. This within itself calls for more and straight to the point regulation.

- The scope and meaning of advertising research. The research in this area of marketing communications has recently been more and more preoccupied with digital platforms, expanding knowledge in the areas of product placement, gaming and sponsorship. The necessity for revising the latest definitions of advertising, though a challenging task, is becoming more urgent, due to the variety of terms and elements associated with advertising that is included or excluded in the definition. And, as pointed out earlier, taking an approach of broadening the definition is rather dangerous, since it poses the risk of washing away the peculiar characteristics of what makes advertising unique and discernible from all other marketing communications.

In addition to the points in favour of the need for a revision of the definition of advertising, as discussed above, there are also several others that in a way are somewhat complementary. Perhaps the most obvious is the technological change brought forward by the fourth industrial revolution that has transformed how businesses operate in just a single decade. As a result, now we could observe a blurring of the disciplinary boundaries as marketing and marketing communications

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<sup>10</sup> STUHLFAUT, Mark, Kasey WINDELS. Altered states: The effects of media and technology on the creative process in advertising agencies. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 25, (1), 2019, 1–27.

<sup>11</sup> KEMP, Simon, Digital 2022: global overview report [online]. 2022, [cited 29 November 2022]. Available from: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report>

in particular are defending their territory and field of expertise. This would suggest that advertising, as part of marketing communications should be viewed as a unique scientific discipline and a separate field of study that requires constant redefinition or at least exactness in its defining. From a research and theoretical standpoint researchers must outline the unique characteristics of advertising and how they are integrated into the whole body of knowledge. In other words, in order to study a phenomenon, one should differentiate whether or not it is part of a specific topic. Defining advertising is also very important to academia since this is how certain objects of analysis are included or not in the curriculum resulting in the way and methods professors use to prepare students both for the theoretical and the practical world ahead. The viability and acceptance of the current definitions are also a task of this analysis. If advertising is to be defined too narrowly or too broadly it would miss out on its unique identifiers. So, revising its definition should be a continuous process and it should be conducted on regular basis across time. In the next section, we would investigate some of the previous definitions before and after the beginning of the millennium. In doing so, we would outline their unique identifiers and propose further development through a proposal of some additional elements.

### **Definitions in time**

In this section, we would analyze some of the proposed definitions before the 2000s. We would also differentiate between the source of the definitions – researchers, marketing or advertising textbooks, associations and even some dictionaries. According to Armstrong and Kotler<sup>12</sup>, advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor. This definition, despite being a bit succinct may suffer from lacking some key elements of advertising. This and the definitions to follow are to be addressed in the discussion. Bearden, Ingram, and LaForge<sup>13</sup> see advertising as the element of the marketing communications mix that is non-personal, paid for by an identified sponsor, and disseminated through mass channels of communication to promote the adoption of goods, services, persons, or ideas. Here the authors distinguish between advertising and other marketing communications. Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty<sup>14</sup> define advertising as paid non-personal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience.

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<sup>12</sup> ARMSTRONG, Gary and Philip KOTLER. *Marketing: An Introduction*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> BEARDEN, William, Thomas INGRAM, Raymond LA FORGE. *Marketing: Principles & Perspectives*, 2d ed., New York: Irwin McGraw-Hill, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> WELLS, William, John BURNETT, Sandra MORIARTY. *Advertising Principles and Practices*, 4th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998.

Arens<sup>15</sup> notes that advertising is the non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products (goods and services) or ideas by identified sponsors through various media. O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik<sup>16</sup> give perhaps the most succinct though the broadest possible definition – a paid, mass-mediated attempt to persuade. Such a definition might include other marketing communications, such as public relations, for instance.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) follows through and develops its definitions throughout the years. So, in 1988 Bennett<sup>17</sup> proposes that advertising is a paid, non-personal communication through various media by business firms, non-profit organizations, and individuals who are in some way identified in the advertising message and who hope to inform and/or persuade members of a particular audience; include communication of products, services, institutions, and ideas. Several years later he revises his own definition reaching the conclusion that advertising is the placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any of the mass media by business firms, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organizations, or ideas.

Some of the definitions that have been proposed by dictionaries in a way follow a few of the definitions mentioned above, with some exceptions. Rosenberg<sup>18</sup> defines it as a paid-for non-personal presentation or promotion of goods, services, and/or ideas. It is usually paid for by an identifiable sponsor. Pearsall and Trumble<sup>19</sup> note that advertising is the practice of influencing people through public media in order to promote sales of products and services or promote political or other messages. Webster's College Dictionary's<sup>20</sup> definition of advertising is the act or practice of offering goods or services to the public through announcements in the media.

Richards and Curran<sup>21</sup> review and analyze these and some other definitions, using the Delphi method. To ensure the reliability of the study they invited in the panel of analysis experts that added diversity of perspective. The

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<sup>15</sup> ARENS, William. *Contemporary Advertising*, 6th ed., Chicago, IL: Richard D. Irwin, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> O'GUINN, Thomas, Chris ALLEN, Richard SEMENIK. *Advertising*, 2d ed., Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> BENNETT, Peter. *Dictionary of Marketing Terms*, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> ROSENBERG, Jerry. *Dictionary of Marketing & Advertising*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> PEARSALL, Judy and Bill TRUMBLE. *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2d ed, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Webster's College Dictionary. New York: Random House, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> RICHARDS, Jef, Catharine CURRAN. Oracles on "Advertising": Searching for a Definition, *Journal of Advertising*, 31, (2), 2002, 63-77.

panel included presidents of professional organizations, government regulators, renowned academics and respected agency executives. Questions were distributed along the panelists in a three-step survey. Several aspects or elements of advertising were outlined that distinguished it from all other marketing communications – non-personal, identified sponsor, mass media, persuade or influence. In the end, a consensus was reached in defining advertising as “a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future”<sup>22</sup>. It eliminated “non-personal” and substituted “sponsor” for “source”. It also retained “paid” and “persuade”, while substituting “mass media” with “mediated”. The researchers offered an addition to the definition that further clarified it “mediated” communication is that which is conveyed to an audience through print, electronics, or any method other than direct person-to-person contact”.

### **Current definitions and discussion**

Almost twenty years later, in an attempt to revise all the new age definitions of advertising, Kerr and Richards<sup>23</sup> again use the Delphi method to differentiate between the various new elements of advertising and discuss the necessity for a revision, mainly due to the technological changes that have taken place. Some of the studied definitions in this regard include Leckenby and Li<sup>24</sup>, who suggest that interactive advertising is any paid or unpaid promotion of products, services or ideas by an identified sponsor to consumers through mediated means; Ha<sup>25</sup>, who shed light on online advertising, describing it as a deliberate message placed on third-party websites including search engines and directories available through internet access. Dahlen and Rosengren<sup>26</sup>, who define advertising as a brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people. Now, this rather brief and succinct definition carries the risk of being too broad and as discussed above it might lack the particular deciphers that differentiate advertising from other marketing communications, with public relations being the first contestant. In this regard, one of the most important elements that makes public relations unique is the target audience or rather the broader scope, if any, of it. In contrast, advertising has

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<sup>22</sup> RICHARDS, Jef, Catharine CURRAN. Oracles on “Advertising”: Searching for a Definition, *Journal of Advertising*, 31, (2), 2002, 63-77, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> KERR, Gayle, Jef RICHARDS. Redefining advertising in research and practice. *International Journal of Advertising*. DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2020.1769407

<sup>24</sup> LECKENBY, John, Hairong LI. From the editors. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 1, (1), 2000, 1–3.

<sup>25</sup> HA, Louisa. Online advertising research in advertising journals: A review. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 30, (1), 2008, 31–48.

<sup>26</sup> DAHLEN, M., and S. ROSENGREN. If advertising won’t die, what will it be? Toward a working definition of advertising, 2016.

a strict target audience that has been previously segmented through various criteria. This definition does not pay attention to the media used for reaching the audience, as well. The definitions do indeed speak about “brand-initiated” communication, which is key for distinguishing the peculiar characteristics of advertising. PR, however, is a marketing communication that also has a brand behind the message or a public/political figure but it is not that obvious, as compared to advertising. In addition, if we stretch our imagination, a brand-initiated communication might also indicate a message on a door that says “will be back in 15 minutes”. This communication is also coming from a brand or a representative of that brand and also has an impact on the reader, though rather unpleasant, one might add.

There has also been a shift in the perception of advertising from the same authors in time from the beginning of the 21st century. For instance, Arens<sup>27</sup> suggests two different or amended definitions of advertising in just three years’ time. In 2015 he defines it as the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products (goods, services and ideas) by identified sponsors through various media. In 2018 he changes it to a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future. The first definition, despite the fact that is rather new or new age, carries the meaning and content of the older definitions (before the 2000s) that we discussed. The second one, takes a note from the study of Richards and Curran in 2002 and amends the one from 2015 with the omission of non-personal, sponsors and media substituting them for mediated and source. Wells, Moriarty, Mitchell and Wood<sup>28</sup> advance in the 21st century using somewhat the same definition as in the 2000s. In 2015 they suggest that advertising is a paid form of persuasive communication that uses mass and interactive media to reach broad audiences in order to connect an identified sponsor with buyers (a target audience), provide information about products (goods, services, and ideas), and interpret the product features in terms of the consumer’s needs and wants. Still the term “mass media” is present, but the definition is much narrower (longer) than before. In 2019 they shorten it to denote that advertising is a paid non-personal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience. Still, we see the “mass media” which will be discussed below, both reviewing the study in 2020 and adding some notes by the author of this article.

Reviewing these and some other definitions and typologies of advertising Kerr and Richards propose an amended definition of advertising “Advertising is paid,

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<sup>27</sup> ARENS, William, David SCHAEFER, Michael WEIGOLD. Advertising. McGraw-Hill Education, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> MORIARTY, Sandra, Nancy MITCHELL, Charles WOOD, William WELLS. Advertising & IMC: Principles and Practice (What’s New in Marketing). Pearson 11th Edition, 2018.



owned, and earned mediated communication, activated by an identifiable brand and intent on persuading the consumer to make some cognitive, affective or behavioural change, now or in the future”<sup>29</sup>. This definition has several contributions. It has differentiated between paid, owned and earned communication in opposition to mass media, due to the fact that businesses in the digital age do not have to pay mass media (TV, radio, newspapers or magazines, billboards, etc.) in order to reach their target audience. They could also use their own digital channels, such as websites or social networks profiles (owned) or create interactive and viral communication that users could disseminate by themselves thus earning free media (earned). The definition adds on the end result which might be a change in terms of affection (how we feel toward a brand) and behavior – what action we might take (an interest to read more, a desire to subscribe, an intention to purchase, etc.). What the humble author of this text would argue is that there are several discrepancies that need to be addressed. Firstly, from the dawn of time people have always advertised goods or services they like or dislike, thus influencing their family, friends or even the broader audience. And it is an axiom that this form of advertising “word of mouth” is the best possible, since it is free and genuine, for the most part. It is here that the so-called “influencers” have come to play a very important part in influencing people’s opinion<sup>30</sup>. With this being said, a second issue needs to be discussed. The word “consumer” is rather arguable. A person of the general audience does need to be a consumer of the brand or a similar brand to fall in the scope of the advertising’s target audience. A substitute that would imply the same and broaden the meaning to include not only the consumers of the brand or the competitors’ brands in “receiver” denoting the other part or participant of the communication process. These suggestions, despite seemingly very insignificant, would imply using a more precise terminology in order to outline the very characteristics of the elements of advertising.

## Conclusion

It is indeed perhaps impossible to define advertising once and for all. Through the evolution of mankind, along with technology, so does advertising and in particular, its constituents – they develop. The text, though not pretending to be an exhaustive one on the matters of advertising, suggests the necessities for a constant revision of the definition of advertising due to the ever-changing marketing practice and theory, as a result of the constant social progress. The proposed points for

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<sup>29</sup> KERR, Gayle, Jef RICHARDS. Redefining advertising in research and practice. *International Journal of Advertising*, p. 16, DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2020.1769407

<sup>30</sup> VANGELOV, Nikola. Efficient Communication through Influencer Marketing. *Styles of Communication*, 11, (1), 2019, 72-83.

consideration surely might bear grounds for criticism and this is exactly why further and constant discussion in this matter is needed. Practitioners and academics should jointly work toward a better comprehension of advertising, as a theory and practice on the global stage. This would ensure that we keep updating its understanding as societies are moving forward in time.

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