

Maria MACAROV-BURNICHI\*

**Book review of *Advertising and Consumer Society: A Critical Introduction* (Second Edition), by Nicholas Holm, Routledge, 2023, 224 pages**

The book titled *Advertising and Consumer Society: A Critical Introduction*, written by Nicholas Holm, presents itself as an introductory guide into the world of advertising. Written in a semi-informal style, marked with anecdotes, personal experiences and real-life examples from all over the world, the book refers not only to the importance of advertising and its relationship to the consumer, but also to the multiple faces and the intricate inner works within the industry. Since the book is meant to be a preparatory textbook for students, the author having taught this material to his students prior to writing the book, one would expect it to paint an idealistic picture of the advertising world. Instead, Holms diverges significantly from idealistic portrayals. In fact, he effectively critiques the downsides and problems of the advertising world, while also trying to explain them and find possible solutions.

According to the author, the second edition was written because of the everchanging nature of advertising and technology since they mainly go together. The first edition, published in 2017, focused mainly on television advertising as, according to him, was “the biggest player in town” (Holm, 2023, p. 2). The second edition turned to online and digital advertising as its focal point. Moreover, changes were made in relation to the audiences since it changed drastically when advertising changed. This edition is structured in three parts, each of these parts being segmentized and sub-categorized, as opposed to the first edition, which was divided into ten chapters. This new method of sectioning provides a better overview of the contents of the book while also offering the reader the possibility to perceive advertising in a more organized way.

Initially, advertising was referred to as “any paid form of non – personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services through mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television or radio by an identified sponsor” (Kotler, 2017, p. 366). Even though when Holms’ first edition of the book came to existence, television was still one of the biggest forms of advertising, as the author notes, after 2016, everything changed – television advertising turned to YouTube and Instagram. This book, as a second edition, reflects the changes brought by the new technologies and behaviors of the consumers.

\* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,  
macarov-burnichi\_maria22m@student.comunicare.ro

Platformization, defined as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), also had a huge impact on the changes in the advertising world. Platforms like YouTube and Meta changed the rules significantly. Since their origin is in the US, “standards are operationalized through platform policies” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4285), which means that if someone desires to create an ad on a US-based platform, they need to follow US regulations.

The first part of the book, titled *The foundations of advertising*, is sectioned into three sub-chapters. The first focuses mainly on the “whys” of advertising, specifically why it is important to study it, not necessarily from an economic point of view, but from an artistic, cultural, and political one, as well as describing the contents of the book in more detail.

The second sub-chapter revolves predominantly around the four most important moments in the history of advertising, from its origins all the way through social media and digitalization. The changes this world has suffered, although conceivably for the better, have not come without their shortcomings and not all of them have been met with enthusiasm. In fact, each of the stages of advertising has brought upon itself criticism and skepticism, which reiterates the fact that this is one of the most dynamic fields to study and work in.

The third and final sub-chapter of the first part of the book, arguably the most theoretical one, speaks about all the forms advertising has taken and is taking still, its semiotics and ideology. It is an introduction of sorts, presenting the rules, innerworkings and goals of an agency, as seen through an advertiser’s eyes. Holm here explains the theory behind an ad. Each advertisement, campaign and insight have their own context. Everything needs to be considered, from the target audience, all the way to real or perceived threats or possible backlash. This world has its own vernacular, its own ideology and basically exists in its own bubble.

The second part of the book, suggestively titled *Advertising and capitalism*, answers a lot of questions from an advertiser’s point of view, as well as introduces new concepts, ideas and analyses. It is divided into four sub-chapters which examine capitalism, political economy, as well as the consumer’s commodity. This section gives detailed examples and definitions not only about the realities of today’s world, but also about the consumers and their lifestyle. It is important to note that this chapter could help consumers make the best decisions for themselves and see through the unrealistically perceived manipulation. Moreover, companies and firms can draw from this sub-section methods of improving their advertising strategy, by better understanding the society in which they operate. Within this part, Holm insightfully alludes to the almost non-existent boundaries between the industry and the consumer as well as the boundaries within the field, while also outright speaking of the underworld of advertising, full of surveillance, “online labor” and (sometimes) the unethical targeting.

The third and final chapter of the book has the advertising agency as its focus, especially because it is the one that primarily deals with the needs of the company or client. Although most accounts have a designated department for advertising and marketing, everything is oftentimes outsourced through an agency. In the final section entitled *Agency, art, and other complications*, Holm, breaks the fourth wall, and speaks freely about the life in an advertising agency, from workflow to the distinguishments between “advertising’s agency” and “advertising agencies” (Holm, 2023, p. 148), from the creativity and aesthetic, all the way to the planning, feedback and critique received. Nothing can be left to chance, and whereas the problems and negative feedback are constantly overflowing, an advertiser’s job is to effectively balance

art, creativity, economics, and politics, while fully taking into account the context in which they are delivering the advertisement.

Although a book that can spark a lot of controversy, by means of its unique and cavalier way of presenting this world, the writing style of Nicholas Holm is accessible, especially since the real-life examples and analogies make it a lot easier to follow. The extensive research, as well as the carefully placed joviality and anecdotes make it not only a textbook that can capture the attention of the students and scholars reading it, but also a guide for anybody and everybody interested in advertising and communication. Thus, Holm's book *Advertising and Consumer Society*, although intended as reading for a course, manages to capture the attention of everyone inclined towards sociology, politics, economy, and art, making it a very well rounded and accessible book.

Notably, Holm not only praises the evolution of advertising and the skill and patience a career in this field takes, but also pictures it realistically, carefully creating a picture which extensively speaks of the upsides and downsides of the industry. Holm is being objective enough to present a clear visual of this continually evolving world, while honestly inserting criticism and praise for the industry. The carefully placed jokes throughout the book and the real-life examples and analogies give the book the authenticity needed to not only be considered a textbook, but also a guide through this universe that has created its own ideology, vocabulary, and politics.

## References

- Nieborg, D., & Poell, T., (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity, *New Media and Society*, 20(11), 4275-4292.