Autumn 2004 Winner
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Instructor’s Foreword

In “Writing About Technology: Rhetorics of Technophilia/Technophobia,” we study the invisibility of technology—including, prominently, the pervasive personal digital technologies of personal computing and entertainment—and ask ourselves questions about the nature of what was being taken for granted in the process. Guided by cultural critics like Sven Birkerts, Kirkpatrick Sale and Neil Postman, we try to train ourselves to look, to notice, and to think about the changes that we’re exposed to as denizens of what Postman calls the “Technopoly.” Cultivating the critical eye challenges us, because we are immersed in cultural systems that encourage us to see the superficial commercial message (smaller! lighter! faster! cool!) rather than the intrinsic narrative of cultural change (does this technology lead us to spend more time in the core pursuits that lead to a fulfilling life?).

Shivaram Lingamneni wanted to contribute to the explorations of our class community by disassembling the emerging mechanisms of web-based advertising and making visible in a compelling way the shallowness and duplicity of the form. Because advertising on the web is relatively new, he argued, it might show its hand and deliver up its manipulations for visible study more readily. This proved to be a fruitful approach. Shivaram tested his theories about the cynically shallow nature of online advertising by pulling back the covers of the advertisements’ screen presentations to reveal the underlying software logic that drove them. The markup of advertisements in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and JavaScript provided fascinating and disturbing data that spoke directly to the motives and methods of the advertisers. Shivaram then met head on the rhetorical challenge of making meaningful to a non-technical audience the story told by the software code driving the ads. That story painted a picture of an industry engaging in bald misrepresentations bordering on malfeasance, an industry clawing unscrupulously for the mindshare of the growing community of internet users, an industry operating against no real code of propriety. Shivaram went on to set this story of today in the context of how it will likely play out tomorrow—and in so doing, he turned to the past to read the lessons of early television advertising and apply them to the current paradigm.

What makes this piece remarkable is its range and complexity—the willingness of the author to perform such diverse analytic work ranging from close readings of software code as well as broad readings of electronic advertising’s many decades of history. It takes a special writer and much diligent labor to bring those disparate pieces together into a coherent and important argument about the future. However, in the end Shivaram is most convincing in his conclusion that internet advertising is likely to attract specific governmental oversight in response to its current manipulative practices and that such oversight will lead to some specific and predictable outcomes. Shivaram’s essay represents what’s best about research in PWR1 because it is insightful in the questions it asks, fearless and smart in its approach to answering them, and articulate in its rendering of its answers.

Eric Miraglia
Predicting the Future of Internet Advertising

Shivaram Lingamneni

Predicting the Future of Internet Advertising

Advertising is so pervasive that some of its most bizarre and extreme examples have become invisible. We see nothing odd in race cars doubling as mobile billboards or our athletes accepting huge sums of money to become modern-day sandwich men. We are increasingly tolerant of the most grotesque examples of commercialization. But this same acceptance has been coupled with a remarkable degree of awareness and understanding. Children understand how the massive personal wealth of their favorite athletes is supported by a network of endorsements and promotions; adults have learned to regard advertisements with discernment and suspicion.

Advertising’s entrenchment in modern popular culture has had both profound positive and negative consequences. The celebrated media scholar Marshall McLuhan famously opined that advertising had become the “greatest art form of the 20th century” (“Advertising”); the Clio Awards, founded 1959, recognize excellence in all media of advertising with a ceremony that mimics the Academy Awards. Certain examples of advertisement are commonly accepted as entertainment in their own right; the most famous commercials, such as the Budweiser frog spots, have attained recognition as important cultural artifacts, even as actual works of art. Yet the ubiquity of advertising has raised considerable debate over whether the industry’s aims are truly in accord with the public interest. There is a widespread belief that advertisers and the public are at war: the advertisers seeking to breach the private citizen’s resistance to the sales pitch, the citizen himself doing his utmost to retain his skepticism. As early as 1927 (Fox 122), when the first wave of outcry against advertising began, the public has perceived a kind of cultural war between itself and the advertiser.

The World Wide Web, scarcely 15 years old, has arguably caused the massive increase in popularity of the Internet. The advertising industry certainly has not neglected to colonize this promising new territory; the Web now has the equivalents of print advertisements and television commercials, as well as new forms and techniques of advertising unique to the medium. But, in contrast to the established and entrenched conventions of its non-digital counterparts, Internet advertising is still in an embryonic, primitive state subject to dramatic changes in the immediate future. Based on examinations of advertising history, legal precedent, economic factors, and the technical issues of advertising display, we can make a variety of predictions about the future of interactive marketing on the Internet. A legal crackdown, a radical shift in business models, and a renewed focus on audience attitudes will all come to alter the state of Internet advertising in the near future.

An Introduction to Internet Advertising

The question of what, in fact, constitutes Internet advertising is more complicated than it might seem. Before we begin to discuss the future of Internet advertising, we must first define it, and distinguish it from related commercial content on the Internet.
The least invasive (and thus the first to be acclaimed) Internet advertising technique was the creation of entire websites to promote a product. The advertising establishment was quick to recognize these as supports for television and print campaigns. When the Clio Awards were first given to Internet campaigns in 1999, they went exclusively to such websites (Clio). It took two years for banner campaigns to gain similar recognition. The question is whether such websites actually qualify as Internet advertisements, or are instead the Internet presence of their corporation, analogous to physical premises rather than to a print ad or billboard. For the purposes of this paper, Internet advertisements are commercial messages displayed in the context of independent content, in the same way print and broadcast advertisements appear within another body of work; non-invasive promotional websites do not qualify.

The other major branch of Internet advertising that this paper will not discuss is unsolicited commercial e-mail, popularly known as spam. In a sense, spam is simply beyond the scope of this paper; spam has attracted so much public debate and academic research that a proper treatment of its evolution and current status would be impossible. Second, spam, unlike the other kinds of Internet advertising, is almost universally acknowledged to be a public nuisance. The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003, an aggressive piece of Federal legislation imposing strict limits and requirements on spammers, includes a list of official Congressional findings on the subject of spam. The Act estimates that spam constitutes “over half of all electronic mail traffic, up from an estimated 7 percent in 2001”; furthermore, it states that “the convenience and efficiency of electronic mail are threatened by the extremely rapid growth” of spam, which “imposes significant monetary costs on providers of Internet access services … that carry and receive such mail.” The CAN-SPAM Act effectively constitutes government acknowledgement that spam is not advertising in the usual sense, but rather a public burden. The conventional advertising issues of credibility and ethos become almost meaningless when applied to spam; the mere association with such a despised marketing tool destroys the advertiser’s standing in the recipient’s eyes.

This paper will focus on Internet advertising that displays along with published content and which financially supports the production of the content. To understand the dynamic between content and advertising on the Internet, it is necessary to understand the underlying framework of the World Wide Web.

The Web displays many similarities to previously existing media. It operates on the basis of client-server interactions. The server delivers static content to the client and executes programs that create dynamic pages; the user’s client software displays the pages, stores some information, and even executes some small scripts. Like a television or radio program, a given Web page can be distributed to any viewer with the equipment and the inclination to receive it; this interaction parallels the relationship of broadcast antenna and receiver. At the same time, the Web-based distribution model involves the client requesting a page, and the server delivering it at the cost of a small amount of resources; this situation is reminiscent of the print media. Where the Web radically differs from any previous media technology is in the interactivity it offers.

The Internet is currently the only mass medium to offer interactive advertising; it is also the only mass medium in which all advertising is, by definition, interactive. Interactive functionality is so easy to achieve on the Internet that there is no reason not to include it. Simple banners can be linked directly back to the parent site, adding a unique dimension of instant response to advertising; more complex advertisements can incorporate advanced
levels of interactivity. By allowing instant, effortless response to an advertising appeal, the Internet adds a completely new dimension to advertising psychology and technique.

It is important to distinguish between interactive and adaptive advertising, another unique aspect of the Internet advertising experience. Interactive advertising responds to user actions and decisions directly. Adaptive advertising operates, to some extent, outside user control; it changes its mode of presentation and content depending on information gathered about the viewer. The distinction may seem blurred and ambiguous, since both interactive and adaptive advertisements involve responses to attributes of the user, but a key point of the distinction is transparency. Interactive advertisements reveal their complexities of their functionality directly to the reader. Adaptive advertisements fail this test; central to their tactics is the concealment of their methods, which are frequently illegal and unethical, and often violations of privacy. For example, the archetypal “punch the monkey” advertisement, which enticed the viewer to click on it by incorporating the characteristic features of a game, is an interactive advertisement; Amazon’s user tracking features, which suggest books and music to the viewer by analyzing his or her past purchases, is one of the more benign examples of adaptive advertising.

Finally, many of the techniques of these new genres of advertising are inseparable from the technologies used in their presentation. The Web’s primary language is HTML, a “markup language” used to format and integrate text with images and other content. HTML’s interactive features include clickable links and form elements, which the user can use to submit information. Javascript, a client-side programming language that runs in the browser, is a primary tool of both interactive and adaptive presentation. Cookies, which store information about the user on his or her own computer, are frequently tools of adaptive advertising.

Among formats for the advertisements themselves, the most primitive is the banner advertisement, an image which links directly back to the advertiser’s site; the effectiveness of banner advertising is measured in clickthroughs, or clicks on the banner. The animated GIF format allows banner ads to contain simple, frame-based animation. HTML provides the iframe tag, which allows the insertion of distinct HTML content into a page. Javascript can be used to create pop-up ads, which are distinct HTML pages loaded into new windows that display over the content-bearing page. Macromedia’s Flash plugin, the only widely accepted advanced animation format, offers more complicated animation features and a wider range of interactivity. Equipped with such an overview of Internet advertisements, we are ready to consider current and future states of marketing on the Internet.
The Legal Situation

In its brief existence, the Internet has acquired a reputation as a cultural and social frontier, a place without an entrenched corporate establishment or pervasive law enforcement. As the Internet became a medium of commerce, it acquired its own corporate culture; as it became a haven for mainstream copyright violators, a mechanism of subpoenas and civil lawsuits evolved to police it. At present, Internet advertising is in an analogous state: it is poorly regulated and controlled, and the regulations that do exist are poorly enforced. From a variety of historical and current precedents, we can predict a legal crackdown on the unethical and illegal tactics that are currently prevalent in online advertising.

Internet advertising is open to many kinds of analyses at the technical level; many of the advertisers’ tactics can be easily exposed through technical knowledge of their procedures. From the advertisers’ perspective, this is unquestionably a weakness; whether it will be corrected by further advances in advertising technology is an open question. The fact is that a close examination of present-day adaptive advertising reveals remarkable ethical and legal issues, including many that open the distributors and their clients to charges of false and fraudulent advertising.

One example is Figure 2, a pop-up advertisement for AnyFreeGift.com, a multilevel marketing campaign offering free gift certificates to people who sign themselves up for a sampling of free trial offers, then recruit friends to do the same. The advertisement is distributed through the FastClick advertising agency. It is interactive; it contains the Yes and No buttons (HTML form elements) and a direct link to the AnyFreeGift.com site. The advertisement poses as an opinion poll; the realistic-looking buttons are intended to deceive the viewer into using the advertisement to report his or her political views.

Pop-up ads are displayed by Javascript code, and typically contain additional scripting themselves. An examination of the scripts in the advertisement itself (relevant material is highlighted in the left pane of Figure 3) reveals, in fact, that the two buttons perform the same function: taking the viewer directly to the advertiser’s page. Information about the user’s preference is not even recorded. In itself, this is hardly a legal issue; however, coupled with another scripted feature, it raises questions about the use of technology in deceptive advertising.
In the right pane of Figure 3, we can see that the expiration date displayed on the advertisement is calculated dynamically to be two days later than the current date. The non-highlighted code ensures that the date is properly formatted and does not contain an absurdity such as “December 33, 2004”. Whereas the opinion poll was an example of interactive advertising, the calculated date is a basic example of adaptive advertising; it adjusts itself to the local date in an attempt to pressure viewers into immediate action. Still, the issue remains more of an ethical problem than an actual violation of the law.

A far more serious example is Figure 4, which contains two frames of a Flash advertisement for Great Expectations, a dating service. The advertisement attempts to discover the viewer’s location; then it displays the message “Searching for singles in your area,” finishing by displaying the calculated location in the advertisement underneath the photographs of women supposedly available for dating.
Tracing the technology used to display this advertisement is more difficult than in the previous example. To begin with, Flash is a compiled format, so the code of the advertisement itself is not available. As seen in Figure 5, a piece of Javascript inserted in the publisher’s web page calls in remotely hosted Javascript code on the agency’s server (in this case, Advertising.com). The remote code, generated by a program running on the server, immune to examination, adds the necessary location information to the advertisement by calling it with the city and state in the flash advertisement’s query string (the part of the URL following the question mark). There is no way to definitively identify how the viewer’s location is obtained, but a reverse DNS lookup is the most likely answer (in particular, Stanford University IP addresses like the one used to view this advertisement translate to subdomain.stanford.edu). To confirm the falsity of the advertisement, we need only supply a different query string; the result is an image like Figure 6, a version of the advertisement which states that the same women are from a different (in this case, a fictional) place.

This advertisement, unlike the first, is a clear violation of FTC guidelines; it is “materially misleading,” an offense the FTC considers actionable (Wilson 26). It contains a material representation about an important characteristic of the service: one that is likely to affect a consumer’s purchasing decision. Both the advertised company and the agency are well-established corporations. The question arises: why do they expose themselves to legal action and government scrutiny? The answer is lack of precedent; since Internet advertisers are rarely prosecuted for deceptive advertising, both the agency and the dating service feel they can act with impunity.

We can predict a reaction against deceptive advertisement on the Internet both from historical precedents and from the recent precedent of action against “cybersquatters,” or...

In 1993, the National Science Foundation allowed Network Solutions, Inc. to register domain names. By law, they were not required to verify the legality of names they registered; for this reason, they made no provision for abuses of their system until 1995 (Feinberg and Craycroft 5). In the meantime, a new phenomenon called cybersquatting had sprung up among a small group of enterprising Internet users who were claiming domain names associated with famous corporations and holding them, intending to sell them. Perhaps the most celebrated of these cybersquatters, Dennis Toeppen, managed to claim *panavision.com*, *deltaairlines.com*, and *neiman-marcus.com*.

Both Network Solutions and the government were quick to react. Network Solutions created a Domain Name Dispute Policy, amending it again in 1996 and 1997 (Feinberg and Craycroft 5). Congress passed the Trademark Dilution Act of 1995, which allowed the owners of a “famous” trademark to prevent its use for any purposes, even ones with no “likelihood of confusion” between the uses of the trademark. Senator Patrick Leahy (D., Vermont) hailed the act as a primary tool in “[stemming] the use of deceptive Internet addresses” (Congressional Record 19312), and Hasbro Inc. famously used it to reclaim candyland.com from a pornographic website. *Intermatic Inc. v. Toeppen* and *American Standard v. Toeppen*, both of which resulted in victories for the prior trademark owners, provided further precedents for the use of the Trademark Dilution Act in domain name litigation (Feinberg and Craycroft 9).

However, the Trademark Dilution Act proved too limited in scope to eliminate cybersquatting altogether. In 1999, Senator Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) sponsored the Cybersquatting Consumer Protection Act (according to Wilson, he had shortly before been offered senatororrinhatch.com for $45,000). The Act made offering a “pirated” domain name for sale and registering domain names with false information proofs of the bad faith of an accused cybersquatter (Wilson 137); it further allows a civil suit to be brought against the domain name itself, in cases when the domain has been registered with false information. Going even further, the Truth in Domain Names Act of 2003 made it a criminal offense, punishable by two years imprisonment, to “knowingly [use] a misleading domain name with the intent to attract a minor into viewing a visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct on the Internet.” On September 3, 2003, the arrest of John Zuccarini, then owner of dinseyland.com, under this Act marked the end of an era in domain name exploitation (Kawamoto 1).

There are similar strong historical precedents of abuses and reforms within the advertising industry itself. In his book *The Mirror Makers*, a history of the American advertising industry, Stephen Fox details the reaction against the paid testimonials in the 1920s. Between 1926 and 1930, paid endorsements of products came to dominate advertisements for consumer goods. Women ranging from the Queen of Romania to movie star Joan Crawford were paid to endorse beauty products (Fox 89); at the height of the craze, Lucky Strike paid opera singers to claim that cigarettes improved their singing voices (115). After Lucky Strike enlisted a ship captain to claim that smoking had helped his crew perform a heroic rescue at sea, the leading advertising journal *Printer’s Ink* launched a campaign against the abuse of testimonials (116). *Printer’s Ink* ran a survey, asking their readers if purchased endorsements had a positive effect on the industry; overwhelmingly, survey respondents asserted that they did not. In 1930, the FTC responded to the public
outcry by ruling against Lucky Strike, restricting the use of testimonials and ordering that paid testimonials be labeled as such. The ruling put a permanent damper on the use of extravagant endorsements; ever since, testimonial advertising has been on a tighter, more ethical rein. This pattern of excess and reform, if repeated, will ensure a reaction against abusive practices in today’s online advertising.

The Business Models

Historically, advertising has been governed by its business models. The commercial transactions that enable an advertisement to be displayed determine its format and its content. Just as existing trademark laws and advertising regulations required modification after they were first applied to the Internet, the first business model of Internet advertising to emerge has profound weaknesses; the faults in the commercial framework have resulted in tensions between advertising agencies and publishers and the underemployment of many advertising opportunities. Change is inevitable; in the near future, we will see movement away from the traditional business model and towards alternatives, such as the sponsored links system and direct negotiation.

Advertising represents such a massive source of revenue for content publishers that it has historically transformed their business practices, and even their content. Advertising first appeared in print periodicals in 17th century England. However, those first examples of advertising were only roughly equivalent to the state of the industry today. Fox identifies the beginning of advertising-focused journalism with the 1869 debut of The People’s Literary Companion, a magazine that charged an unprecedentedly low price of fifty cents per annual subscription. The Companion provided a thin layer of “stories, fashions, and household hints,” sandwiched between the massive amounts of advertisements that supported the subscription price (Fox 28). The paper attracted a circulation of 500,000 before it was interrupted by its creator’s death (29). But the business model survived in periodicals like the Ladies’ Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, the most notable magazines in the first wave of advertising-supported journalism. Instead of relying on the sale of copies for revenue, these new periodicals depended on the sale of advertising space.

The primary business model of online advertising is at once a response to the conditions of the Internet and an extension of the previous business models of print and radio advertising. The process is dominated by online advertising agencies, such as DoubleClick and FastClick. The advertising agency acts as intermediary between the content publisher and advertising client; the agency designs the advertisement and arranges for its display on the publishers’ sites. This paradigm of design and distribution is hardly an innovation; it has been well established in print advertising since the beginning of the 20th century (Fox 40). But the Internet advertising business model involves the separation of content from advertisement in a novel and completely unique fashion. The advertising agency hosts the advertisements on their own server; advertisements are transferred directly from agency to viewer. The publisher is responsible only for the HTML and Javascript that position the advertisement on the page; the agency monitors both display and audience response to the advertisements through programs running on their servers.

There are remarkable flaws in this business model, easily seen through a comparison to the paradigm of print advertising. In the print world, a given advertisement drawn up by an advertising agency must be approved separately by client and publisher; without the permission of the publisher, the ad cannot appear. With the Internet model of
advertisement distribution, the publisher’s control over advertising content is severely limited; the publisher can only accurately appraise the kind of advertising being displayed by closely observing the messages delivered from the agency’s server. Furthermore, the publisher cannot simply reject an objectionable message; he or she must either appeal to the agency to halt central distribution of the advertisement or sever ties with the agency altogether.

In fact, this business model is so unsatisfactory that major websites avoid it altogether, hosting their own advertising and eliminating the middleman. A simple test exists to determine whether a website is managing its own advertising: simply read the HTML source code of the page to establish the server on which the advertising is stored, then look up the ownership of the server’s domain name. This test establishes that MSN, Yahoo, CNN, Lycos, and Excite all host their own advertising, retaining control of their pages. However, outside this circle of high-traffic websites (Yahoo’s FAQ page claims 2.4 billion page views per day), most publishers have no alternative but to contract with an advertising agency. Albino Blacksheep, a humor website that hosts a variety of content, has announced its intention to contract directly with advertisers; claiming to be one of the world’s 10,000 most active sites, with upwards of 250,000 page views daily (“Albino” 1), it has not succeeded in finding customers. There is a considerable gap in the present-day advertising business model; while extremely active and low-traffic sites have good advertising solutions, the options for the middle range of sites are much weaker.

The major alternative business model in Internet advertising is paid search, or sponsored links. First developed in 1997 by Overture, then known as GoTo.com, sponsored links create revenue for a search engine by allowing websites to pay to have their links displayed alongside the results of a related search. In 2003, Overture became a wholly owned subsidiary of Yahoo, and its sponsored links are now displayed on CNN.com and MSN.com, but the sponsored links concept became famous when Google adopted it as its only advertising technology. Interestingly, Google’s IPO statement lists an ongoing lawsuit with Overture as a risk; further developments in the situation have not been made available to the public at the time of writing.

Google’s AdWords program effectively sells associations; by becoming a subscriber to the program, a company can link itself with a particular keyword, appearing in a sort of parallel search. Because the sponsorship does not impact Google’s actual search engine, and because sponsored links are clearly marked as such, it does not damage Google’s ethos as a purveyor of unbiased, accurate search results.

Ironically, even as Adwords allows Google to avoid the traditional model of advertising distribution, its sister program Adsense has made Google a distributor in its own right. Google now offers web publishers the opportunity to display
Program in Writing and Rhetoric

Google-sponsored links on their own pages via the Adsense program, which identifies the most relevant links to display. The relatively unobtrusive appearance of the advertisements, coupled with the association with Google’s brand image, makes Adsense one of the most attractive opportunities for publishers today.

In both this context and the original, sponsored links can be considered a form of adaptive advertising; however, unlike many other Internet marketing techniques, sponsored links pass the transparency test. As seen in Figure 7, Google clearly distinguishes commercial messages on their own site; Google Adsense bars carry the label “Ads by Google,” which links to an explanation of the workings of the Adsense service. Adsense even has the potential to solve the problem of underemployed advertising opportunities; Google’s published case studies for the Adsense program feature a variety of middle-traffic websites, the kind of publishers traditionally reluctant to offend their audience with obnoxious, obtrusive advertising. The elegant, low-key Adsense bars have huge potential in this market niche.

In a 2004 paper, Sharon Shavitt, Patrick Vargas, and Pamela Lowrey demonstrated that audience attitude towards an advertising medium responded directly to how intrusive the medium’s characteristic advertisements are, and to “the degree to which the medium offers self-selected ad experiences” (1028). Their major result was that media which involve audience self-selection of advertising content are not only better liked, but also enjoy better retention in viewer memory; they found that catalog and classified ads, which allow viewers the freedom to choose their own area of focus, can in fact surpass invasive TV and radio ads in terms of response and memory. Google’s Adsense model is in accordance with both these central principles. The simple, text-focused presentation of the Google ads is far less intrusive than graphics-based advertising, greatly improving viewer attitude and response to the message. Furthermore, since the Google Adsense model effectively creates self-selection by bringing advertising into close correspondence with user-selected content, the research of Shavitt, Vargas, and Lowrey supports the idea that the Google model of Internet advertising will prevail over previous paradigms.

Google has economics on its side as well. The Internet Advertising Bureau reported industry revenue of $2.4 billion for the third quarter of 2004 (Kutner 1); Google alone reported earnings of $890 million for the same quarter (“Google Announces” 1). It is clear that the sponsored links model of Internet advertising holds considerable promise; it represents a considerable threat to the traditional model of distribution, which it is likely to eclipse altogether.

Format and Audience Response

Audience reactions to Internet advertising have undergone radical shifts in the few years that the technology has been a mainstream phenomenon; this is because of changes in the format of Internet advertising. From an examination of media scholarship related to Internet advertising, we can predict a change towards renewed sensitivity to audience feelings.

The degree to which the public opinion of advertising has changed is exemplified by the 1999 article, “A Survey of Internet Users’ Attitudes towards Internet Advertising.” In this study of the public view of advertising, Ann Schlosser, Sharon Shavitt, and Alaina Kanfer draw conclusions about the public view of Internet advertising that seem remarkable, even shocking, today.
Schlosser, Shavitt, and Kanfer conducted a survey of Internet users between 18 and 64 years of age, and conclude that in many respects, attitudes of Internet users towards Internet advertising are significantly better than their attitudes towards advertising in other media (referred to in their study as “general” advertising). 48% of the survey population said they could trust Internet advertising, versus 38% for general advertising; 33% of the population felt that they had “sometimes” or “often” been misled by Internet advertising, versus 67% for general advertising (44). Most surprisingly of all, the survey reveals no significant leanings either for or against Internet advertising in general: 38% represented themselves as liking it, with 35% against it and 28% neutral.

However, this figure did trail significantly behind the comparable statistic for Internet advertising; 46% of those surveyed liked general advertising. Schlosser, Shavitt, and Kanfer explain this gap by claiming that the “entertainment value” rather than the “informativeness” of Internet advertising is at fault. With remarkable insight, the authors conclude that to improve their public perception, Internet advertisers should not attempt to duplicate “features that have been found to be entertaining in the mass media (e.g., attractive visuals, humor), but rather features that have been found to be entertaining on the Internet” (50).

In the five years that have elapsed since this survey, attitudes to Internet advertising have undergone a dramatic reversal. A new survey conducted by the author revealed a profound downturn in attitudes toward Internet advertising. This survey has weaknesses when compared to the one conducted by Schlosser, Shavitt and Kanfer. For one, it represents a convenience sample; the survey respondents were all undergraduate students of Stanford University, whereas Schlosser, Shavitt, and Kanfer used a random sample of telephone households (39). Furthermore, the sample size of 41 is much smaller than the 397 in the 1999 survey. But the change in attitude towards Internet advertising cannot be denied.

An overwhelming 98% of those surveyed stated that they disliked Internet advertising as a whole, with 2% remaining neutral, and no respondents claiming to like it. Attitudes towards general advertising were down as well, with 58% reporting a negative attitude, 34% neutral, and 7% positive, but an unmistakable contrast with the 1999 figures is evident. Similarly, 91% of respondents felt that they could not trust Internet advertising, with 7% neutral, and 2% saying that they could. The percentage of respondents who felt they were sometimes or often misled by Internet advertising was 91%, up by 58 percentage points; the parallel percentage for general advertising was up as well, to 78%, but by the much narrower margin of 11 percentage points. Clearly, there has been a radical change in the public opinion of Internet advertising. The reasons that Internet marketing has fallen so dramatically out of favor are fundamentally technological; new, intrusive, techniques and formats of advertising have undermined the credibility of the industry in general, just as the abuse of testimonials once threatened the reputation of advertising as a whole.

The crucial technological factor in the downturn in attitudes has been the emergence of two specific advertising techniques. The easiest to pinpoint is the rise of Macromedia Flash in advertising; we can confidently date the beginning of Flash’s climb to prominence with Netscape’s 1998 decision to bundle it with their Navigator browser (Oakes 1). Microsoft responded by including the Flash plugin with their own Internet Explorer; once Flash had become established on both of the major browsers, it became the standard format for complex animation and interactive content throughout the Web. Flash
allowed advertisers much greater freedom in animation than they had previously enjoyed; furthermore, it offered unprecedented possibilities for interactivity. Flash was used to create visually disruptive miniature games, such as the iPod-shooting advertisement previously displayed; increasingly complex advertisements were a drain on the system resources of the audience, and Flash’s ability to make sounds was the most obviously invasive of its characteristics. One reason why Schlosser, Shavitt, and Kanfer found such a positive attitude to Internet advertising was the simple fact that Flash had not yet been established as an advertising technology; Flash, which partially replaced traditional banner advertisements, is far more intrusive than its predecessors.

The second technology important in Internet advertising’s loss of public respect was the Javascript-enabled pop-up advertisement. Pop-up advertisements, being inherently disruptive, have created widespread public frustration. Abusive pop-up tactics such as mousetrapping, where clicking anywhere on a pop-up or even attempting to close it cause a stream of additional pop-ups to be displayed, have become closely associated with Internet pornography (the FTC’s 2001 restraining order against John Zuccarini provides a legal definition of this technique); these connotations have not helped the public image of pop-up advertising. Reactions against pop-ups have been so intense that the two current leading browsers, Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox, now offer some degree of pop-up blocking. A historical perspective on pop-ups is more difficult because the standardization process of Javascript has been far more confused; in his article for the O’Reilly Web Devcenter, Steve Champeon attempts to outline its development. Javascript began in late 1995 as LiveScript, a Netscape proprietary language that ran only on Navigator. By mid-1996, Javascript had attracted enough attention to cause Microsoft to implement it, under the name Jscript, in Internet Explorer (Champeon 1). It was only in 1999 that the European Computer Manufacturer’s Association created a standardized Javascript; for these reasons of compatibility, pop-up advertising had not become prevalent at the time of the Schlosser, Shavitt, and Kanfer survey.

In 2002, Hairong Li, Steven M. Edwards, and Joo-Hyun Lee co-authored the definitive paper on pop-ups as intrusive advertising; their work was a major influence on the Shavitt, Vargas, and Lowrey theory of the tension between intrusion and self-selection. Li, Edwards, and Lee sought to create a quantitative scale with which to measure the levels of irritation caused by intrusive advertising; the team isolated seven distinct characteristics of advertising annoyance, then used them to compare pop-up ads to television commercials. For example, Li, Edwards, and Lee found that people considered pop-ups to be less “distracting” than commercials, but more “disturbing,” “forced,” “intrusive,” and “invasive”; much of their research dealt with experimental design and statistical work on their quantitative model (42). However, the underlying theme of the research of Li, Edwards, and Lee, which found an echo in the work of Shavitt, Vargas, and Lowrey, was that marketing tactics that provoked “feelings of irritation” were “unlikely to elicit positive attitudes in consumers” (Li, Edwards and Lee 45). Instead, they resulted in advertising avoidance. Taken together, the Li and Shavitt papers represent a growing body of academic work claiming that pop-up advertising is an industry misstep and that advertisers alienate their audience at their own peril.

Finally, Xavier Drèze and François-Xavier Husherr identify both a symptom and a solution of the problem of user discontent with Internet advertising. Their 2003 paper begins by observing a drop in advertising click-through rates from 7% in 1996 to .7% in 2002, and then attempts to determine the cause of the decline (9). Using eye-tracking
equipment, they discovered that experienced Internet users had come to adopt more and more advanced advertising avoidance techniques and that fully half the Internet advertisements displayed received no user real attention (15). However, the surprising conclusion of their argument is not that advertisers should attempt to combat user apathy with increasingly obtrusive, attention-grabbing pop-ups and animations. Instead, the authors suggest that the advertisements were not failing at all, but that the metric of clickthroughs was inappropriate. Drèze and Husherr call for a return to “traditional memory-based effectiveness measures,” rather than single-minded focus on clickthroughs (21). Effectively, they reinterpret the banner advertisement as a tool of branding. They support their claims with some startling statistics; out of 100 people exposed to a banner advertisement, 11 would remember the brand name without any prompting 24 hours after exposure. Another 30 would recognize a version of the banner with the brand name removed; 18 of the 30 would be able to remember the name upon viewing the banner (21). These figures dwarf the miniscule click-through rate of .7%; Drèze and Husherr accordingly conclude that the advertisement’s message (in their interpretation, the strength of the brand image it projected) is more important than its form (eye-catching animation, which proved to have little to do with either clickthroughs or brand retention).

At the heart of the three studies is a common theme: a rejection of pop-ups and rich media advertisements coupled with an emphasis on positive user attitude. But Drèze and Husherr provide the clearest link to the historical context of the theme; the idea behind these studies is the concept of the “soft sell,” a brand-focused appeal focused on the creation of public goodwill. Historically, Fox identified the greatest examples of the soft sell with the “Creative Revolution” of the 1960s and early 1970s; a reaction against the loud, aggressive, and direct “hard sell” work of the 1950s, the Creative Revolution produced advertisements that focused on brand image, rather than on the product. Popular classics like the humorous Alka-Seltzer spots originated in this period (Fox 269); the 1971 Coca-Cola “Hilltop” spot caused viewers to call their broadcast television stations to request more showings of the advertisement (“Advertising”). Historically considered, the researchers’ recommendations against pop-up ads are an example of a transition from hard to soft sells; the consensus of media scholars on the issue strongly suggests that the next generation of Internet advertisements will be far more sensitive to viewer attitude.

**Conclusion**

Predicting the future trends of any technology is difficult; the complex, multifaceted technologies that support Internet-age advertising pose particular difficulties. All advertising responds to a host of economic and social stimuli, continually evolving to meet the demands of the product and the marketplace. On the Internet, the complexity of the situation is multiplied by the ever-changing technological environment. It might seem that any attempt to foretell the future of Internet advertising is doomed to failure. How can we predict the evolution of such a wildly protean medium?

The answer is that we can only extrapolate from past and current trends. From solid background knowledge of Internet advertising, firsthand observations of the current situation, an understanding of historical patterns, and an acquaintance with current rigorous research in the social sciences, we can make an educated, supported guess. This process is certainly open to error, but it is the best method. These predictions are fallible like all predictions; however, they have a real, substantial justification behind them.
Works Cited


