

# 'To guide, help and hearten millions'. The Place of Commercial Advertising in Wartime Britain, 1939 - 1945

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*This paper uses detailed statistical analysis of British press advertising expenditure between 1939 and 1945 to provide an insight in the nature of that society through the Second World War. It is suggested that, from a historical perspective, commercial advertising offers a valid reflection of the society in which it appears. This became particularly acute in wartime Britain when commercial advertisers stood in stark contrast to the output of the Ministry of Information in offering an honest and frank appraisal of everyday life in wartime. Drawing on four thematic trends in advertising identified by the author, it is demonstrated how commercial advertisers made a valid contribution to home front morale by offering practical advice 'to guide, help and hearten millions'. In this respect, commercial advertising is shown as a significant contributor to the construction of popular culture from a historical perspective.*

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This paper is an examination of British commercial advertising in the Second World War that seeks to establish its value as a representation of the nature of everyday life through the war years. It explores the nature of commercial advertising in society and the part that it plays in shaping popular culture.

The research is underpinned by an objective survey of press advertising between September 1939 and September 1945 largely based on the contemporary survey of expenditure, the *Statistical Review of Press Advertising*. The *Statistical Review* was a monthly title first published in London in October 1932 by The Legion Publishing Co. Ltd., a research organisation dedicated to supplying data to the advertising industry. This 'advertising trade paper' broke down advertising expenditure for a huge variety of different products via an ongoing survey of 8,500 publications per month (*The Advertiser's Annual 1940*, 1). It was an independent publication that had no interest in over- or under-representing any particular product, or painting any particular magazine or newspaper in a more or less favourable light. From this journal, the author has collected monthly statistics for 78 generic product groups and 92 specific products. Plotting this advertising expenditure, relative to the same data for 1937 and 1938, suggests trends versus time and relative to pre-war patterns of advertising. Examples of advertisements are taken from

the weekly publication, *Picture Post*. *Picture Post* was selected because it was an essential part of any media schedule in the period in question. Not only did it have a significant circulation, an average of 1,021,203 according to the ABC with the publisher claiming a pass-on readership of six readers per copy sold, but it also had a wide appeal across all classes and geographic areas.

suggestion is that advertising offers a reflection of the society in which it appears which is *appropriate* given the earnest intention of advertisers to connect with the idiom of the time.<sup>1</sup> This theoretical framework is then tested against British wartime society under four broad headings: popular responses to the outbreak of war; the impact of scarcity and shortages; the place of women in wartime society; and, discussions around the nature of the post-war world.

## CULTURE, SOCIETY AND ADVERTISING

Commercial advertising is a key component in shaping popular culture in the modern epoch. Through a series of transactions tempered by and mediated with reference to the prevailing popular discourse which in its turn determines the nature of "reality", commercial advertising offers a variety of signs and symbols that are used as a suitable protocol for living out one's life. From a historical perspective such sources, *consumed* through the war, offer an insight into popular culture, defined by Stuart Hall as the, 'lived practices which characterise a particular society, class or group at a particular historical period' ('Culture and the State' quoted in Billington et al. 1991, 28). Advertising offers a powerful reflection as a medium that responds to the prevailing mood of those at whom it is aimed, treating them as active, thinking individuals who in turn draw on those symbols and messages around them to define their place in the world and devise a workable system for the practice of everyday life. From an anthropological perspective, commercial advertising provides valuable anchors and points of reference within society that help individuals make sense of their experience. According to Robert Darnton

individual expression takes place within a general idiom...we learn to classify sensations and make sense of things by thinking within a framework provided by our culture (1984, 6).

Within the gamut of popular culture, commercial advertising offers important points of reference to guide the individual through the experience of life. The very objective of commercial advertisers is to assimilate themselves into the prevailing popular mood, to reflect the people's concerns, interests and preoccupations whilst leading them towards their products as the solution.

The press advertisements drawn on in this research do not yield a stable meaning they are complex packages caught up in the nature of the period and the concerns of those who devised and designed them. Yet, commercial advertising might offer the best route to an authentic cultural history, given that its success, determined in product sales, depends on speaking the language of the time, with their representations constantly moving in an effort to keep in step with the interests of the people. In this respect these symbolic remains can offer a route to understanding meaning in social life via their representation of everyday practices. My research seeks to appreciate the culture of the British home front during the Second World War through the variety and nature of those constantly shifting advertising messages as they attempted to side with the people, speak in their language, highlight their worries and anxieties whilst creating a favourable environment for the consumption of their products and services. This is the place of commercial advertising in Britain during the Second World War.

This paper maintains that commercial advertising was drawn on at the time as a valuable source of reference to 'guide, help and hearten' the public that came into contact with it (Advertiser's Weekly, 30 May 1940, 234). Such commercial advertising helped to guide the people through these extraordinary circumstances, providing a useful protocol for life. In this respect, advertising sits alongside propaganda as one of those forces present in modern society, referred to by John F. Sherry as, the 'pattern of significant symbol clusters that contributes to organizing our experience' ('Advertising as a Cultural System' in Umiker-Sebeok, 1987, 446). Despite its commercial overtones, advertising does not exist outside of society as a mere practice wholly concerned with selling more but is an integral part of the society in which it operates, playing its part in the 'formation of men's attitudes' and moulding public opinion alongside cinema, the press and propaganda in general (Ellul, 1965). As Gunther Kress has observed,

Advertising cannot be seen as a kind of grotesque deformity grafted onto the otherwise sound fabric of the social and cultural body ('Educating Readers: Language in Advertising' in Hawthorn, 1987, 123).

Whilst it may be easy to regard advertising from a superficial level and dismiss it simply in terms of its very

basic function of selling more, its true impact goes much deeper and the messages that the industry propagates extend into a variety of other areas, having influences not directly obvious or necessarily connected with that base objective. This was widely acknowledged in the period under consideration here, when H. K. Nixon wrote in 1937 that advertising had 'commercial, psychological, economic and social functions' (38).

Along the way to informing consumers, advertisers attempt to bring their propositions to life. In this respect advertising works *with* the existing environment. According to Colin McDonald, 'Advertising works with the grain of people's desires, never against them' (1992, 23-4). Advertising is designed to bring those desires to the surface via a series of stimuli incorporated in their copy. In this respect an advertising message has no meaning in itself, only in response to its relevance to the reader. It is through a close alignment with their intended audience, drawing on and reflecting the society in which they operate, that advertisers create engagement with their advertisements. Judith Williamson describes this as a 'vicious circle' in which we give meaning to advertisements, and they give meaning to us. An advertisement in itself is nothing; it is a mere representation, ineffectual until the consumer identifies with the message that lies within. It depends on the reader's interpretation, filling in the gaps from their personal experience, beliefs and attitudes in order to complete the circle. As Williamson puts it, 'Every picture tells a story – but it helps if you know it already' (1978, 153). Thus, effective advertising is dependent on reading the minds of the people, understanding their hopes, desires and anxieties and proposing appropriate solutions.

Advertising reflects back what are determined to be the prevalent concerns, interests and preoccupations of the people, simplifying them and validating them in the process. It is in this way that advertising becomes such a valuable public resource, especially through periods of tumultuous change such as the Second World War. The representation of such views and opinions in the media makes them "real" for those members of society that see them and lends them legitimacy. Advertising offers a simplified source of information, along with a variety of symbolic associations that help individuals define who they are. Through the common understanding of an advertising message or the consumption of certain products, and especially high-profile brands, an association is struck between the values that support that item and the like-minded individuals who also consume them. Douglas Holt, in his recent research, has suggested that skilfully marketed brands become 'anchors of meaning'. He claims,

Effective advertising tells stories to the public that helps them to manage their identities (2004, 73).

The repetition and widespread advertising of common attitudes and patterns of behaviour thereby codifies social, political and moral standards in the form of the prevailing popular culture. For their part, the media perpetuate these easily accessible “stories” to help individuals make sense of who they are and where they are in society: they offer ‘windows’ on to the world (Jhally, 1990, 65).

Commercial advertising reflects the society in which it appears: for commercial advertising to be successful (in terms of realising the base aims of the advertiser), the messages propagated must be anchored within the existing frame of reference of the intended audience. Where the language and representations are completely alien, then the message will fall on deaf ears. On this basis, commercial advertising offers a fascinating insight into the concerns, worries and anxieties of the people in a way in which other sources may not. The success of commercial advertising is predicated on credibility. Whereas the government may act on the basis of sanction, commercial advertisers depend on trust. Therefore, their interest is not served by imploring, as the Ministry of Information (MoI) did during the war, that the nation was ‘Mightier Yet’ but rather by offering a full and frank description of life on the home front with which the people could identify alongside practical advice. The variable nature of this advertising and its validity as a historical source is tested here under four broad headings. The objective in examining this advertising is to assess the nature of the responses of advertisers to the changing environment and also the changing psyche of the people in an effort to understand the weaving of the cultural paradigm. The first area considered here is the reaction of society to the outbreak of war.

## RESPONSES TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

‘The war has turned our lives upside-down’

Amongst those advertisers in *Picture Post* concerned with the fighting of the war there was a common theme that came to dominate their messages in the first phase between September 1939 and March 1940. Painting a picture of a nation preoccupied with fear and anxiety, advertisers offered a frank interpretation of the consequences of being at war whilst positioning their products as the answer to such newfound concerns. Whereas it might have been feasible for the government to declare with bravado, ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’, the nature of the advertiser’s relationship with the consumer was such that they were compelled, as far as was possible, to speak honestly and in the language of the time. Thus, with the declaration of war, ‘wartime’s worries and problems’ were ushered in according to Wincarnis tonic wine (*Picture Post*, 9 March 1940, 16). A contrast was drawn between the pre-war world and the current situation with Alka-Seltzer adding ‘blackout

blues, irregular meals’, a cut in wages, being overworked



FIGURE 1. SOURCE: PICTURE POST, 24 FEBRUARY 1940, 11.

and nervy, and the evacuation of family to the list of woes: Horlicks highlighted these “problems” further by graphically illustrating how the war was infringing on the practice of everyday life, with dire consequences. In their advertisement of 21 October, we see a newly created policeman explain,

Three weeks ago I was a hairdresser and now I’m a policeman. When I’m off duty I’ve still got to think about my business. In a way the war’s a double job for me (*Picture Post*, 21 October 1939, 8).

Meanwhile, on 18 November the physical scares of the war were illustrated as a young couple are shown digging up their garden in order to install their air raid shelter, a very real reminder of the nature of the threat and a manifestation of how modern war reaches into such personal spaces. They remark, ‘The war has turned our lives upside-down. Our worries have been doubled’ (*Picture Post*, 18 November 1939, 54).

Commercial advertising offered a frank appraisal of how the war was affecting the average citizen in a way in which the government was not prepared to, despite reflecting on the dire predictions of neurosis they chose largely ignore them. The government appeared fixated by the notion of the irresolute Briton and felt that simply by promoting such a persona it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Advertisers, however, were determined to identify with the people. Only by offering an appropriate reflection would their advertisements be credible. Hence, they felt compelled, in the case of Horlicks, to refer to the

fact that it was entirely acceptable that spending ‘most of last Saturday filling sandbags on Hampstead Heath’ would make your ‘muscles ache in places where I didn’t know I had any’ and that writing ‘A LETTER TO “SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE”’ would, naturally, be a cause for worry (*Picture Post*, 27 January 1940, 3). By such measures advertisers painted a picture of a world turned ‘upside-down’ with the spectre of war being greeted with a certain dread, anxiety and nervousness alongside the burden of extra responsibilities and work.

Through this period advertisers offered practical help and advice, albeit in the best interests of the products they were advertising. A statistical analysis of advertisers of sauces, meat extracts, condiments and soups shows this group bucking the trend of food and non-alcoholic drink advertisers in general, which fell by 30 per cent through the war, with a growth in expenditure of £25,000 by war’s end compared to August 1939. The advertising message that wartime food would be bland and need pepping up, adopted from the outbreak of the war, was repeated and extended throughout the conflict. Through their advertising, these producers positioned themselves as a friend to the housewife who was now required to maintain varied and appetising menus in the face of a dwindling variety and volume of food. For example, in October 1939, Bovril claimed that it ‘makes meat more tasty and more “interesting”’ and by October 1940 had become ‘an essential item in war-time diet’ (*The Times*, 3 October 1939, 6; *Picture Post*, 12 October 1940, 4). Mason’s OK Sauce promised to make ‘War’Fare’ breakfasts appetizing’ whilst H.P. Sauce suggested that their product could make wartime dishes delicious, and Vita-Gravy made the ‘mixed vegetables under their crisp wheatmeal crust...taste twice as good’ in Woolton Pie (*Picture Post*, 2 December 1939, 10; 1 March 1941, 33; 25 October 1941, 3).

The manufacturers of products in these groups were able to exploit a niche that was particularly apposite in wartime. Advertising was quick to take advantage of the new opportunities opened up for certain products by the war and, as such, whilst the overall impact may have appeared dire for the advertising industry in general, there were some glimmers of hope. Commercial advertisers, especially of pickles and sauces were highly responsive to the new wartime regime and quickly adjusted their approach in sympathy with the trials and tribulations of the housewife in making a Spartan ration go that bit further whilst still offering a range of tasty dishes. The place of commercial advertising in this respect was offering practical advice that empathised with the tiresome nature of those rules and regulations imposed by the government at war’s outbreak.

## RESPONSES TO SCARCITY AND SHORTAGES

### ‘I GO FURTHER WHEN YOU DRINK COCOA’

As the impact of rationing grew and moved into new areas, advertisers moved to reposition their products relative to the times and the new needs of consumers. In so doing they brought about a growth in advertising expenditure in the food sector. A well-established sales message might be abandoned if it was felt that a new message would be more in tune with the situation. In this way, as is well demonstrated in the advertising of Bournville Cocoa, products were seen to be incredibly versatile, adapting to meet whatever the perceived need might be, or where a gap was to be found in the market.

Prior to the war and during its first years, Bournville Cocoa was promoted on the basis of its ability to aid sound sleep and also to steady the nerves (*Picture Post*, 1 March 1941, 6). However, with the quasi-rationing of milk in October 1941, Cadbury, the makers of Bournville Cocoa, saw an opportunity to reposition their product and thereby exploit this development in the market. In October 1941, the government had moved to control the supply of milk to ensure that ‘priority consumers’, expectant and nursing mothers, children and invalids, got a guaranteed ration, while the general public got what was left and National Dried Milk (Calder, 1969, 381). Up to that point Bournville Cocoa was marketed as ‘a natural food and it helps your nerves!’ However such advertising came to an abrupt stop in November 1941 when the new copy headline was introduced, ‘I [milk] GO FURTHER WHEN YOU DRINK COCOA’ (*Picture Post*, 1 November 1941, 27). Henceforth, advertising promoted the ability of Bournville Cocoa to make the milk ration go further, whilst also claiming that it made powdered milk more palatable (*Picture Post*, 13 June 1942, 24).

However, Bournville Cocoa could be made to serve yet another function when the ‘Personal Points’ scheme was introduced for chocolate and sweets in July 1942. Cocoa could now be used as a substitute for chocolate (*Picture Post*, 21 November 1942, 28). Playing on the deficiencies of the chocolate ration, Cadbury’s responded, ‘When the chocolate ration is finished, the children can get that chocolaty flavour they like so much as a *drink*’. Bournville Cocoa was the product for all occasions and, given that such food products could now be used to serve a variety of different purposes, the volume of advertising went up in 1942 to exploit these opportunities and ensure the survival of such goods.

In a similar way, those products that could help to alleviate the hardships associated with the shortage of fresh eggs came to the fore after July 1941. From 14 June 1941 customers were required to register with a retailer in order

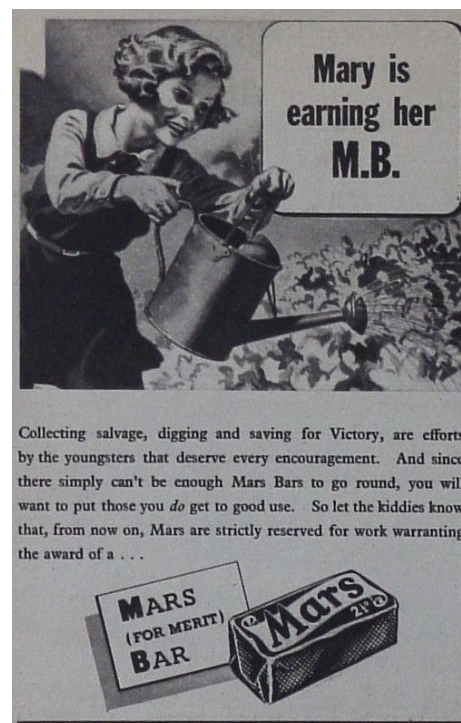


to obtain eggs, those who failed to do so would be unable to purchase them from 1 July. Whilst the government's intention was not, in the strictest sense, to ration eggs, it was concerned to ensure their equitable distribution and curtail black market activity. Through this scheme it was hoped that each person would obtain one egg a week, however, from the outset it became apparent that it would be difficult to meet this target. In response, producers of egg substitutes began to advertising, along with manufacturers of other products that purported to produce a real egg effect.

As dried egg became a prerequisite in the wartime kitchen, Chieftain Egg Substitute sought to educate the public in regard to the versatility of this product and how it could be used by offering a free recipe leaflet (*Picture Post*, 16 August 1941, 5). Creamola Custard Puddings, whilst not a new advertiser, having been advertising throughout the war, in the face of the quasi-rationing of eggs altered their creative execution in order to accentuate their product's qualities in a time of egg scarcity. Whilst employing the same visual, Creamola was repositioned from 'the greatest pudding success of to-day' in May 1941, to become, by August, 'like a real egg pudding...yet requires no eggs' (*Picture Post*, 31 May 1941, 8; 9 August 1941, 3). Henceforth, Creamola was promoted as the pudding that either required no eggs or could be made with a variety of milk substitutes rather than fresh milk thereby exploiting the niche in the market for a dessert that could be produced in the face of wartime scarcities: the product remained the same, all that changed were the attributes that were accentuated (*Picture Post*, 18 October 1941, 2).

As the grip of food rationing tightened, advertising expenditure increased in order to maximise sales by demonstrating versatility and an ability to plug the holes created by shortages, as in the case of Bournville Cocoa and Creamola Custard Puddings. If 1942 was the nadir of food rationing, it was, relatively, a boom year for the advertising of food and drink, as the battle was fought to ensure that their goods made up any shortfalls in diet. Rather than sounding the death knell for product promotion, it would seem that the introduction of a scheme of rationing in certain product sectors served only to increase advertising activity. In addition to the examples outlined above, 1942, the year when the 'Personal Points' scheme was introduced for chocolate and sweets, saw an increase in advertising expenditure in the confectionery sector. Whereas 1940 had been down 48% on 1939, and 1941 a further 33% down on 1940, in 1942 advertising expenditure in the confectionery sector was up by 7%. July, the month in which the points scheme was introduced, saw a month-on-month increase of 17%, August an increase of 21%. The introduction of rationing did not come as a deterrent to advertisers but rather as a call to action: a reason to advertise in order to explain the new situation or to extol the virtues of a particular product within this new regime, whilst at the same time reiterating that supplies were still restricted and that consumers should act in a "responsible" manner when

buying chocolate and confectionery. Mars Confections Limited devised a wholly new campaign in response to the introduction of the points scheme. Up to July 1942, Mars Bars had been promoted as a general diet supplement in response to the introduction of rationing and the associated difficulties in obtaining food and the need to maintain good health. For example in from July 1941 the calorific value of a Mars Bar was compared to 2½d worth of eggs, milk, beef and boiled sweets. The Mars Bar is clearly the out-and-out "winner", being 'man-sized', and offering 'a meal in every bar!' (*Picture Post*, 5 July 1941, 30). However, starting in July they were repositioned as exclusively for children as 'M.B.'s', 'Mars (for Merit) Bar' and 'D.C.M's', Distinguished Conduct Mars, described as wartime 'medals' for children (*Picture Post*, 11 July 1942, 2; 15 August 1942, 26). In 1941 Mars Bars were the "little something" to keep you going', in 1942 consumers were told to 'let the kiddies know that, from now on, Mars are strictly reserved for work warranting the award of a... **DISTINGUISHED**



**FIGURE 2. SOURCE: PICTURE POST, 15 AUGUST 1942, 26.**

**CONDUCT MARS':**

Shortages solicited a creative response from advertisers, ostensibly in the best interests of the public, as helpful advice and a fresh perspective was offered to help in the process of adapting to wartime conditions. For advertisers, as much as for the public, new circumstances called for new approaches. Whilst it is undeniable that commercial advertisers were acting largely in their own interests in seeking to ensure product sales, they were also responding to the changing environment and giving voice to

issues of concern to the average housewife. Creative advertising demonstrated how a normal life could be sustained despite the disappearance of many staples. This two-way dialogue is illustrated further with reference to the place of women in wartime.

## THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN WARTIME BRITAIN

### 'Live up to that smart uniform'

The role of women in wartime was dual fold, alongside being praised and encouraged to enter the services or contribute in some definite way to the war effort, they were also expected to retain their "feminine charm". Such a popular discourse was outlined in force in commercial advertising, which concerned itself with the notion of femininity in wartime, especially in relation to those taking on more masculine roles. Whilst in times of peace there may have been a clear distinction between masculine and feminine spheres, the war challenged that as women moved into more traditionally male dominated areas, offering them a new identity in the process. However, despite adopting a uniform that inclined towards a masculine appearance, women were not predisposed towards wholesale change. A variety of devices were thus employed to accentuate their femininity, not least amongst these being the increased use of cosmetics. According to Pat Kirkham,

what they looked like remained a central concern for millions of British women throughout the war. Far from being ignored, fashion and femininity remained firmly on the female agenda ('Fashioning the feminine: dress, appearance and femininity in wartime Britain' in Gledhill and Swanson, 1996, 170–1).

Whilst women may have been prepared to embrace more masculine roles, this was not to be at the expense of their appearance and underlying femininity. Cosmetics advertising played a key role in helping to facilitate a place for women in wartime that was compatible with both a commitment to serve and the retention of femininity. For example, advertising expenditure for lipstick and rouge, and face powders in the period January to June 1940 grew by 8% and 31% respectively year-on-year. Potter and Moore's Powder-Cream was offered as the ideal solution to ensure that women obtained that 'Instant Beauty'. Taking the example of the Women's Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S.) they insisted that 'The W.R.N.S. girl must be trim and sleek, groomed to a hairsbreadth, to play her part' (Picture Post, 23 March 1940, 61). Feminine appearance in this way was a prerequisite to efficient service and according to these advertisers make-up and styling were as much a part of being in the services as stamina or endurance. In a similar

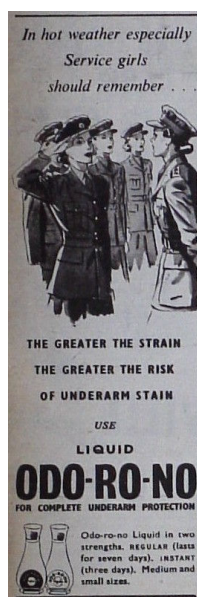
way, Tangee Lipstick was promoted as a vital part of service life, contributing as it did to 'Beauty on Duty' claiming that, 'On duty she [in this case a member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force] must look smart – but not painted' (Picture Post, 28 October 1940, 6).

Femininity was as much a part of military life as the uniform and women were urged to make sure they 'Live up to that smart uniform' by maintaining their appearance even if, in reality, that might prove rather difficult. Indeed the strictures of military life were acknowledged and in the very face of these women were urged not to surrender their female charms. Advertising in November 1939, Eve Shampoo appreciated that contemporary fashions were not entirely practical in military life but urged women not to surrender their beauty regime entirely and, in this case, care for your hair: 'Already you've probably sacrificed your elaborate up-swept hair style to accommodate your uniform cap – but there's no need to sacrifice the health and beauty of your hair as well' (Picture Post, 4 November 1939, 54).

As the demands made of women intensified, so commercial advertisers adapted their approach in response to the prevalent mood. Under the terms of the National Service (No. 2) Act, effective from 18 December 1941, unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 30 were to be called up into either industry or the Auxiliary Services (19 year olds were to follow suit early in 1942). In this respect products that might be predominantly used by women were now called on to fulfil a different function with advertising keeping pace with the new concerns and anxieties associated with such roles. As Penny Summerfield says,

Mobilisation policy placed women at the interface of two conflicting versions of patriotism: on the one hand, the demands of the national war effort for more workers implied the sacrifice of conventional domestic arrangements and gender roles within them; on the other, national stability and morale required the continuation of family forms based on women's conventional roles ('The girl that makes the thing that drills the hole that holds the spring...': discourses on women and work in the Second World War' in Gledhill and Swanson, 1996, 40).

preceding months and years, from 1942 producers identified a new demand for such products with Odo-Ro-No, from August 1942, drawing on the enlistment of women to promote their product (Picture Post, 1 August 1942, 23; 29 August, 1942, 5; 10 October 1942, 27). As women found themselves in these new, more demanding vocations, then the need for effective deodorant became greater and Odo-Ro-No adopted war fatigues to advertise themselves as the solution to this newfound problem:



**FIGURE 3. SOURCE: PICTURE POST, 1 AUGUST 1942, 23.**

This advertising, in a very direct way, addresses some of the concerns that women might have felt in regard to joining, for example, the Auxiliary Territorial Services (ATS). As women were brought together ‘in close proximity in the Forces’ they ‘focussed symbolically and materially on bodily hygiene and manners’ (Summerfield, 1998, 177). Commercial advertisers responded, reflecting these concerns in their advertising and making an important contribution to overcoming female objections to joining-up with make-up as a crucial means to retaining that all-important femininity.

Spurred on by the efforts of commercial advertisers, women in wartime were determined to protect and project their femininity. Alongside those images and messages in the advertising of the period, government agencies, cinema and the public at large expected, if not demanded, that women retain their femininity whilst taking on masculine roles. One of the clearest delineations of this approach on the part of the government came with the publication of the MoI pamphlet ‘Eve in Overalls’ in 1942. In that pamphlet women in the factories are described as having ‘well-cared for hands and hair and they wear, whenever possible, pretty shoes’. It goes on, ‘they have not given up their necklaces nor their bracelets nor their lipsticks’ (quoted in Rose, 2003, 130–31). Whether more imagined than real, this was projected as the ideal as far as women on the home front were concerned and formed a dominant popular culture with commercial advertising playing an important role in its successful propagation.

## VISIONS OF A POST-WAR WORLD

### ‘Germany to disarm...George to give me some silk stockings’

From May 1941 there was clearly an effort on the part of commercial advertisers to keep in step with public opinion as considerations around what it was that they were fighting for and the nature of the post-war world rose to the surface. According to Paul Addison, in the wake of Dunkirk, and through the Battle of Britain, ‘demand for social reform at home sprang up as suddenly as a gust of wind on a still day’ (1975, 104). Parties, both inside and outside the government, believed that promises of a better post-war world would be crucial in steeling morale if the nation were to survive as she stood alone after June 1940. Irrespective of the serious reservations of Churchill in regard to making any promises relating to the post-war world whilst still embroiled in conflict, there was a rising tide of agitation that wanted to ensure that the people would be rewarded for their efforts. Discussions around reconstruction, if not the dominant topic of conversation, were high on the list. J. B. Priestley, basing his observations on the three years he had spent travelling up and down the country as a speaker from the summer of 1940 reported,

In hotels, camps, factory canteens, hostels, railway trains, bars, restaurants, I listened and talked and argued. Topic Number One was probably the state of the war at the particular time; but Topic Number Two, running Number One very close, was always the New World after the war (quoted in Addison, 1975, 162).

From 1941, as the prospect of defeat began to recede, people began to lift their heads and look beyond the struggle for survival. Commercial advertisers were early exponents of such a forward-looking approach, placing themselves firmly in the vanguard of the reconstruction debate.

Throughout this period, commercial advertisers mounted a concerted campaign that had at its core an unshakeable belief in victory and that this was, according to Rose’s Lime Cordial, ‘JUST ROUND THE CORNER’ (*Picture Post*, 16 December 1944, 6). Such efforts were designed to serve many purposes, not least amongst these was a determination to sustain home front morale and urge the people to fight on with the promise of a bountiful future world. Alongside the belief that victory was close at hand, commercial advertisers went about conjuring up images of a post-war world, drawing wistful parallels with the pre-war days, to create that sense of ‘something to look forward to’. They cast a definite light onto what it was that was important to the people and what it was that they were fighting for.

For commercial advertisers victory was certain and now was the time to start planning for it. Consumers were

urged to give consideration to the post-war world now for fear that they would miss out on the opportunities that would be afforded them if they did not think ahead. As the national dialogue gained momentum, advertisers added their voice to the growing number who spoke out in regard to the post-war world. As such they were riding off the back of rising popular consciousness regarding post-war planning. According to Kevin Jeffreys, by the end of 1942 discussion of future domestic policy had become an irresistible trend (1995, 86).

In tune with the true interests and concerns of the people, commercial advertisers gave voice to more down-to-earth aspirations. Crawford's Biscuits, in a campaign that ran in *Picture Post* between January and October 1944, showed "average" citizens outlining their 'PEACE TERMS'. Whilst making reference to the ideological battle greater emphasis is given to more reasonable demands that highlight a return to normality and are more realistic in their ordinariness. Thus, in January 1944, their advertising showed a member of the public outlining her 'PEACE TERMS' which included, alongside 'Hitler brought to trial', the 'front of our house re-painted' and 'fresh butter, strawberry jam and Crawford's Cream Crackers'. In February it is 'Germany to disarm...George to give me some silk stockings'. In April, 'A new type of government for Germany...A fresh set of chair covers' (*Picture Post*, 8 January 1944, 2; 5 February 1944, 2; 1 April 1944, 2).



**FIGURE 4. SOURCE: *PICTURE POST*, 5 FEBRUARY 1944, 2**

This appears a very insightful campaign and reduces the lofty rhetoric of the Atlantic Charter, issued in August 1941, to a much more humble and accessible set of desires on the part of the British people.<sup>2</sup> These were more tangible war aims for the average citizen who, in the final analysis, perhaps wanted nothing more than to see 'all together again' (Crawford's Biscuits, *Picture Post*, 5 August 1944, 27). According to commercial advertisers what was fundamental 'among the blessings of peace' was not so much the ideal that the people of the world should be able to live a life free from want and fear, but a pair of Kayser-Bondor stockings

(*Picture Post*, 28 April 1945, 26). This was to be the 'reward' for which you had been fighting (Kayser Tailored underwear, *Picture Post*, 28 July 1945, 3). The demands of peace had further been outlined on behalf of the people in a campaign for Meltis "New Berry" Fruits that ran in *Picture Post* between May and December 1941, for them amongst 'The Fruits of Victory' would be, 'to sit blissfully in the sunshine' and, 'The flash of headlamps in the night, like "silver scissors cutting through dark velvet"' (12 July 1941, 2; 1 November 1941, 4). Towards the end of the war they were suggesting that what the people longed for most was, 'the joy of unrationed shopping', essentially a return to normality (*Picture Post*, 21 April 1945, 26). Commercial advertisers spurred the people on with visions of the prizes of peace that would include silk stockings, new chair covers and plentiful confectionery. They promised their readers a world completely at odds with that known before the war, precisely in accord with the popular discussion around reconstruction with Mass-Observation reporting in April 1943 that fifty-seven per cent of those questioned expressed a desire to see 'great changes' after the war (quoted in Fielding, 1992, 633).

Advertisers showed a wide variety of goods in plentiful supply and all manner of new innovations designed to make life easier. Regulo Gas Cookers suggested that 'Tomorrow's NEW WORLD' would be open to all, and cement was widely promoted as one of those means whereby a new world would be built, bridging 'the gap between the old and new ways of life' (*Picture Post*, 8 January 1944, 3; 1 January 1944, 27). Such a vision would be realised by the awakening of the people and their determination for a fresh start. In early 1943, Milk of Magnesia looked forward to 'POST-WAR PROSPERITY - THE TRUE FOUNDATION'. They suggested that 'Most of us are thinking about the sort of world we are going to have after the war', suggesting that their was a universal determination that, 'it has got to be a better world' (*Picture Post*, 13 February 1943, 26). Pears Soap believed that the scientific innovation that had thus far been harnessed in the pursuit of the war would be turned to the benefit of mankind in the post-war world, giving Britain 'better health, better homes, a better standard of living and a happier life for all' (*Picture Post*, 21 June 1941, 2). Such promises seemed boundless and in the dark days of 1941, when this advertisement appeared, it might be hoped would spur the people on to fight all out for this utopian vision.

Alongside such lofty rhetoric appeared other more basic allusions to the future, yet still wistful in their description of Britain at peace. Chivers Jellies, in a campaign that ran in *Picture Post* between December 1944 and June 1945, used the example that children under the age of six would have no knowledge of Britain at peace and had their parents describing the delights that were in store:

Shops ablaze with lights and colour - oranges - bananas - crackers - toys galore - summer holidays by



the sea – and luscious Chivers Jellies of many flavours (*Picture Post*, 16 December 1944, 2).

In this land of plenty, Marconiphone simply concluded, ‘*It’s going to be good..*’ (*Picture Post*, 11 August 1944, 6).

From May 1941, and with growing intensity as the war reached its climax, commercial advertisers urged the public to look to the future. In looking forward they had an unshakeable belief in ultimate victory and confidently predicted as early as the autumn of 1941 that this was just round the corner. With peace they portrayed the world returning to an idealised, pre-war state, for Kayser-Bondor Full-Fashioned Stockings best characterised by the joys of Ascot whilst Dubarry Talcum Powder looked towards ‘happy summer nights beneath the silver moon’ (*Picture Post*, 21 June 1941, 5; 25 April 1942, 3). Commercial advertising through this period was part of a broader debate not only in regard to the nature of post-war Britain but whether that debate should be taking place at all while there was still a war to be won. The evidence provided here clearly sets out advertisers’ attitudes towards this subject: they were wholly committed to discussing the post-war world, not least because this would be a time when they could once more go about their business in earnest but also because the public at large were so keen to look to the future. By championing this cause, commercial advertisers could hope to benefit from the positive association. However, these advertisements demonstrate how closely aligned they were with the people. Many of the promises that appear in these advertisements relate to the “little luxuries” that were so cherished by the average citizen and spurred them on through the war. Speaking at the Labour party conference in 1945, the candidate for East Grinstead explained,

two years ago, when I was in Africa, we fell to talking one day about what we hoped to see in the post-war world, and the fellow who put the point best was the one who said he wanted to settle down with his wife in a cottage, with the kiddies, and to enjoy chocolates and looking after the chickens (quoted in Fielding, 1992, 633).

Crawford’s Biscuits were happy to promise the ‘front of our house painted’, ‘silk stockings’ and ‘a fresh set of chair covers’. However, in joining the debate, commercial advertisers were fundamentally concerned throughout the war years with preparation for a state of “normalcy” when the war ended. The ‘new world’ that commercial advertisers promised was not built on the belief, as stipulated in the Atlantic Charter, that people should be free to choose their own form of government and to be able to live in freedom from want or fear but, according to HMV Electrical Household Appliances, on the right of every housewife to have the ‘leisure for living’ that could only be realised

through the purchase of the new range of goods that the end of the war would make available.

## CONCLUSION

Commercial advertising plays a significant role in society, guiding and helping consumers. Whilst undeniably intended to promote the sale of their own goods, they offer help and advice that fits into popular culture and helps to construct the society in which it exists. This was no less the case in Britain between 1939 and 1945, and if anything, this role was accentuated as the public struggled to adjust to the vastly different circumstances of being at war. As such it is a valuable resource for understanding the day-to-day experience of past societies.

Culture is a structured representation of society; it creates a framework within which signs and symbols are used to help make sense of the individual’s place within that society through association with the prevailing modes of conduct and “normal” practices. Commercial advertising offers as accurate an image of that society as possible given that its *raison d’être*, product sales, is dependent on getting as close to the people as possible and speaking in their language. Advertising helps to guide society and is, in turn, guided by society. It is a two-way conversation.

Instead they reflect the nervousness and anxiety that greeted war’s outbreak whilst at the same time offering more practical advice in order to get by, whether that be with the help of Wincarnis Tonic Wine or a variety of sauces and pickles to pep up a drab and uninspiring diet. As the situation and the mood of the public changed, so the advertising message shifts. In a sense, an alliance is struck between advertisers and the public acting in unison in response to government action. Thus, creative advertising offers ideas of how to fill gaps in the diet that might otherwise have signalled a fundamental and wholesale change in life with detrimental consequences for morale. The advertiser’s understanding is further demonstrated by their engagement in the discourse around the place of women and femininity in wartime, again with the offer of practical help and advice. And finally, in opposition to the government’s position, advertisers side with the people in opening up the debate around reconstruction.

Thus, Commercial advertising in Britain during the Second World War played a crucial role: ‘to guide, help and hearten millions’. By virtue of this, the historian is afforded a fascinating insight into the everyday practices of the people, their concerns, interests and preoccupations. The place of advertising in wartime society was alongside the people as partners in the construction of the prevailing culture of the period.

## NOTES

1. The idea of an advertisement being ‘appropriate’ to the society in which it appears is an argument put forward by

2. Linda Scott. See 'Images in Advertising: The Need for a Theory of Visual Rhetoric' in *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Sep., 1994). The author acknowledges the contribution of the reviewer of the original CHARM proposal in bringing his attention to this article.

3. The Atlantic Charter, drawn up at Placentia Bay off Newfoundland by Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1941, saw Britain and the United States renounce territorial aggrandisement; condemn territorial changes contrary to the wishes of the people concerned; pledged that peoples should be free to choose their own form of government and to be able to live in freedom from want or fear. See Calder, 1969, 263-4.

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