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'What if Technology Worked in Harmony with Nature?' Imagining Climate Change Through Prius Advertisements

Garland, J., Huising, R., and Struben, J.

Organization, 2013, 20 (5), pp. 679–704.

Our understanding of climate change, caused by a build-up of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere, is potentially influenced by advertisements. This is where Garland et al. (2013) position their study of Prius and comparative Canadian advertisements. Content, compositional and interpretive analyses helped to extract a visual rhetoric, drawing on cultural resources while inhabiting major themes of culture as part of the potential knowledge creation.

The authors elaborate on examples of text and graphical design in the Prius advertisements to illustrate 'how the advertisements elicit co-creation by explicitly and implicitly inviting the viewer to imagine' (684). While the advertisements, in general, make viewers believe that hybrid cars are not without emissions, hybrids offer at least a less polluting option. To channel imaginative processes, three themes of nature, harmony and agency are added in each advertisement: nature is depicted as controlled with hyper-realities expressing a future in which nature is improved and free of climate change. Therefore, Prius advertising suggests a harmony between technology and nature as option to 'avert' climate change. Moreover, the advertisements purposefully lack an agent to commit the polluting act of driving to avoid a reflection and potential guilt.

The authors argue that the textual and graphical features of the advertisements invite the viewer to 'co-create its meaning' (694) and viewers' understanding of climate change. On the one hand, related ambiguities allow for connections to 'social, scientific and technical aspects of reality' (694) in the knowledge process. On the other hand, they disconnect the viewer from the actual challenges of climate change and 'neutralise potentially critical viewers' (698). Language, images and practices might have the persuasion to influence our understanding of climate change. Especially, the aesthetic behind hyper-realities can make consumers reflect on their actions. The authors identify the limitations of their study as follows: the sample size is small and does not include other countries; there is a focus on print media while other advertising channels are neglected; the effects of the analysed symbolic systems on viewers have not been tested and different viewers could perceive the advertising differently; and, lastly, there is a narrow focus on the symbolic realm which excludes other social and material factors involved in creating our understanding of climate change.

Accounting research could explore the opportunities of hyper-realities and ambiguities to impact our understanding of climate change and to trigger reflection on our behaviour. Annual reports, SEA disclosure and other stakeholder communication convey messages which could be viewed through the lenses suggested by the authors.

However, from my point of view, this article misses a critical edge: primarily, 'greenness' is a selling point for Toyota and not a selfless endeavour. The link to a potential cost-benefit analysis of customers ('does it pay to be/drive green') in their purchase decision is neglected. I see the danger that business as usual is perpetuated by this advertisement while we actually need a change in behaviour to curb climate change. The suggested hyper-realities underpin the status quo of injustice of climate change that the rich countries can get away with their

emission intensive (dirty) behaviour while poor countries have to pay the price (see Beck 2010). A deconstructivist approach à la Derrida may reveal the underlying, inherent meanings of this article and Toyota's advertisement.

Reference

Beck, U. 2010. "Remapping Social Inequalities in an Age of Climate Change: For a Cosmopolitan Renewal of Sociology." *Global Networks* 10 (2): 165–181.

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