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'TV advertising is dead.' Really?

[Olivia Johnson](#)

If you input the phrase 'TV advertising is dead' on Google you get over 20 million hits. Now, I cannot claim to have read all the articles thrown up by this search, but a goodly selection seem to be warning of TV advertising's imminent demise. I do not believe that this pessimistic tone is a quirk of the articles and information that Google throws up. If you talk to people in the industry generally, there is an emerging consensus. We're about to enter a brave new world that looks nothing like the current one. TV advertising is no longer the force it was. It is all over bar the shouting.

Well, yes, but only up to a point. Some months ago, I was having lunch with some colleagues of mine. We were musing about the state of the industry over ham, egg and chips. Two of us assumed that the death of TV advertising was nigh. One of us demurred. I thought I had better explore his contention. This paper is the result of that process.

A DEDICATED FOLLOWER OF FASHION

'And when he does his little rounds, Round the boutiques of London Town, Eagerly pursuing all the latest fads and trends, Coz he's a dedicated follower of fashion' (1).

As an industry, we are expected to know how the habits of the public are changing, especially when it comes to the media people are using. Arguably, we have been too slow to recognise and respond to the shifts that continue to occur. However, I contend that, while we have under-reacted to those changes in the recent past, we are now in danger of over-reacting to the ongoing changes confronting us today. We are now overestimating the extent to which TV is defunct as a medium.

It has become fashionable and in vogue within the industry to make the following claims:

1. People just don't watch much telly these days.
2. It's incredibly expensive to advertise on telly.
3. And anyway, TV advertising just does not work as it used to.

STUCK IN THE MUD?

It is a bit risky being an advocate of yesterday's medium, especially in an industry desperate to be 'future-facing'. But, at the risk of appearing to be a stick-in-the-mud, I believe that TV as an advertising medium is far from dead.

I contend that it is still an invaluable part of our armoury, and that to deny our campaigns the power of TV for the sake of appearing fashionable is like cutting off our noses to spite our faces. My contention is based on the fact that the three 'beliefs' outlined above are more fantasy than fact.

NO ONE WATCHES TV ANY MORE, RIGHT?

Wrong, actually. Lots of people are watching telly. TV reaches between 70 and 80% of adults daily. Every day, millions of people in the UK (and elsewhere) sit down in front of the box (see [Figure 1](#)).

And they are sitting down for hours. Over half the UK population watch at least 21 hours of telly a week. That is three hours a day. And, despite what the zeitgeist says, it is not just the old who are sitting in front of the box. Even 15–24 year olds who have grown up with the internet, who are often described as 'digital natives', are as partial to an evening watching TV as the next man. Some 47% of that age group watch at least three hours of telly a day. That's some 3.5 million sought-after young people, captive and ours for the taking, each and every day (see [Figure 2](#)).

Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly, this habit has not changed over the years (2). Despite all the attractions and distractions of our multi-media world, people are watching as much television as they ever did (see [Figure 3](#)). Now this is not to say that people are not spending time on the internet. They are. In fact 39% of UK adults access the internet every day. And they spend, on average, 45 minutes a day online. That is a lot of people spending a lot of their time on the internet. It is just that they spend even more of their time relaxing in

front of the telly.

The durability of TV as a pastime is probably worth an article all its own. But I would hypothesise that people still like it because it lets them just sit back, relax and veg out.

The marketing, business and even normal press is full of articles about 'engagement' and about the need to cede control to 'active' consumers, who want to create, control and dictate in their turn. I am not so much of a Luddite as to deny these things are happening. Consumers have always had opinions and ideas, and the internet lets them express these as never before. But, people do not always want to be in 'active' mode.

Sometimes, people want to be in passive, lean-back mode. By the time you've spent a day organising and feeding your kids, working in an office, tidying up the house and booking the car in for its next service, a few hours on the sofa with your feet up and your mind in neutral is just the ticket. Roll on TV.

OK. PEOPLE WATCH TV ... BUT IT IS TOO EXPENSIVE

Actually, in the words of billett's, 'TV just keeps on getting cheaper ... as deflation continues it's a great time to be on TV ... TV [is] now at 1995 prices' (3) (see [Figure 4](#)). Binet and Field argue that, in real terms, TV prices are actually at their lowest for 25 years (4).

IT MAY BE CHEAP, BUT IT DOES NOT WORK AS WELL AS IT USED TO

It is very easy to bounce along in benign agreement with this statement. TV ads are such old hat that it is hard to get people excited about them. There are so many that it is hard to tell one from another. It is all just wallpaper, isn't it?

Wrong. TV advertising works. And it may even be more effective now than it was of old. Work by Les Binet and Peter Field on the IPA Effectiveness dataBANK clearly establishes this point, and they have generously allowed me to raid their book, *Marketing in the Era of Accountability*, for this section.

In one of their chapters, 'Media strategy', the authors make three key claims (5).

1. 'Campaigns that have used TV have significantly outperformed those that have not' (see [Figure 5](#)).
2. 'Using TV makes a campaign much more efficient, regardless of budget' (see [Figure 6](#)).
3. 'The effectiveness of TV actually seems to be increasing over time' (see [Figure 7](#)).

SO WHY IS TV SO BRILLIANT?

1. It Lets you Endear yourself to People and Win Hearts

TV is brilliant at entertaining people and building emotional associations between a brand and its consumers. Increasing amounts of research suggest that doing this is not a vanity project. Millward Brown argues that 'feelings' (affective and emotional information) are critically important to people when they think about and choose between brands. Indeed, people who, through illness or accident, have lost the mental facility of 'feelings' are unable to make even quite simple choices. The importance of the seemingly 'irrational' in all aspects of mental processes gets ever greater (6).

The 2006 IPA paper for Felix is a brilliant illustration of this. When the agency suggested to consumers in research that they might change or get rid of the little black-and-white animated cat that had helped build the brand's fortunes for almost 20 years, the women got upset. They felt an emotional bond to the cat and would miss him. This may not seem entirely sane or rational as a response, but it is very real. It's an emotional reality that turns into hard currency at the supermarket (7).

We had a similar experience at Hooper Galton. Nando's, a chain of Portuguese Peri-Peri Chicken Restaurants, developed a spoof cricket-sponsorship TV campaign to accompany coverage of the 2005 Ashes series. The hapless team of Portuguese cricketers that we created so endeared themselves to fans and the England team that Nando's was invited to be the official supplier of food at the end-of-year official dinner.

As Claire Beale wrote, 'television is still the most powerful hearts-and-minds advertising medium. When was the last time a website made your spine tingle?' (8).

2. It can make you Famous

'I want my brand to be famous' should not be dismissed as an empty desire. Work by ITV suggests that there is a correlation between brand fame and purchase intent. In turn, 34% of the people ITV questioned said that 'advertising was the single most important feature in making a brand famous'. As an influence, it outstripped in importance other influences like brand performance, global presence or even longevity. Within that, 51% of people believe that TV advertising is the advertising that drives fame (vs 8% agreeing that newspaper advertising drives fame) (9).

Now, sceptics may dismiss this research as self-serving (although the independent consultants who conducted it on behalf of ITV would disagree), but the findings strike a chord. Personal experience says that telly ads are the ones we seem to remember.

It is hard to believe that the Sony Bravia, for example, would have enjoyed the recent fame that it has without its two TV commercials: *Balls* and *Paint*. The sheer impressiveness of each played a large part in the amount of attention the campaign has generated. It is the

unique ability of TV to be 'spectacular' in this way.

3. It Gets you Talked about

Much has been written recently on the power and importance of word of mouth. It is undoubtedly invaluable. The words of a friend have an authenticity and veracity that other communication channels lack. TV advertising can be a powerful way of generating chatter.

The TV commercial we made for Florette, an operatic extravaganza of singing lettuce pickers, was talked about on radio phone-ins and extolled by DJ Janice Long as her favourite-ever commercial.

The Honda *Cog* commercial got tongues wagging. The ad was downloaded from the company website 2.3 million times. A Google search using the phrase 'new Honda ad' revealed 1 million website matches. Over 3000 Google newsgroups discussed the 'new Honda ad'. It is a brilliant example of 'old media' activity creating 'new media' buzz. And, as more people saw the ad more, desire to own a Honda increased (10).

4. It Gives your Brand Public Meaning

The brand you buy says something about you. Jon Steele brings this principle to life in a vivid way in his book, *The Perfect Pitch*. Working on a pitch for Porsche in the US, he and his colleagues found that people who wanted to buy a Porsche were put off from doing so by the 'asshole factor' – namely the poor opinion other people had of Porsche drivers. What other people think, matters (11).

TV, because it is a genuinely public medium, and talks to millions of people, is well placed to build perceptions of a brand among the public, ideally positive ones. Indeed, the ITV study referred to earlier argues that of the components of fame, universal meaning, is the one that correlates most closely to movements in market share (12).

5. And you can use it in Increasingly Interesting Ways

TV is evolving fast as a medium. You can, as Pete Edwards, partner of media planning consultancy Edwards Groom Saunders, says, 'do so much now that you couldn't even contemplate doing five years ago. You now have a host of channels that offer not simply advertising space, but engaging formats across numerous digital platforms, providing viewers with a more compelling viewing, and crucially, commercially rewarding experience. Coupled with the parallel growth in scale, what were once niche channels have become TV brands that command mainstream, highly-valuable broadcast audiences. TV truly has become a world of opportunity for advertisers of all shapes and budget sizes ...'

CONCLUSION

Now, in case you were wondering, I'm not naïve enough to think that TV is going to remain unchanged over the next decade. PVRs could well have a fundamental effect. Nor do I dismiss the importance of digital media, both as a way for advertisers to talk to consumers and, rather more alarmingly, as a way for them to talk to each other about advertisers and brand owners.

But, in a bid to understand and exploit new emerging media, it is imperative that we don't dismiss the medium that has been invaluable over the last 50 years. 'Don't throw the baby out with the bath water', as my mum always says.

REFERENCES

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NOTES & EXHIBITS



Olivia Johnson is planning director at Hooper Galton. Olivia's career spans over 20 years in the communications industry, including five years as an account planner at BBH, six at BMP as head of planning and three at Ogilvy & Mather.

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FIGURE 1: DAILY TV REACH (UK, 2006)

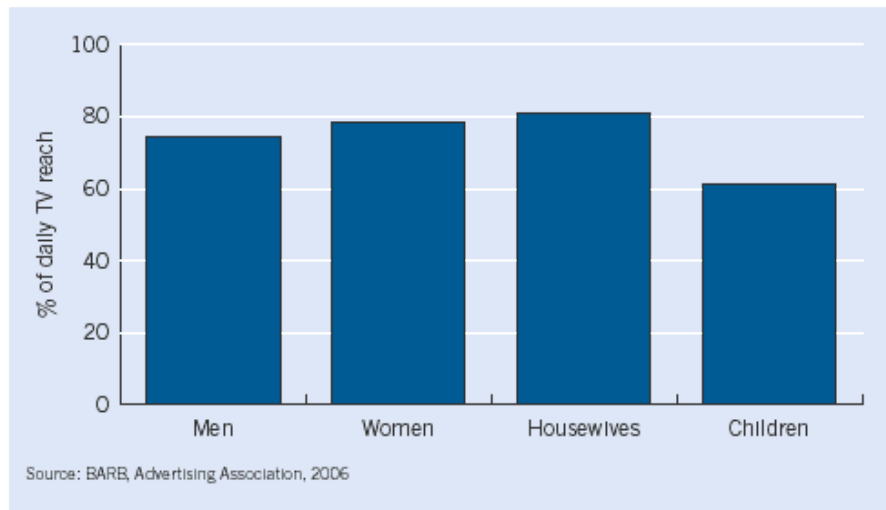


FIGURE 2: WATCH AT LEAST 21 HOURS OF TV A WEEK (UK ADULTS)

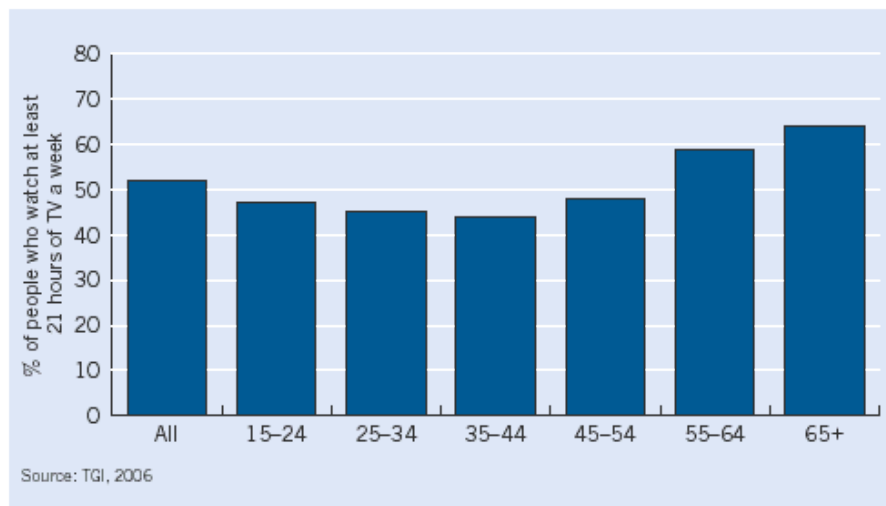


FIGURE 3: HOURS OF TV VIEWED EACH DAY (UK ADULTS)

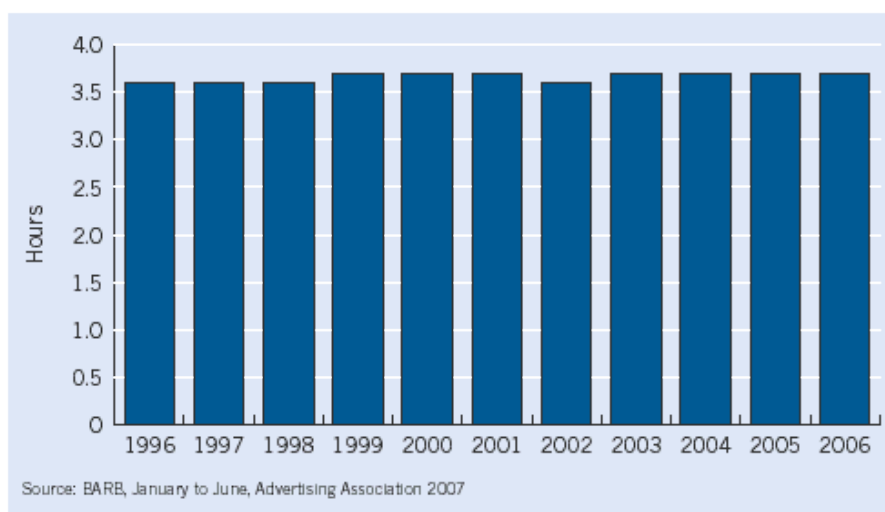


FIGURE 4: TV PRICES

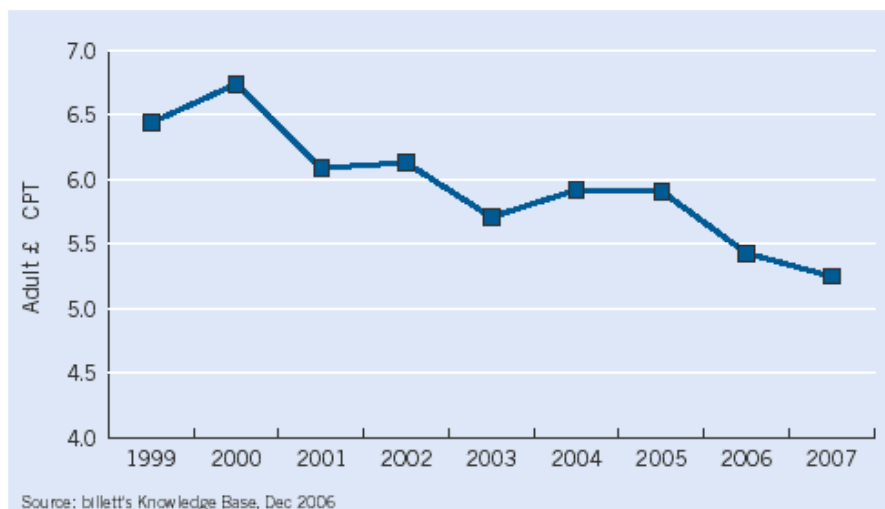


FIGURE 5: TV ENHANCES CAMPAIGN EFFECTIVENESS

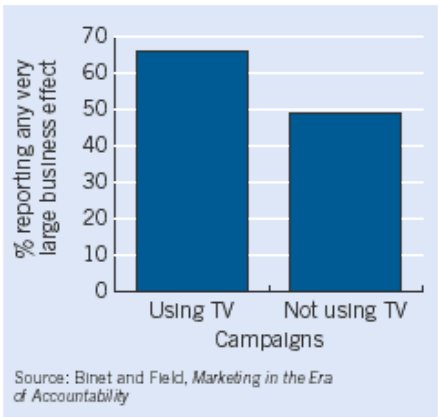


FIGURE 6: TV ENHANCES CAMPAIGN EFFICIENCY

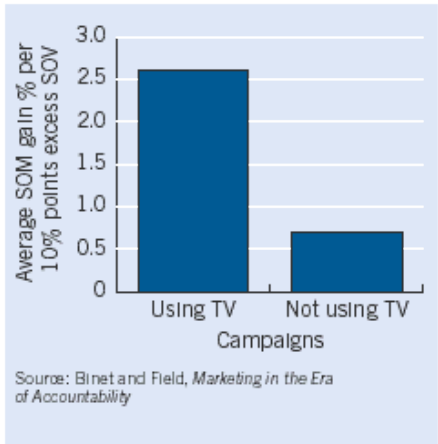
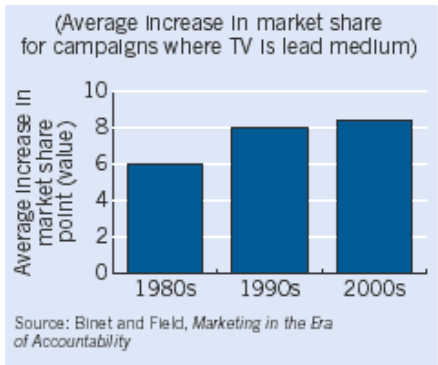


FIGURE 7: TV HAS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE



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