

PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING IN AMERICA

An Overview

By Warren Berger

These are turbulent times in public service advertising. More groups than ever are competing for a limited amount of airtime for their messages. There are ongoing debates about whether broadcasters are donating enough time to public service advertisements (PSAs) and questions being raised about whether sponsors of public education campaigns are sufficiently adapting to the times. In fact, even what seems like the simplest of questions – what is a PSA? – no longer has an easy answer. Is a PSA still a PSA if it promotes a broadcaster's programming or a corporation's interest? Is it a PSA if it has been paid for?

In the midst of all these changes, a seminal event took place in 1998, when the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) decided to pay \$1 billion for five years worth of antidrug ads. It seemed the government was making this unprecedented expenditure because it believed that advertising could play a role in helping to change the attitudes and behaviors of young people. But some, including then-chair of the Federal Communications Commission, Reed Hundt, saw darker clouds on the horizon.¹

At the time, Hundt expressed concern that this move by the ONDCP was another indication that the traditional public service model – which has long relied on donated airtime from broadcasters seeking to fulfill their public service obligations – was no longer working. "I would consider it a white flag of surrender," says Hundt, when reflecting on these events three years later. "The fact that the government is willing to pay this much for airtime means they are simply not willing to demand that the networks donate time." The National Association of

Broadcasters (NAB) and the Advertising Council (or the Ad Council, as it is often referred), one of the leading sponsors of public service campaigns, have done studies concluding that the networks are meeting their public interest obligations by making consistent and generous contributions to public service, including PSAs.²

A new study by the Kaiser Family Foundation examines the amount of airtime currently donated to PSAs and finds that broadcast and cable networks provide an average of 15 seconds every hour to public service advertising (just under one half of 1 percent of all television airtime). In addition to these donated minutes, the study also finds that sponsors such as the ONDCP are buying about nine seconds an hour for their public service messages – about a third of all PSAs.³

It's hard to know how these new trends – and the debates they've sparked – would have looked to the first pioneers of public service advertising 60 years ago. In the United States, this new form of advertising began to gain momentum in the early 1940s, after advertising industry leader James Webb Young, a consultant to the ad agency J. Walter Thompson, suggested that advertisers could improve their public image by designing ads for good causes and providing public education on important issues of the day. Young challenged his colleagues to use their persuasion skills "to confound the critics of advertising with the greatest demonstration of advertising's power they have ever seen."⁴

The ad industry soon had an opportunity to put Young's plan into action. The onset of World War II led to the formation of the Ad Council, which created ads serving the war effort by explaining food rationing, urging people to conserve, and so forth. Some of the Council's more famous World War II ads became classics: "Loose lips sink ships" was one example of pithy Madison Avenue sloganeering brought to the cause.

After the war, the Ad Council soon expanded into many other areas of society, and, by the late 1940s, began working closely with various government agencies and charities. It was during this period that one of public service advertising's most famous characters, Smokey Bear, came to life, educating the public about the dangers of forest fires. Smokey's success suggested that some of the same tools that had been used to sell products – cartoon characters, catchy phrases, emotional appeals – could be used for matters of grave importance.⁵

But while the Ad Council lent its advertising expertise and creative services to various causes and advocacy groups, the growth of PSAs also depended on another important element – the availability of broadcast airtime to run the messages. Part of the Ad Council's role was to approach broadcasters and persuade them to fill gaps and holes in their schedules with PSAs. But in addition to plugging gaps, the broadcasters also had another incentive for running these ads.

Dating back to the Federal Radio Act of 1927, broadcasters – in exchange for their use of the public electromagnetic spectrum – have had an obligation to serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity."⁶ While the vague wording of this and subsequent regulations left much room for interpretation, broadcasters were expected to provide some evidence of service to the community each time they renewed their licenses with the FCC. One of the ways they could accomplish that was to run public service ads, which the FCC defined as a community service ad "for which no charge is made."⁷ What emerged during this time was a three-way partnership: a nonprofit or government agency would seek out the support of the Ad Council to help develop a public education effort to promote its

cause, typically picking up the costs for production; advertising professionals (working at the behest of the Ad Council) would offer their time and creative ideas pro bono; and media organizations would donate space to run the ads, thereby, in the case of broadcasters, helping to meet their public service obligations.

By the 1960s, public service advertising had become a highly visible part of the American television landscape – fueled in part by the social activist spirit of the times. The Ad Council worked closely with government agencies and nonprofits to address the many hot-button issues of the day – war overseas, growing urban poverty, pollution, increased drug abuse. Amid all of this social turbulence, the ad industry itself was going through a creative revolution that, among other things, tried to bring more realism, candor, and sophistication to ads. The combination of these forces – controversial social issues all around, more proactive advocacy groups, and a new generation of ad writers looking for creative outlets – led to a golden creative era in public service ads.⁸

It was during this period that some of the most memorable images of public service advertising were produced. A commercial targeting litter and pollution featured an American Indian named Iron Eyes Cody, who was shown paddling a canoe while observing the desecration of the American landscape; the character responded, wordlessly, by shedding a single tear, as the ad's tagline urged: "Keep America Beautiful." Other public service ads at the time took on sensitive issues such as racism, with heart-wrenching ads for the United Negro College Fund that featured the slogan: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Meanwhile, the Ad Council's campaign promoting automobile safety, urging the public to "buckle up" safety belts and to avoid driving after drinking alcohol, began to alter behavior and shift public attitudes. The Ad Council's own research found that after the campaign began running, seat belt usage in America tripled.⁹

By the 1980s, the Ad Council was no longer the only major advertising coalition working on PSAs. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, formed in 1987, focused on the single issue of drug abuse. One of the Partnership's first TV commercials remains one of its most famous: "This is your brain," a voice-over declared as the camera focused on an egg; as the egg was broken and fried, the announcer added: "This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?" The Partnership began to saturate the American media with its messages in the late 1980s and early 90s – producing a volume of ads second only to McDonald's at the time. At one point, 92 percent of American teenagers reported that they had seen the "Fried Egg" commercial.¹⁰ In the early 1990s, the Partnership and the Ad Council were joined by a growing number of groups and charities that had begun to produce ads independently of these two national organizations – and public service advertising seemed to be reaching peak levels in America.

In recent years, however, there have been new debates about the amount of airtime being donated to PSAs. Doria Steedman, who heads up the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, says that before her organization began paying for ad time it was having more and more trouble getting its messages on the air. "There was an erosion of what the media was able to give us," Steedman says. "Several networks told us they were only going to be able to give us 10-second spots. And our chances of getting into prime time – slim always – became close to none."¹¹

One study in the mid-90s by two leading advertising industry associations showed that it was becoming more difficult for PSAs to get on the air, especially during prime time. According to the American Association of Advertising Agencies and the Association of National Advertisers, the amount of time on average donated to PSAs on the major networks during prime time dropped from 11 seconds an hour in 1992 to just four seconds per hour in 1995, prompting Hundt to exclaim that PSAs had "dried up like rain in the desert."¹²

Reaching a prime time audience with a PSA doesn't seem to have gotten any easier in this decade. The Kaiser Family Foundation study documents approximately five seconds per hour on average for donated public service advertising on the four major networks during prime time.

Of course, there is one big problem with the debates over whether broadcasters are donating enough to PSAs, and that is that it's difficult to assess exactly how much public service advertising is actually running these days. The Ad Council, for example, estimates the value of donated television for its own PSAs in 2000 at approximately \$316 million and has found, according to its president, Peggy Conlon, that the amount of overall time broadcasters donate to PSAs has remained steady at about 6 percent of all advertising inventory.

In 2000, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) used self-reporting from local stations to estimate that local broadcasters donated \$5.6 billion to PSAs the previous year, of which \$1.8 billion was from television.¹³

Critics note that these numbers can be misleading because they value donated ad time at the highest full retail rate, even though airtime is typically sold at a discount (particularly hard-to-sell slots, which is where PSAs often end up running). When the NAB testified before the Gore Commission, a Presidential Committee charged with examining the public interest obligations of broadcasters in the digital age, some of these questions were posed to the survey's pollster. "What was clear is that most of these PSAs are running at 3:00AM and that the term PSA has been redefined to include all this other stuff and inflate the overall amount," explains Norman Ornstein, the co-chair of the Gore Commission.

The bottom line is that even as society has debated the very definition of PSAs and broadcasters' responsibility to run them, according to Andrew J. Schwartzman, president and CEO of the Media Access Project, nobody has been able to "answer with any specificity how much *time* is really being devoted to PSAs."

The growth of cable television in the past decade has opened up new outlets, at least to a limited degree. The Kaiser Family Foundation finds that cable stations, which are not required by the same 1927 obligations as broadcasters to serve the public interest, dedicate about half as much airtime as broadcasters *overall* (seven seconds per hour vs. 17 seconds per hour on average), but donate somewhat more time during *prime time* (eight seconds per hour vs. broadcasters' five seconds).

In trying to explain the apparent decline in donated PSAs on broadcast television during prime time, the ad industry groups point to a strong 1990s economy that left little ad time unsold. But some critics contend that the real issue is the lack of specificity and accountability with regard to broadcasters' obligations to run PSAs. With no specific quotas mandated, nor any stipulation that ads run at certain times, broadcasters have had tremendous leeway in deciding how many (if any) PSAs to run, as well as who they will accept such ads from and when they will run them – a system that is unlikely to change in the near future.

According to former FCC Chair Reed Hundt, the vague wording of existing regulations has become more and more of a problem in recent years, as competition within the television industry has heated up. "The FCC lacks the will to impose public service regulations and rules that are clear and specific and that apply equally to everyone," he says. "Instead, we've continued to rely on an unwritten agreement by broadcasters to run PSAs – and unwritten deals are bound to be broken, especially as the competition for eyeballs becomes more fierce."

Others think it's folly, given the political and economic reality, to even bring up the "R" word. "The regulation train left the station 15 years ago," notes Conlon, "and it's not coming back. I think it's naive of our industry to think we can make big daddy government make these communications outlets do things for us that they don't want to do. That's not the way we are going to compete in this marketplace."

But what is clear is that "paid PSAs" and promo-style PSAs (in which a network receives visibility, for example, by featuring its own stars as part of a message addressing a social issue) are a significant part of the current landscape. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation study, 25 percent of PSAs on the major broadcast networks now feature one of their own celebrities. Broadcasters say that these trusted celebrities are highly effective spokespeople for the causes they espouse and can capture a viewer's attention as effectively, if not more so, than an unknown spokesperson. Indeed, today, the Ad Council as well as others often work in partnership with broadcasters to produce promo-style PSAs that bring attention to a particular social problem.

Critics of this trend worry that paid PSAs – whether they include a corporate sponsor or not – could eat up time that might be donated to unpaid ads, and otherwise favor well-funded, and perhaps less controversial, causes. But the Ad Council's Peggy Conlon says she hasn't seen as yet any significant adverse effects. "I don't think we've seen a measurable decrease in public service advertising as a result of the paid campaigns. Is that a possibility in the future? Sure, you can't discount it. But it hasn't had an impact yet." To try to counter the possibility that donated PSAs could get squeezed out, the ONDCP incorporated a "match" into its campaign. This practice requires broadcasters that accept the program's paid antidrug ads to donate equal time to unpaid PSAs featuring complementary messages – or to use the same kinds of messages in their programming.

The public service marketplace has also expanded to include another kind of “hybrid” ad that is part public service and part public relations. Serious issues and causes are being adopted by companies with a sales agenda. Beer companies such as Anheuser-Busch increasingly use ads to promote “responsible” drinking, while recent commercials by Philip Morris, which owns cigarette brands, have centered on the plight of battered women and the company’s contributions to that and other social causes. It should be noted that the Kaiser Family Foundation study finds that these corporate public service messages are fairly infrequent, averaging less than one second an hour.

Another change that PSA experts have noted over the past decade is the crowding of the public service marketplace, as more nonprofits than ever try to use advertising to draw attention to their issues. This trend has added to the already fierce competition for limited airtime, but it has also had another effect, according to leaders in the advertising industry. Over the years, the public has been exposed to so many appeals from so many different groups that many television viewers have become somewhat jaded to or are simply tuning out the multitude of messages they see. Mary Warlick, executive director of the One Club for Art and Copy, which presents awards for creativity in advertising, says public service advertisers in general have more trouble getting noticed because after decades of public service appeals for so many different causes, “the audience has grown numb. You must do something very strong to break through the ambivalence.”¹⁴

Public service groups must also rely on creative approaches to encourage broadcasters to run their ads. Peter Cohen, an advertising executive who has worked on a number of public service ad campaigns through the years, including an award-winning series of ads for New York City’s Coalition for the Homeless, says that in today’s competitive PSA marketplace, if an ad is not compelling, it may not ever make it on the air. Because networks and local station managers are now inundated with PSAs from so many groups, an ad must be special to get their attention, something especially challenging given the low budgets most of the nonprofit sponsors of PSAs are working under. “I’ve found that the more interesting an ad is,” Cohen says, “the more a station manager will want to run it.”¹⁵

Some groups are finding that they can get better results by working directly with a broadcaster or cable channel; for example, the Ad Council and the Kaiser Family Foundation, among others, have worked directly with networks to produce and run public service messages. This model enables an organization to secure better placement for its messages by negotiating the commitment up front and developing messages that speak to a particular audience.

Such new approaches may be long overdue. A study by the Harvard School of Public Health suggests that in order to truly effect behavioral changes, public service ads need to abandon shock-and-scare tactics and begin to incorporate some of the more sophisticated marketing approaches used in product ads – including product placements, sponsorships, and working directly with news programs to reach the public.¹⁶

Public service messages can come under fire, however, when they are delivered outside the context of advertising and in other nontraditional ways. For example, when it was made public that the ONDCP allowed networks to receive credit toward their “match” requirement by incorporating antidrug messages into their shows’ storylines and dialogue, critics raised questions about whether such financial incentives are appropriate.

As more contemporary approaches are being tried, public service ads are also crossing new media frontiers. Recently the Ad Council brought one of the most recognizable figures in public service advertising, Smokey Bear, into cyberspace, where the character today has its own Web site. The rise of new media and the continued splintering of old media is a mixed blessing for public service advertisers. It’s more difficult for a public service ad campaign to have the same kind of widespread cultural impact felt by a “Smokey Bear” or “The Crying Indian.” As the Ad Council’s Peggy Conlon observes: “In the past, we could take one image or message and reach everyone, just using the three networks,” she says. “It’s a more challenging job because you can’t reach a 30-percent share of all television viewers with one spot. Those kinds of audiences aren’t amassed anymore.” The flip side of media fragmentation is that it makes it even more possible to target PSAs to a specific audience. In some ways, the Internet and other interactive mediums could turn out to be the ideal environment for PSAs. They allow public service to move beyond mere attention grabbing to deliver in-depth information immediately on an issue or problem, or to connect people with resources.

Moreover, Web pages and banner ads are relatively inexpensive to produce, an important factor for nonprofits working with tight budgets. According to the Ad Council, Web sites have, so far, been receptive to donating space for PSAs; last year, the Ad Council estimates, the number of its messages appearing on the Internet grew by 500 percent. It remains to be seen how PSAs will fare in this new environment. Will it eventually become as difficult for PSAs to get on prime Web sites as on prime-time television? What motivation will online companies have to serve the public interest in the future? Will the expected convergence of old and new media push PSAs further to the margins or create more opportunities to get the messages out in more effective, innovative ways? Stay tuned. These are just some of the questions that face public service advertising as it enters a new era and a changing media landscape.

Warren Berger is the author of the book "Advertising Today," (Phaidon Press, 2001), an overview of trends in contemporary advertising, including PSAs. He also writes frequently about advertising and the media for the *New York Times*, *Wired* magazine, and *Advertising Age*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1998, p. A1.
- ² "National Report on Local Broadcasters Community Service," published by the NAB, April 2000, p. 3; also, Ad Council's 2000 Annual Report.
- ³ "Shouting to be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age." A Report by the Kaiser Family Foundation on television content (2001) (Authors: Walter Gantz, Ph.D. and Nancy Schwartz, Indiana University).
- ⁴ "The Ad Council at 50," *Advertising Age*, November 11, 1991, p. A2.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. A6.
- ⁶ Federal Radio Act of 1927, 44 Stat 1162 (1927).
- ⁷ FCC Rules, Section 73-1810 (d) (4).
- ⁸ "The Ad Council at 50," *Advertising Age*, November 11, 1991, p. A8.
- ⁹ *New York Times*, November 20, 2000, p. F6.
- ¹⁰ *Forbes*, February 4, 1991.
- ¹¹ Doria Steedman interview, *ONE Magazine*, Vol. 2, issue 3, p. 16.
- ¹² *Television Digest*, March 10, 1997.
- ¹³ "National Report on Local Broadcasters Community Service," published by the NAB, April 2000, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ *New York Times*, November 20, 2000, p. F6.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ "Recommendations for Future Mass Media Campaigns to Prevent Preteen and Adolescent Substance Abuse," Harvard School of Public Health, 1990.