Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World
by Joseph Turow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 242 pp., $22.50)

Fear of Audience Segmentation

In a style that is reminiscent of, but more negative than, Alvin Toffler's now-classic *Future Shock*, Turow decries the changing media system, viewing audience segmentation and media demassification as potentially destructive forces in modern society. Unlike some of business' critics, he does not blame some amorphous business conspiracy for the increasing fragmentation of media audiences. But his seemingly intuitive cultural analysis of media audiences and mostly anecdotal review of changes in how the trade press discusses those audiences presents a paranoid view of the U.S. cultural future.

As the most visible of business practices, marketing is criticized by almost everyone, from social critics to public policymakers to political pundits. Even people meeting at social gatherings will jump on marketing practitioners they have just met with all sorts of complaints. Deceptive advertising, audience manipulation, market abuse of children, and

cultural destruction are among the social ills often laid at the feet of the marketing business. And as a core area of that business, market segmentation itself increasingly has been criticized for all sorts of reasons. Although these criticisms often are voiced by people with limited knowledge or understanding of marketing theory and practice, the mere existence of the critics has influenced marketing theory and research.

With even articles in *Marketing News* calling segmentation potential "exploitation of vulnerable populations" (e.g., Sims 1997), the research question becomes "when," not "if," segmentation might be unethical (Smith and Cooper-Martin 1997). As firms of questionable products, such as cigarette companies, try to make optimal use of marketing tools, people who dislike the product itself attack those tools for all sorts of perceived ills (e.g., Rotfeld 1996, 1997a). Although the ethics and exploitation discussions themselves might sound racist and sexist, referring to "vulnerable populations" of women and black people as if these thinking adults possessed the cognitive control of children, the sellers of guns, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and legal gambling all are criticized for their market segmentation strategies in product design and advertising (Davidson 1996).

Turow's concerns are broader and more far-reaching than that. His basic premise is that audience segmentation, and especially the pinpoint targeting that is theoretically possible with new media technology, reinforces suspicion, alienation, and lack of empathy among people of different groups because they have lost the shared consumer experience that the old mass media audience system provided. Although he does not assert that the "discipline of segmentation is antithetical to a free, open and democratic society" (as Barash 1997 does), he implicitly condemns cable television and the Internet as the most devastating forces to people's ability to communicate with one another.

In the early days of radio, movie theaters would stop the show and play the latest episode of "Amos 'n Andy," lest customers stay away to listen at home. In the early days of television, it was Milton Berle or "I Love Lucy" that everyone watched; two decades later, almost anyone on the street had the shared experience of watching "M*A*S*H," "Dallas," or "The Brady Bunch." Even the advertising on these shows would be subjects of conversation, including for people not interested in buying the products. Today, with increasing demassification of the media and marketing efforts to target refined audiences, the ability of a narrow group to share a specific consumer experience is becoming the only thing linking anyone together, or so Turow's theory goes.

The problem is that accepting his cultural analysis and resulting view requires overlooking so much of the modern reality, as well as ignoring a bit of the past. As Turow voices concerns "that the U.S. is experiencing a major shift in balance between society-making media and segment-making media" to our social detriment (p. 3), he overlooks the historic nature of the advertising-supported media system that always served primarily groups of people that marketing professionals wanted to reach. Although writers of recent years have presented the "new" views of advertising as part of the cultural reality, Turow *expects* marketing to provide the nation's shared culture. And his focus on computers and cable television must ignore that a new generation now can share the cultural products of a generation ago and ignores the mass media cultural icons that still exist and thrive, though maybe not in a way that appeals to him.

Anyone who teaches a wide range of different undergraduate students finds the shared experiences that still exist. Traveling around the country to different schools, or even around the world, it is easy to find popular television shows for which many people recount the same experiences. If a student in class wishes to discuss a new commercial seen the night before, it requires little explanation, because most of the class has seen it, too. And the faculty member could readily recount the same commercial or show when traveling across the country to talk to a different student group or even to a room of business executives. Young people go to school or meet people on the street and talk of interesting Web sites or popular games.

As it says in the Talmud, "We see not things as they are. We see them as we are." When Turow mentions Beavis and Butt-Head many times as examples of narrow targeting, despite their national fame and familiarity—they are listed five times in the index, whereas *Advertising Age* publisher Rance Crain is listed just once—he is probably noting his own disconnection from so much of the media, not necessarily that of audiences. It is akin to when syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell wrote that the diaper-changing stations in men's public restrooms were "wasted space" because *he* never saw anyone use one. Similarly, a city council critic of his community's cable system suggested that it make space for WGN by removing Lifetime because *he* did not know anyone that watched Lifetime, not realizing that the network is oriented toward women.

This is not to deny that media are becoming demassified, or that these new media provide great potentials for tailoring messages to specific market segments. Yet this same trend also presents pragmatic problems, because media buyers need to place messages in more vehicles to communicate with the target. The problem often becomes how to come up with a common strategic message that transcends narrow concerns of single audiences, cultures, or even nations. And as the audience for each vehicle becomes smaller and narrower, the data on that audience become less precise, despite what some critics like to believe.

Starting with special hearings in 1995, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) addressed special regulatory issues tied to these new media systems. At these hearings, a basic issue was that cable television and the Internet would enable advertisers to more readily deceive and defraud the most vulnerable consumers with more precise segmentation of these target audiences. In theory, an audience member would have tailor-made deceptive messages sent directly to his or her computer screen; deceptive television advertisements would be sent through the cable networks whose audiences would most readily fall for the deceptive appeal (Rotfeld 1997b).

Without doubt, new technologies allow for greater refinement of target audiences, and this, in theory, could allow for more precisely targeted deceptive practices. And with the Internet, various vulnerable individuals can be targeted specifically for deceptive messages they are prone to be-

lieve. Yet targeting information is not yet that precise, nor are audience data that refined, and the economics of audience research limits the precision of data that could become available in the future. Better data cost more, and no one yet seems willing to pay for it, with the majority of cable networks not having audiences large enough to be reported by the syndicated services. Broad demographic data are still the norm that define media audiences, and that information only provides minimal insight into how people might think.

Turow spends most of the book describing media demassification trends and uses of the new technologies, as if their existence alone should prove the cultural problem. Although applied to more direct potentials for marketing abuse than this book's cultural concerns, much of it was heard before at FTC hearings and related writings of potential public policy problems. Chapter 6, on direct mail and related database marketing, reads similar to critical analysis of privacy issues found so often in consumer protection publications, though the concern herein is how such refined segmentation is bad per se. He freely reviews and quotes from *Advertising Age* and the trade press as surrogate indicators of global business' social attitudes and concerns, but this requires ignoring the plethora of studies that find that journalists' views are not necessarily valid indicators of how their audiences think.

And in some ways, he is contradictory while ignoring other writers who have addressed the same areas. Turow laments the separation of media that causes people to be apart and distrust one another, but Baker (1994) found news media to be more diverse in general content a century ago, blaming advertising support as a cause of less variety in the media system, not more. Turow's concern for the failings of a media system that depends on advertising for most revenue is not new. Three decades ago, in an essay in *Ramparts*, iconoclastic adman Howard Luck Gossage presented sarcastic critiques of media having advertisers, not readers, as the revenue-generating component of its audience (reprinted in Gossage 1986).

Turow notes that segmentation is an old idea and gives a bit of the history, but it seems misunderstood. He is criticizing media standards for acceptable advertising, a practice he found as far back as the 1930s, when magazines wanted advertisers to "fit" the publication's style, though such practices are more commonly perceived as positive forces for consumer protection (Rotfeld 1992; Zanot 1985). Actually, though Turow notes such screens as part of the cultural blockage, they are more commonly viewed as blocks to diverse opinions in the media (Hentoff 1975) or just extensions of the media managers' desires to present a quality publication for the audience (Gossage 1986; Rotfeld 1992). He laments the precise targeting of the new media but seems to ignore the long existence of the tailor-made targeting of controlled-circulation magazines and mailing lists. Many families might not watch a common television today, yet even with a single set in the home, different family members watched their own programs at different times.

The unremarkable and well-known fact is that U.S. media are becoming demassified with new influxes and changes, just like the greater society. And many minorities increasingly are recognized as valuable markets that buy for their own personal and diverse subcultural reasons. As they have throughout history, immigrant groups change the face of the country. New generations have their own common icons that the elders see but seldom understand. Most of this book lists and describes how media practice and practitioners are dealing with the new options available, with periodic laments on the loss this diversity means for the shared culture.

Turow expects marketing as an institutional force to give a nation a single, shared culture, and to a point, it does that. But for the most part, it is incapable of doing so and never could. As my former officemate in graduate school seemed to say at least once a week, that is why there are so many flavors of Jell-O.

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