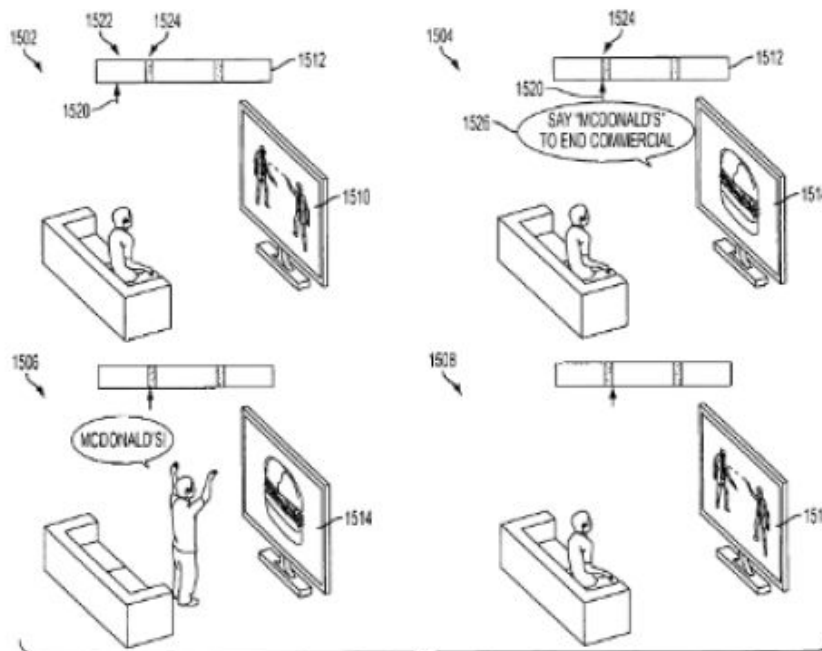


## The Future & Advertising

The bar of what it takes to be a “star” drops lower and lower with the increased interactivity of the digital age. Time was, you had to be the ruler of a country to be worth lobbying - whole mercantile dynasties have been founded on a monarch’s careless favour, while others have died with one’s displeasure. Later you had to be a film star, paid millions and seen on televisions all over the world, to qualify to be approached by ad companies. Now? Even comparatively normal people with some slight “influencer” status are being leveraged to subtly advertise products by featuring them in the background of their Instagram pictures or similar.

It is clear that over time humans have become more and more tolerant of what would be considered intolerable intrusions in any earlier epoch of history. With the increase in blanket online surveillance, advertisers now see almost all you write and say online. And once the last few methods of avoiding this digital molestation are closed up, they can (and will) begin leveraging this surveillance in more and more obvious ways. A common sight in low-budget online games of the early 2010s were popup messages that said things like "Share this game on Facebook and receive a free item!" These simple messages were nonetheless effective at turning average people into willing product promoters, and using all carrot and no stick. But it was crude, and there’s no doubt things will go further. Sony patent 8246454-B2, filed in 2009, gives us a glimpse of the future. The description explains that the patent describes “methods, systems, and computer programs for converting television commercials into interactive network video games.” An example of such “interactive” commercials is illustrated by the figure reproduced below.



Here, the microphone of a Smart TV or videogame console is used to detect sound, and McDonalds requires the repetition of the company name before a commercial can be exited - mandating proactive engagement with the advertisement rather than just passive absorption.

And it's inevitable that this will spread beyond personal abasement in the privacy of your own home. When you order food online you'll see a popup saying "Mention Coca-cola positively in a tweet and get 10% off your next Coke!". Neural networks will scan your tweet, check the context isn't negative or neutral, and reward you accordingly. Still all carrot and no stick, of course.

Eventually companies will be able to track what we say in-person as well, either through always-on phone microphones, invasive personal assistants, or cliché police-sponsored Big-Brother style compulsory bodycams for public safety. Now companies will partner with government to ask you to shill in public for bonuses. "Tell a friend about the new Mountain Dew Electric flavour today and receive a shocking 2% off your next electricity bill!"

The 'bonuses' will start becoming direct fiat cash bribes - 0.5p for every corporate slogan you say during your day, 1p for every jingle you whistle in public with a bonus based on how many people are nearby, £2 if you wear a shirt with their logo on it on your next date. Et cetera. Everyone else will be doing it too of course, so nobody will mind you spouting these advertisements at them mid-conversation. After all, your friends will probably reply with a slogan from their own chosen corporate teat in return!

I expect eventually it will be so normalised and accepted people will put aside a certain time of day to get together with all their friends, sit in a big group, and get all their corporate shilling for the day done in one big go. They'll all assemble and one by one spit out as many catchphrases and jingles as they can, as quickly as possible. Everyone will get their money, and they'll move on with their day. It's only efficient, after all.

But the advertisers will keep adjusting the rewards and tweaking the algorithms to make you work harder and harder for your money. Eventually it will become a fulltime job for people, who will make their entire living just by becoming these walking billboards. Your daily morning session won't be enough to pay the bills anymore. You'll have to spend more and more time at the group shilling session, hour after hour, until eventually you have no free time left, and neither does anyone else.

Every waking moment you are in contact with another human being you will both be stumbling over yourself as you compete to blurt out as many promotional announcements as possible, with specialist software watching carefully to make sure you have the requisite levels of enthusiasm and sincerity in your voices.

The only respite your ragged vocal cords will get will be when you are alone, and you will be so exhausted from a hard day's bleating you'll be keen to give your voice as much of a rest as you can. You will simply stop speaking your own words altogether. When you are with people you will be advertising, and when you are alone you will be resting in silence.

And as this goes on, actual language will become obsolete. You, and the rest of the planet, will simply forget how to speak normally. You will have spent so long uttering these empty company catchphrases, you will literally forget what they mean. They call it "semantic satiation", and you've probably experienced it yourself. You repeat a word for long enough, and it stops sounding like a word at all. Now imagine that, but with all of human language. There'll be no more interior monologuing, and all that will rattle around inside your head will be abstract conceptions and the occasional stray slogan bouncing through your mind.

In the same way cavemen would grunt and groan at each other, people in the far future will communicate solely through these commercial catchphrases devoid of all meaning save the low-fidelity slight variation of tone that the sincerity detectors will allow. Even the company ad-men will be doing it, and its likely they themselves will no longer be able to create new jingles now their language skills have so far deteriorated. They'll just string random snippets of gibberish from existing catchphrases together to form "new" advertisements, until eventually the entire purpose of the system has been forgotten.

The system, like all systems strive to, will endeavour to become perfectly balanced and as self-sufficient as it is possible to be. Devolved animal-like humans will echo the garbled slogans of long-defunct companies to each other while scrabbling around in the ruins of civilisation and automated systems will deposit money into their bank accounts, which will automatically be used to pay the automatically-generated utility bills which will fulfill their needs. The electricity bill will keep people warm. The food bill will keep people fed. And so on, for ever and ever.