Looking Back at the Future of the New Economy

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Abstract

This paper examines the New Economy phenomenon as a culturally embedded discourse through an analysis of 133 print advertisements collected from the UK edition of the Financial Times between February and December 2000. It maps the various interpretative struggles as companies tried to align themselves with a rapidly changing business environment during this period. We conceive of New Economy advertising as having a dual role, both in the representation and proliferation of the ‘New Economy’, as well as in the constitution and production of this phenomenon. The meaning established by the various advertisements will be shown to be one of participation rather than explanation. The vocation of the signifier ‘New Economy’ lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb and organize a multitude of pre-existing distinct anxieties and pre-occupations. For example, unspecified narratives of opportunity and threat, and risk and security are incorporated as meaningful in and by themselves. As such the ‘New Economy’ must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function rather than any particular content attributable to it.

Keywords: new economy, e-commerce, capitalism, ideology, advertising
LOOKING BACK AT THE FUTURE OF THE NEW ECONOMY

INTRODUCTION

“There is nothing you can do to convey an atmosphere, a Zeitgeist. You can offer incidents to illustrate that lost time (which may be a very short time ago indeed), but more often than not they seem bizarre and the people involved lunatic.” (Lessing, 1982, p.172)

There is a certain irony in treating the phenomenon of the ‘New Economy’ as an historical event, given its chronological closeness and continuing reverberations. For a brief period covering the late 1990s and the first half of 2000, it was apparent that the business world was characterized by an almost unbounded sense of optimism and opportunity. The utopian aspirations of that period, with visions of hope and progress, made the ‘New Economy’ into a most peculiar Fin de Siècle phenomenon (Meteo, 1991). A new era of generosity was foretold where productivity would no longer be a chief concern, where success and growth would become exponential, and industrial lessons would be turned up side down (Frank, 2001; Hoffman and Novak, 1997). Assessments of the technical and economic prospects of Internet-driven commerce blurred with predictions of radical behavioral and attitudinal changes. This (near) future would be very different from the present. The social ‘development’ from industrial to information society was frequently compared to the transition from an agricultural to an industrial era, where consumers would be more demanding, highly individualistic, and would have unlimited access to information (Sheth and Sisodia, 1997). Traditional boundaries between firm, state, and commercial environment were also seen to be in a state of revision (Glazer, 1991; Miller, 1996), with analogies frequently drawn between the social transformations caused by e-commerce and those caused by railroads, the telegraph, and electric power (Rayport and Jaworski, 2001).

The exuberance characterizing the New Economy phenomenon found its ultimate signifier in the seemingly unstoppable rise of the Nasdaq composite index of technology stocks. In the five months to March 2000 it rose an astonishing 88% to reach a peak value of 5048. The subsequent slump in the value of the Nasdaq became
an equally powerful signifier that triggered the banishment of the term ‘New Economy’ to the pages of history according to some commentators (Frank, 2001; Porter, 2001). By March 2001 the index had lost 60% of its peak value, a level from which it would retreat even further over the next two years. (Early in 2003, the index was hovering between 1300 and 1400.) Industry analysts and commentators have attributed the crash to a multitude of factors such as the lack of sustainable business models, insufficient investment in technology architecture by e-commerce businesses, poor timing and planning, amateur investing, cash-flow problems, and an over-reliance on disintermediation (Internet News, 2001; Norris, 2001). Whatever explanations are given, it is clear that the New Economy phenomenon was first and foremost a cultural phenomenon that culminated in a range of utopian aspirations, mythologies, and representations which were collectively opted into and maintained by a large number of organizations and individuals (Brown, 1997).

ADVERTISING AND THE NEW ECONOMY

“Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes itself as a consumer society, as idea. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea.” (Baudrillard, 1970/1998, p. 193)

The ‘New Economy’ can be conceived as a kind of fantasy screen where a multiplicity of meanings appeared. Our analysis of New Economy marketing communications will illustrate the central role that advertisers played in the definition and representation of this corporate fantasy. New Economy print advertising was a major discourse through which the phenomenon was defined for, and communicated to, the public. Hopes and opportunities for the New Economy were initiated and lived out as much on the pages of the business press as they were in stock exchanges, boardrooms, and networks of information. In this regard New Economy advertising can be understood as a series of interrelated narratives (Escalas, 1998) that provided members of the business community with a meaningful and understandable frame of reference through which to conceptualize the commercial and social opportunities of various technological developments. The importance of New Economy advertisements in “framing and producing the objects and events they describe as they invite us to attend to, anticipate, or make ‘this’ happen while simultaneously neglecting or ignoring ‘that’ (Knights et al., 2002, p. 99)”, was heightened by the lack
of alternative substantial referents or cues. Indeed, the ‘New Economy’ could not easily be located in particular products and/or institutions.

Much has been written about the role that advertising can be said to play not only in the reproduction, representation and mass proliferation of cultural images, dominant cultural norms, and ideologies, but also in the constitution and production of culture itself. From a sociological perspective, advertising can be seen to provide many of the core social referents, signs, and meanings used in everyday social practice (Liess, Kline and Jhally, 1986; McCracken, 1987; Davidson, 1992). Whilst advertisers overtly draw on and incorporate mythic structures during the creative process (Johar, Holbrook and Stern, 2001), readers actively read and manipulate advertising images for their own mythic ends and purposes (Ahuvia, 1998; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). Reading advertising is neither passive nor interpretatively deterministic because advertising texts are polysemic, i.e. sites of potential differential meanings (Moores, 1992; Elliott and Ritson, 1997). Different audiences may read advertising in multiple ways, and there is always a contrast between the intended message and the actualized message (Mick and Buhl, 1992; O’Donohoe and Tynan, 1997). McQuarrie and Mick (1992) suggest that not only are readers aware of the persuasive and suggestive motives of the advertisements they read and enjoy, they are also highly competent at dissecting and analyzing advertising messages and imagery. Yet, as Adorno reminded us back in the 1950s at the conclusion of the section on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (Adorno, 2001, p. 12). These arguments undermine the view that investors, clients and organisations who became fixed in their belief about the potential of New Economy were in any way deceived by the messages and narratives espoused in the pages of the business press. Whatever the specific intentions and objectives of the advertisers involved, and many examples of New Economy advertising are presented in our analysis, the mythologies designed into this communication provided a general space that made the New Economy narratives believable.

Advertisers, like all creators of cultural ‘texts’, produce advertisements with the intention of communicating some form of meaning. At the individual or firm level, the objectives and intentions of the clients who commissioned New Economy
advertising can be understood as being largely consistent with the objectives and intentions of most other advertisers. Firms who use marketing communications seek to develop awareness for their products and services, build brand recognition, and determine some basis for competitive advantage and differentiation. Organizations eager to be part of the New Economy may have been more ambiguous in terms of defining and specifying the target audiences of their advertising efforts than traditional mass consumer advertisers, but this only reflects the ambiguous and multifaceted nature of the business environment during this period. These organizations (including ‘old’ economy financial service providers, software developers, Internet access providers, computer hardware manufacturers, consultants, governments, media groups, and internet retailers) had to raise their profile with potential investors, potential collaborative partners, and other constituents in the supply chain as well as customers and users. The data presented below offers an insight into some of these attempts by organizations to engage in the interpretative struggles over the nature, capacities, and likely effects of the New Economy (cf. Knights et al., 2002). And by trying to demonstrate a purpose and a realizable program for e-commerce in an otherwise ambiguous and uncertain environment, these advertisers further contributed to the propagation and reification of the ‘New Economy’ myth itself.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
Our data consists of print advertisements from the Financial Times (FT) newspaper (UK edition) collected between February and December 2000. The FT is the UK’s leading daily finance and business periodical. From January to June 2000, it had an average UK circulation of 450,000 copies (Guardian, 2001). The FT also has an international circulation of around 300,000 copies (Quinn, 2001). Each issue of the FT was examined, and any advertisement that contained either explicit or implicit reference to the Internet, the New Economy, or e-commerce was copied. Duplicate or repeat advertisements were removed from the sample used in the analysis. A total of 133 print advertisements make up the total dataset.

Cook (1992) identifies several contextual elements of advertising texts, some of which need to be acknowledged in this content analysis of New Economy print advertising. The advertisements can also be assumed to share a broadly homogenous
situational context. The FT is targeted at certain readership segments, and the New Economy advertising discourse is thus engaged (‘read’) in particular types of settings and in certain ways. There is also a considerable degree of intertextuality in that the advertisements did not appear in isolation but as part of the larger text of the Financial Times or in some cases in special pull-out sections and reviews. The production and publication of advertisements is not a general discourse but one with restricted and specific modes of application (Lunt and Disney, 2001). One of the most salient contexts was the decision by the Financial Times to invest $165 million to partially re-brand itself as FT.com, the ‘dotcom newspaper’ (Reed and Lowry, 2001).

Our approach to the coding of the data was adapted from Strauss’ (1987) writings on grounded theory and undertaken in a number of progressive stages. A formal content analysis was initially performed to establish some provisional codes by documenting the frequency of key words and terms, the type and number of organizations placing New Economy advertisements, and the types of products and services being promoted. This was followed by the identification of associative or selective codes that specify how different provisional codes relate to and contrast with each other through a series of panel discussions. The objective of each coding session was to facilitate the in-depth interpretation of the sample of advertisements, to agree on the main images and ideas used, and to identify narratives in the advertisements that were particularly evocative and prophetic in character.

FINDINGS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS
The 133 advertisements tended to rely heavily on visual imagery, albeit vague. Basic descriptive analysis shows that the sample had a mean average of 172 words per advertisement (including headlines, body text and organization names), with 35 advertisements having less than 80 words of text. 75 separate organizations are represented in the sample. IBM was the most frequent New Economy advertiser in the FT during the period with 6 separate advertisements, followed by Sun Microsystems (5 advertisements), and Getronics, Intel, MSDW and Nortel and PwC (4 advertisements each). A classification of the types of products and services offered in the advertisements is only partially possible due to the fact that some of the terminology used to describe the service or product offering remains vague. For example, an advertisement by Nettec claims to provide “e-business solutions” without
specifying the nature of the problems its products are designed to solve, a description of the solution offered, or the means by which the solution is achieved. A number of advertisements use similar terminology to semiotically construct an offering with little or no explicit referent, such as “e-business Infrastructure Solutions”, “e-business implementation solutions and e-business acceleration”, and “New ways of conducting on-line business.” In a small number of advertisements it was not possible to determine the type of product or service offered. Unlike the majority of print advertising, New Economy advertising makes extensive use of what McQuarrie (1989) refers to as ‘resonant rhetorical devices’. Many of the images and text used in the advertisements are constructed through a designed contradiction between explicit and vague meanings. Resonance attracts and holds the reader by the creation of structured ambiguity and incongruity (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992), in which unspecified problems that are likely to have disastrous business consequences are identified and undefined solutions offered to resolve them.

Of those advertisements where it was possible to identify a specific product or service offering, the majority were concerned with specific information technology facilities such as software and hardware products, server provision, and support. Approximately 10% of the advertisements focused on mobile and wireless applications and products. Consulting firms offering business support services (“solutions”) accounted for another sizeable segment of the sample, together with advertisements offering financial, investment and banking services, although these latter aspects may have been emphasized because of the editorial content and intended readership of the FT.

This initial descriptive overview locates the referents of the New Economy clearly in a specific set of technological opportunities that emerged as the result of enhanced information storage and transfer opportunities and Internet interfaces. Like other ‘revolutionary’ and prophetic business movements, the main organizational interest underpinning many of the mythological narratives of the New Economy is attributable to efforts of the management consultancy industry to re-invent and modernize the rhetoric of strategic innovation based around the re-presentation of a discourse of specialized business knowledge. In this respect, clear parallels can be drawn between the popular discourses of the New Economy and earlier management consultancy
discourses such as Total Quality Management and Business Process Re-engineering (De Cock, 1998).

Content analysis of individual terms and phrases used in the advertisements provides further insights into general frames of reference and priorities within New Economy Advertising. One of the most prevalent discursive devices running throughout the sample of advertisements is the generic use of the prefix ‘e-’. There are a total of 230 terms in this category, including 92 references to ‘e-business’ or ‘ebusiness’, 32 references to ‘e-commerce’ and 12 references to ‘e-marketplaces’. In addition to these common terms, many of the advertisements apply the signification pre-fix ‘e-’ to a set of business related terms common in business discourses more generally, such as ‘e-services’, ‘e-tax’, ‘e-procurement’, ‘e-customer’, ‘e-cash’, ‘e-profit’, ‘e-intelligence’, ‘e-strategist’, and ‘e-infrastructure’. Although this prefix does, or did, have specific signification to the term ‘electronic’, it subsequently evolved into a second order generic referent for the New Economy more universally. As a second order signifier with only loose referentiality, the ‘e-’ prefix can be added to almost any activity or institution without apparent ambiguity or contradiction, thus creating a range of what Woolgar called ‘epithetized’ phenomena: “While it is often unclear from these labels exactly how the application of the epithet actually modifies the activity/institution in question, a claim to novelty is usually central... The implication is that something new, different, and (usually) better is happening (Woolgar, 2002, p.3).”

The content analysis of terms and phrases used in the advertisements also reveals that New Economy advertising is rhetorically structured around arguments concerning the emergence and resolution of risk, and the presence or absence of trust. As noted by Lunt and Disney (2001) in their analysis of financial service advertisements, the main dimensions of meaning in New Economy advertising are structured through oppositions, for example between opportunity and threat, domination and submission, and greed and fear. The rhetoric of warfare and conflict is also frequently employed in the sample of New Economy advertisements, through the use of terms such as ‘brutality’, ‘battle’, ‘courage’, ‘defeating’, ‘ferocity’, ‘overkill’, ‘ruthlessness’, and ‘vengeance’.
The rhetorical style of some of the text used in the advertisements has a hyperbolic character, with New Economy opportunities being described as incredible, explosive, otherworldly, unparalleled, unbelievable, and fundamental. The negative implications of not adapting to forecasted developments in the New Economy share this quality, (‘monstrous’, ‘nightmare’, and ‘tyranny’). The use of such rhetorical devices is further evidence of the second order character of New Economy discourse. The lack of formal referents or explicit meaning in terminology is to a certain extent concealed by the powerful associations generated through the application of exaggerated and extreme terms and claims. In the absence of specific or identifiable issues that could be understood as constituting potential opportunities and threats, the generic discourse of opportunity and threat, and risk and security is incorporated as meaningful in and by itself. To illustrate some aspects of the basic content analysis further, findings from the detailed discourse analysis will now be presented supported by descriptions of specific advertisements from the sample.

KEY THEMES IN NEW ECONOMY ADVERTISING

The period over which the advertisements were collected (February - December 2000) coincides with momentous change in the outward appearance of the New Economy. Viewed against this background, advertising in a traditional business newspaper like the Financial Times appears both as a seismic instrument that illustrates the shifts and changes in the New Economy, as well as contributing to the phenomenon being reflected.

Organizations and companies primarily associated with the New Economy, such as Amazon and Yahoo! are notable absences from this sample of 133 print advertisements. The advertisements under consideration here originate from the more traditional ‘old economy’ business sectors, such as investment banks, management consultancies, or computer software and hardware manufacturers. Despite the overriding emphasis on unbounded opportunity, an unknowable future of growth and change, and representations of paradigmatic shifts in business practice within New Economy discourse, these organizations, at least in terms of their advertising, can be seen to be conforming to a reasonably coherent and consistent set of images and narratives. The advertisements appear to have a dual function for the organizations placing them: to publicly announce a transition into the New Economy to investors,
clients, and customers, and to construct a corresponding corporate identity located within the New Economy for employees and executives working for the organization concerned. The advertisements represent an attempt by senior strategists within their organizations to reassure themselves of the necessity and benefits of otherwise ill-defined and uncertain ventures into the New Economy, as well as raising awareness among potential users.

The advertising of the period under discussion shows different degrees of seismic sensitivity to the then current developments in the New Economy. Organizations sought to juxtapose conflicting sentiments involving the need to demonstrate security, reassurance and stability in light of the New Economy crash on the one hand, with the vision, optimism and innovation that had become the hallmark of legitimate New Economy business reputations on the other. Organizations that had redefined themselves in their advertising as New Economy organizations by pronouncing the arrival of new business realities and the end of ‘old’ ways of operating markets were not in a position to reject these claims when fears of the crash eventually materialized in the spring of 2000. Claiming that everything is or would soon change only to subsequently admit that such claims were overstated had the potential to seriously undermine the credibility of both well-established and new e-commerce brands. Some organizations reacted to the crash of technology indices (the Nasdaq composite index in particular) by simply continuing to re-emphasize previously established archetypal e-commerce myths. For example, an advertisement by e-start.com that appeared in the FT in June 2000 reinforces opportunities for new e-commerce start-ups despite the fact that start-ups made up most of the casualties in the crash that had commenced two months previously. The only advertisement for e-start.com in the sample states:

“WE kick-start your start-up. YOU stay in control… e-start has changed the rules for start ups. If you’ve got what it takes, we’ll provide you with all the right connections and expert advice you need to succeed, while leaving you in control.” (e-start.com, June 2000)

The exact nature of the consultancy and business services offered by e-start.com remain unclear, or rather implied. Vagueness about what constitutes the signifier of ‘expert advice’, or indeed what one needs in order to ‘have what it takes’ to capitalize
on the services provided by e-start.com is given without any coherent signifieds. The
advertisement resorts to an endorsement discourse to compensate for these
uncertainties by presenting logos of 13 established companies in the footer of the ad
(such as Nokia Ventures) stating: “Our Launch Network is made up of over 50 service
providers, thousands of entrepreneurs and Europe’s top tier venture capitalists.”

The underlying sentiments of the advertisement reinforce several beliefs, (1) that the
reason why many start-ups failed in the past was a loss of control by those running
them, (2) that entrepreneurs considering an e-commerce start-up need to enlist
external business support services in order to launch with sufficient force and
strength, and (3) that the question of which New Economy consultancy service to
choose for one’s start-up involves considerable risk (i.e. there is considerable
variation in the type of support that can be purchased).

Disregard for general feelings of skepticism about the actual potential of the New
Economy following the crash of the technology indices is further evidenced in an
advertisement by Meta 4 that also appeared in June 2000. In parallel to e-start.com,
Meta 4 remains vague about the services or products being offered as well as the
specific remit of the organization’s activities:

“Do you know any better combination than People, Knowledge and Web
Technology…
…By integrating Knowledge management people with the internet, Meta4 is
actively participating in the transformation of the business world. Meta4.
People, Knowledge and Web Technology.” (Meta 4, June 2000).

The advertisement does not incorporate any sense of caution but rather draws upon a
discourse of transformation, inevitable change, and the potentials of a brave new
business world, all of which form dominant and common archetypes of New
Economy representations. In the absence of any fixed product or service offering,
“transformation of the business world” forms the necessary constituent for the
company’s purpose of existence.

Many advertisers continued to draw on conventional New Economy axioms of
unbounded opportunity, the need for new business practices, and ever greater speed.
However, some of the advertisements in the sample – typically those placed by established investment banks, management consultancies and IT manufacturers – actively react to and incorporate the impact of the downturn to re-construct their own identity for the post-crash New Economy. An advertisement by Deloitte Consulting, for example, constructs an explicit opposition between consultancy firms that have “grabbed the headlines” only to suffer rapid declines in stock value, and firms which have ‘quietly and steadily’ built sustainable and secure e-business ventures:

“Recent business headlines have highlighted the precipitous decline in the share price of Internet consulting firm stocks. Deloitte Consulting, on the other hand, has become the world’s forth largest consulting firm by building a foundation based on strength, stability and innovation. While others have grabbed the headlines by taking a ride into the dot.com world, we have been quietly and steadily building a powerhouse e-Business consulting practice.”

(Deloitte Consulting, September 2000)

In this advertisement, New Economy hype is constructed as a transitory ‘other’ that has been consigned to the past. The fact that the ‘New’ Economy of the late 1990s can legitimately be reconstructed as a kind of ‘Old’ New Economy in contrast to a newer, more realistic ‘New New Economy’ demonstrates the flexible and floating character of New Economy discourse in general whilst operating as a means to sustain the specific credibility of established corporate brands such as Deloitte. Juxtaposition of traditional conservative business values and innovative entrepreneurial values in New Economy discourse is neither contradictory nor problematic:

“If you are tired of watching the value of your stock options rise and fall like a roller coaster, then think about joining an innovative firm with a rock solid foundation. Think about Deloitte Consulting – we’re in it for the long haul.”

(Deloitte, September 2000)

An advertisement for (what was at the time) Arthur Andersen further illustrates how established ‘Old Economy’ brands sustained credibility and market differentiation in the months following the crash by incorporating signifiers that combined stability with innovation, or ‘Old’ and ‘New’. The advertisement reads:
“Hey, who cares if this advertisement doesn’t pay for itself?

Chill, man. In the new economy, you can ditch orthodox value systems. Like cost. Like effectiveness. Like hell. Ways of creating, measuring and realizing value are changing. But they’re a mix of old and new. Interested in cracking the value code?” (Arthur Andersen, November 2000)

The history of the New Economy involves a continual re-structuring and re-use of discourses of the future and the past, new and old, and innovation and stability. During the initial stages of the New Economy, the predominant narrative constructed the ‘New’ in positive opposition against the ‘Old’. Advertising imagery emphasized an opportunistic future of innovation defined against a constructed past business reality that was stable, slow and non-reactive. In this context, the main risks and fears are described in terms of being excluded from the opportunity to be part of the New Economy. As the phenomenon evolved and markets re-adjusted, faith in New Economy optimism waned and was replaced by a different discourse of risk based on uncertainty and mistrust. By December 2000 the various stages of the New Economy were being openly discussed in some advertisements. For example, an advertisement by Robertson Stephens (see below) describes New Economy conditions ‘pre e-crash’ and ‘post e-crash’. Consultancy firms reacted, and in part contributed to both manifestations of this discourse. In the first instance they offered themselves as pioneers who would take businesses away from the old and into the new, and in the second instance, as a bridge between the lessons and wisdom of the past and the realistic developments of business futures. The most explicit example of this post New Economy discourse is evident in an advertisement by SAP (August 2000). The image for the ad depicts an adult holding a briefcase and walking hand in hand with a child through an arcade of classical marble pillars:

“Announcing solutions for the new, new economy. (You know the profitable one.) The promise of e-business is every bit as robust today as it was when the ‘new economy’ was declared. It’s just that things that were labeled passé and irrelevant when IPOs were soaring have returned with a vengeance – planning, infrastructure, even profitability are back in fashion. Welcome to the new ‘new economy’. No company is better suited for this world of value-orientated e-
business than SAP... Out with the ‘new’. In with the ‘new new.” (SAP, August 2000)

Advertisements from (what was at the time) Andersen Consulting adapt this discourse through a notion of the ‘superficial’ versus ‘depth’, where superficiality is associated with the first period of the New Economy and depth with the latter period. The advertisement uses the imagery of a paint-spray canister spraying a mist of tiny ‘e’ characters. A series of instructions are given beneath the picture of the canister:

“In the new economy some opportunities may just be paint jobs

**Uses:** Instantly gives traditional organizations the glossy sheen of electronic commerce. Temporarily conceals critical business model flaws.

**Directions:** Using quick strokes, apply a thin a layer to surface of organization. Repeat application as needed.

**Warning:** may not withstand sustained use or brutal competition. Looking for a longer lasting approach to eCommerce?” (Andersen Consulting, July 2000)

The ad narrative develops a statement of harsh realities in answer to this question, alluding to a sense of brutal competition and hard battles ahead, that will (or has) replaced the euphoria and naïveté of an earlier New Economy period:

“In a rush to join the eCommerce revolution, many organizations have opted for and easy-to-apply approach. But without a business model to back it up, even the coolest website can’t take you very far. And off-the-shelf, plug-and-play software won’t help you with withstand the relentless, brutal competition of the emerging electronic economy.” (Andersen Consulting, July 2000)

Several advertisers represent the New Economy in terms of impending threat and in some cases frame imagery with explicitly drastic disaster scenarios. For example, an advertisement from Interworld (May 2000) draws upon a ‘Titanic-esque’ narrative of a ship hitting an unseen Iceberg. The full page ad shows a single empty life belt floating in an ocean with the headline: “Iceberg? What Iceberg”. The nature
of the implied threat is twofold. In the first instance, it refers to the impending and partially hidden threat for established businesses of not embracing the New Economy before it is ‘too late’, and in the second instance, to the fact that few businesses will survive the turmoil of the current New Economy environment unless they enlist the necessary consulting and investment expertise.

An advertisement for the investment bank Robertson Stephens (December 2000) incorporates an explicitly combative narrative in which the reader is offered a simple choice between ‘domination’ and ‘annihilation’. One side of the ad contains a black and white head-and-shoulders image of a serious looking business professional (Chairman of the board). The other half of the ad features a comparatively lengthy self-confessional account which begins:

“Philippe Guglielmetti, Chairman of the Board of Integra, leans forward and lights another cigarette. The question on the table is purely hypothetical: how to avoid the dilemma of the post “e-crash” era, where a mis-step can lead to annihilation but success leaves you prey to takeover.” (Robertson Stephens, December 2000)

This ‘harsh realities of life’ narrative develops with an almost detective fiction genre convention (“…everyone knows that Guglielmetti, with his soft smile and his large, liquid eyes, is dead serious.”), concluding that the only way to dominate is through a strong business-investor partnership.

Narratives of ‘disaster avoidance’ reveal another underlying opposition in New Economy advertising: unseen or partially specified catastrophes as opposed to unseen or partially specified defenses and reassurances. The idea of imminent disaster remains latently present in a number of the advertisements. Using a similar ‘case-study’ type format, two advertisements from Digex (June 2000) emphasize the crucial role that various New Economy intermediaries play in “keeping e-business in business”. The implication is that without Digex (or a similar organization) small manufacturing operations would simply be unable to survive in the post e-crash New Economy environment.
A considerable amount of questioning and revaluation of New Economy opportunities was evident during the period when the advertisements were collected, and this presented surviving New Economy companies with a significant challenge in terms of maintaining the confidence of investors, clients, and customers. Faced with an uncertain business landscape, some advertisers used discourses in which future growth, opportunity, and stability were emphasized. Re-focusing on expected future success rather than misgivings and skepticisms at the time represents an attempt to construct a meaningful role for these organizations and to restore some confidence among clients and customers. New Economy discourse had been heavily utopian even before the crash, but the real power of this discourse only emerged once business realities seemed to conflict with the ideological agenda of the New Economy. An advertisement by PricewaterhouseCoopers (June 2000) aimed at prospective employees and the business community as a whole depicts a smiling young man looking in the direction of a one-way street sign marked with a white arrow containing the word "tomorrow". The visionary message accompanying this image states:

“People here create e-marketplaces. People here redefine business models. What will you do here? Join us. Together we can change the world.”
(PricewaterhouseCoopers, June 2000)

The ‘future’ of the New Economy is thus offered as a choice rather than as an inevitability (“What will you do here? … Together we can change the world.”). However, closer consideration reveals an interesting subtext to this particular advertisement, exposing rather more threatening aspects, thus linking it to the ‘harsh realities of life’ narrative described above. The future in this advertisement is at the same time depicted as inevitable as it is the image of the one-way street sign that is chosen to represent “tomorrow”. There is no turning back against the one-way street. In this particular advertisement, the usually negative connotations of ‘one-way street’ (e.g. connotations of ‘inevitability’, ‘futility’, or ‘useless endeavour’) supplement the – most likely unintended – subtext.
An advertisement by Aspira (June 2000) seeks to allay feelings of present-day uncertainty by focusing attention on a prosperous and exciting yet secure future. The image used in the ad is that of a man in climbing gear scaling a metal structure:

“Visions of the future come from a place where fear is replaced by adventure. Reducing total network ownership costs, management costs and your fear of the future. It’s scary. It’s huge. It’s the future, where all media will converge in the palms of your customers’ hands. Should you worry about your existing investment in view of tomorrow’s Internet-driven world? Relax, you won’t have to. Because Motorola, and industry leaders such as Cisco Systems are building the Aspira communications architecture to seamlessly leverage your existing technology base – while allowing you to tap into the new efficiencies and wide open possibilities of IP-based broadband. So climb on up. There’s absolutely nothing to fear.” (Aspira, June 2000)

Another discursive strategy used to deal with uncertainty is to focus on ‘next generation’ products and services. The failings in the New Economy can be attributed to many factors, including claims that the technology available at the time was unable to meet the heightened expectations of users. Some advertisers appear to be trying to re-establish much needed confidence and interest by announcing newer and ever more powerful tools and applications. The following text is taken from an ad by Marconi, a company that has since faced near collapse:

“Everything hangs on this moment. That glorious and scary second your e gallery goes live. You’re expecting tens of thousands of global visitors within the first 45 minutes. You’re projecting millions of hits. Your success depends on whether the network can handle the volume. That’s why Marconi is delivering faster, more dependable optical networks. Next generation networks with the bandwidth to handle virtually unlimited traffic. With this kind of power at your fingertips, now’s the time to ask – When will your finest hour be?” (Marconi, March 2000)
A similar prediction of impending change and a portrait of a New Economy future where current ills and problems are overcome thanks to ever-greater technological capacity is evident in an advertisement from Siemens:

“Business is going mobile. No doubt about that. But to make business really successful, we need the Next Generation Internet. One that really works. One that makes your business ideas come true. E-mails disappear. Connections fail. Downloads take forever. You may see it as the Internet of today. We see it as the Internet of yesterday. Make your business mobile.” (Siemens, November 2000)

Organizations that had made a significant investment in the New Economy faced considerable communicative struggles in a changing business environment: brand values had irrevocably changed, as had investment and organization priorities. These organizations suggested that although the present business situation was bleak, the commercial opportunities offered by future communication technologies would produce positive and sustainable results in the long term. Just as advertising was a major conduit through which the early hype surrounding the New Economy was manufactured and sustained prior to the crash, we have shown that it continued to serve a similar function in the more modest discourses that subsequently developed. So we see construction (by constantly borrowing references from other significations the ads continuously construct whereof they speak) and deconstruction (through a denial of immediately preceding constructions, for example, “we have moved beyond the hype”, “we are distinct from the bubble industry”) going on simultaneously in our sample of ads, thus establishing a new/different stage or screen on which the next act of this play we would tentatively label ‘late capitalism’ could be acted out.
“Rationality does not always seem as rational as it claims to be. Hence the interest of hammering over and over again into people’s heads ideas to which they are already conditioned but in which they can never fully believe. Hence also their readiness to embrace irrational panaceas in a world in which they have lost faith in the effectiveness of their own reason and in the rationality of the total set-up (Adorno, 2002, p. 82, from an essay on the astrology column of the Los Angeles Times 1952/1953).”

In view of the limited and highly specific nature of the material scrutinized, no ‘generalisation’ in the strict sense of the word seems to be possible. However, the material suggests certain perspectives of a somewhat broader nature. In what follows we want to broaden the discussion of our sample of ads in order to find out what they indicate as symptom of some tendencies in our late capitalist society (cf. Eco, 2000). The New Economy ‘experience’ these ads introduce, confronts us with a situation in which we are compelled to take note of how our sense of socio-economic reality and normal attitude toward it is grounded in a symbolic fiction; that what counts as the horizon of meaning in our society is in no way directly grounded in “facts” as rendered by the scientific “knowledge in the real” (cf. _i_ek, 1992/2001, p. 220).

In our interpretation of the ads we conceived of the ‘New Economy’ as a kind of fantasy screen, an empty form/frame, where a multiplicity of meanings can appear. Our interpretation indicated that the meaning established by the ads is one of participation, and not one of explanation. The New Economy, with its various associated epithets (‘e’, cyber, virtual, …) has been shown to form a kind of Master-Signifier, a signifier without signified. This Master-Signifier is an empty signifier which stands for the impossible fullness of meaning, that is, its meaning is ‘imaginary’ in the sense that its content is impossible to positivize precisely. As _i_ek puts it: “a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves – nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know, that it has to mean ‘the real thing’, so they use it all the time” (_i_ek, 2000, p. 114-115). The concept ‘New Economy’ simply absorbs and (re)organizes a multitude of pre-occupations and obsessions (e.g. those of efficiency, progress, modernization), and technological possibilities and anxieties, which were already
present at the turn of the millennium by binding them to the same signifier. As such the New Economy must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function. Yet it is precisely this polysemousness which is profoundly ideological, insofar as it allows essentially socio-historical obsessions and anxieties to be ordered back into apparently (at the time) ‘natural’ attitudes (cf. Jameson, 1981/2002). Everything can be solved (even though problems remain unspecified and solutions undefined), so runs the implicit argument, and if one fails, this is merely due to a lack of understanding of some supposedly ‘new’ economic logic. This indeed achieves a kind of equilibrium and satisfaction that could not be achieved if the elements that the signifier organizes would be faced as such (Adorno, 2002).

The distinguishing feature of post-New Economy business discourse is the propagation of the common-sense (and therefore profoundly ideological) idea that we should bury idiosyncratic fantasies, return to the ‘natural state of things’, and confront economic reality as it really is. However, our purpose is almost the exact opposite from this facile postscript. Our position is that we should not mistake the historical reality of the New Economy for ‘mere’ fiction – we should be able to discern, in what we now experience as fiction (i.e. New Economy representations), the hard kernel of 21st century capitalism which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it (cf. Jameson, 1981/2002; _i_ek, 2000). The New Economy came to seem fictive only when the ‘solutions’ it offered were no longer believable. Indeed, as a means of providing solutions, fictions lose their function when the context for which they were created changes (Iser, 1993). But this does not mean that we can now do without fictions; on the contrary, a gap created by a discredited fiction will have to be filled by another fiction that seems more trustworthy (at least for a while).

Much more difficult than to denounce (what appeared as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in the ‘real’ economy. For this reason, we should stick to Lacan’s famous thesis that “truth has the structure of a fiction” (cf. Bowie, 1991, p.115; _i_ek, 2001). What the cynics miss, when they distinguish between fantasy and some ‘objective’ reality onto which it is projected, is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality. The ultimate irony is that while it is now fashionable to be critical of the ‘fantastical’ New Economy, people mainly continue to practise its underlying beliefs, that is, to rely on them as the
underlying structure of daily economic/organisational practices. So it is not just that New Economy proponents staged a semblance of the ‘real’ economy deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality; in late-capitalist, consumerist society the ‘real’ economy somehow has acquired the features of a staged fake:

“Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist, utilitarian, despiritualised universe is the dematerialisation of ‘real life’ itself, its reversal into a spectral show” (i_ek, 2001, p.105-106).
REFERENCES


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