

America Interactive—The Republic is Not Yet Safe

By Adonis Hoffman

If history is any barometer, it will not be long before a well-meaning public servant comes up with a solution to a problem that does not exist. Policymakers just might over-react to new technologies they do not quite understand. For some, the default position becomes: when in doubt, regulate. Or at least try to regulate.



In line at the DuPont Circle Krispy Kreme in Washington, I could not help but notice the young woman ahead of me who was peering intensely into her video iPod. On the screen was a podcast of last Sunday's *Meet the Press*. I asked her how she liked watching programs on such a small screen and whether it was worth the time and effort. She said her husband uploaded all of her content every morning, and sent her off to work with more programs than she could watch—all without commercials. "And, oh by the way," she said, "we don't really watch much TV at home, nor do we have cable—he gets most of this stuff online."

As a parent of two teenagers, I am rapidly becoming an interactive expert out of necessity—not unlike a jailhouse lawyer—because there is so much I need to know just to keep apace in the day-to-day world of digital convergence where music, games, voice, video, products, goods and services are all within the grasp of a handheld device. In the wrong hands—say that of a fourteen year old male—this could be disastrous either due to the cost or the content. But for a responsible adult, this new world is simply marvelous.

When I talk with advertisers seeking to master today's new world order, I encourage them to leave their value judgments at the doorstep. The ease of interactivity changes everything, not the least of which is how marketers vie for the attention of viewers, listeners and consumers. For the millions of Americans who love shopping from home via television, interactivity makes purchasing as easy as pressing a button on the remote control. For those who buy online, permission based marketing messages and RSS can cut through the usual clutter. And for wireless handheld devices, the sky is the limit.

While some experts say that better creative content is the key, I think the answer lies in the speed, personalization and medium of delivery. After all, when the ad for sales on the latest lacrosse sports gear comes over my son's cell phone, he could care less about the creative content—although there are style points given for the "cool factor". Three things make it most effective: First, the ad reached him where he was; second, it was for something he really wants and somehow opted into; and third, it caught his attention before and better than any other form of marketing.

But all is not rosy in this scenario. If history is any barometer, it will not be long before a well-meaning public servant comes up with a solution to a problem that does not exist.

My concern is that policymakers just might over-react to new technologies they do not quite understand. For some, the default position becomes: when in doubt, regulate. Or at least try to regulate.

This is not good for business, good for competition or good for end-using consumers. America, if not there already, is well on the road to complete media and marketing interactivity, and consumers appear to really like the power it gives them. Few people really understand how all the interactive technology works. Even fewer know anything about the complex interstitial relationships between suppliers, delivery systems and media platforms. What's more, they don't care.

What people care about is ease. Make it easy for them to do what they want to do with the medium that is in their hand, on their desk or in their family room, and they will be very, very happy. If marketers can help policymakers understand this simple, but powerful maxim, the republic will be safe for the pursuit of commerce, innovation and information.

If marketers do not succeed in making the case, we could see 20th century regulation imposed on new millennium technologies. Not a comforting thought.

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