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Chris Miles
Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

Abstract. Taking as its starting point Barbara B. Stern’s (1994) ‘A Revised Communication Model for Advertising’, the article argues for the application of first-order and second-order cybernetic principles to the construction of a more multi-dimensional and realistic model that is able to address well-documented tensions and problems in the advertising system and provide a fresh perspective on issues connected with interactive advertising and the creative component in advertising communication. The article culminates in a radical second-order cybernetic model of advertising communication that is founded upon the relationship between various observing frames and the stabilized eigenforms (constructions of the self and others produced by an observer) that are generated in the communication process. Key Words ● advertising ● communication ● cybernetics ● feedback ● interactivity ● theory

The need for a new communication model for advertising

Stern’s (1994) proposal of a ‘revised communication model’ for advertising significantly advances our understanding of the complex interplay of elements within the advertising communication system and is particularly strong in its incorporation of research from the post-modern battlefield of literary studies. The concepts of both the ‘implied audience’ and the ‘sponsorial audience’ greatly expand the potential for subtlety of analysis in research upon the advertising communication system. Stern’s article is, however, now over 10 years old and, in the intervening time, there has been neither significant examination of the revised model’s advances, nor any attempt to take them further. In addition, new technologies and media channels have been developed that strongly demand a reformulation of the role of interactivity in the advertising communication model.

The striking growth of blogging, podcasting, alternate reality gaming and customer-review internet sites and their increasing use for advertising and marketing communication purposes necessitates that interactivity be given a core
position in the advertising communication model. While practitioners are enthusiastically adopting these new technologies and formats into integrated campaigns and academic researchers have made significant advances with the analysis and modelling of specifically internet-based advertising communication (for example, Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Rodgers and Thorson, 2000) comparatively little has been done to integrate older models of advertising communication with newer concepts of interactivity. This has resulted in a form of two-tier approach to advertising communication modelling – one set of models designed to describe traditional advertising methods and practice and another to deal with the new interactive media.

Stern’s model attempts to be an all-encompassing one, able to deal with traditional print and outdoors advertising just as well as those forms embedded in Hypermedia Computer-Mediated Environments (to use Hoffman and Novak’s term). There are, however, significant limitations to the Stern model that centre around its incomplete depiction of the interactive relationships between core elements of the advertising message production process. What is needed at this juncture is a model that builds upon Stern’s advances and fully addresses the complex character of interaction and the implications of the phenomenal increase in message production by a multiplicity of consumer audiences as well as realistically representing the multipartite, dynamic relationships between an expanded set of actors and producers that characterize contemporary advertising communication practice.

It is the contention of this article that the construction of such a model can be effectively accomplished through the application of principles drawn from the field of cybernetics. Interactivity, of any type and between any element of the advertising message production and reception matrix, is founded upon the principle of feedback. Cybernetics is the discipline which has made the mechanisms of feedback its primary concern and therefore, it will be argued, offers the tools and perspectives to successfully model the highly complex and dynamic interactions that typify advertising communication.

The article opens with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Stern’s 1994 revised model of advertising communication. Once the key areas that any new model needs to address are established, the article continues with an overview of the development of cybernetics, a discussion of its basic features and their application within the social sciences. The bulk of the article is then devoted to the creation and explication of the cybernetic model of advertising communication. This model is introduced in two stages, the first focusing on the application of the basic building blocks of early cybernetic theory (feedback loops and reference signals) and the second harnessing the later developments of second-order cybernetics and consequently based upon the idea of advertising communication as an observing system. The conclusion discusses the merits of the new model and points the way forward for further research.
The Stern model

Stern’s 1994 model is an attempt to address the gross inadequacies of previous communication models in terms of their over-simplification and inability to deal effectively with issues of interactivity and the existence of multiple voices within the core elements of sender-message-receiver (see Stern, 1994: 5–6 for an overview of objections to the use of the three-stage, injection approach). By introducing a number of perspectives from literary theory, Stern is able to expand the traditional, unidirectional tripartite schema into an interlinking multi-causal 3 x 3 matrix (see Figure 1) which includes within itself a further zoning into those elements that can be regarded as being ‘within-text’ (or virtual) and those that can be regarded as belonging outside it.

The advertising message is considered by Stern to be the one element of the system that is entirely ‘within-text’; it is presented by the ‘persona’ to the ‘implied consumer’ (both of these elements being the within-text facets of the more traditional ‘source’ and ‘consumer’) in one of three general forms of discourse – autobiography, narrative or drama. Outside the boundary of the text, Stern situates two further facets of the ‘source’, namely, the ‘sponsor’ and the ‘author’ and two further facets of the ‘consumer’, identified as the ‘sponsorial consumer’ and the
‘actual consumer’. Clearly, Stern’s expansion of the simple source-message-consumer schema radically broadens the basic assumptions of the advertising communication model. Making the distinction between sponsor and author explicit, for example, reminds us of the complexity of the concept of a ‘source’ and that the creative agency input is a separate (if often confused and occulted) voice. Similarly, the differentiation between ‘sponsorial consumer’ and ‘actual consumer’ serves to introduce into the core of the model an element that is usually overlooked or passed over in silence, namely the existence of the sponsor as one of the initial audiences, or consumers, of the advertising message. The influence that the existence of the sponsor as an audience has on the creation of advertising messages is well attested to in the secondary literature and the anecdotes of practitioners and therefore needs to be addressed within any communication model of advertising. Stern’s claims for the ability of her revised model to deal with the demands of interactivity are also understandable in that it allows for a discussion of the permeability of the boundary between within-text and without-text. The interactive consumer, for example, can be spoken of in one sense as representing an ‘alignment between implied, sponsorial, and actual consumers – the real consumer behaves as the ideal one imagined by the persona and by the sponsor’ (Stern, 1994: 13), although Stern notes that this alignment is vulnerable to the ‘actual’ consumer’s resistance to behaving in the same way as the ‘implied’ consumer.

Stern’s article ends with a call for further research into all the areas concomitant to her revised model. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the revised model can benefit from further articulation and expansion. In opening up the advertising communication model to a formal consideration of intertextuality, virtuality and the potentially conflicting pathways of interactivity, Stern’s model needs to cover far more areas (breaking the ‘author’ facet of the ‘source’ element into further components, for example) and more explicitly address the mechanisms of feedback within the whole system. It is noticeable that in Stern’s diagrammatic representation of the revised model, there is no attempt to place direction upon the linkages between facets and elements (other than a simple two-way connection within the traditional schema that is meant to illustrate the potential for interactivity). This absence in the diagrammatic representation of the model mirrors the absence of discussion regarding the details of these linkages within the expository text. The exact nature of the interactivity between the elements of the model, therefore, is not addressed. Is the interactivity between sponsor and author based upon the same system as that between sponsor and consumer? How exactly can the advertising message be seen as an interactive creation of all the elements/actors involved? If there is collaboration between author and sponsor how can the model account for that collaboration going wrong or producing dissatisfaction in one or more of the involved parties? Can the model account for inherent tensions between agency and sponsor? Stern’s conception of the consumer, though more complex than in previous models (by virtue of the introduction of the sponsorial consumer), deserves to be opened up considerably – should the consumer be characterized as a unity or are there grounds for fracturing the concept somewhat?
The important place played by consumer focus and test groups in the advertising message production process, and the consequently ambiguous status of such groups within a catch-all definition of ‘consumers’ is surely an important issue for a model dealing with interactivity? Such questions, which all have issues relating to the interactivity of the advertising system at their heart, are not adequately answered by the Stern 1994 model.

While the existence of Stern’s three tropes of autobiography, narrative and drama is not something that one might want to argue with, their elevation to the same level in the model as the actual consumer or sponsor seems unbalanced and not as helpful as it might be. Equally relevant, for example, might be the substitution of a typology of rhetorical figures used within advertising discourse. Furthermore, Stern’s three tropes do not effectively cover all advertising message voices: an end of message voice-over relaying a call to action is not adequately typified by any of the three tropes as defined by Stern (1994: 10). The delineation of content trope choices is not something that this article will address. As will become clear during the discussion of the cybernetic model, these choices are assumed within the model but not bounded by identification. The cybernetic model, in not being grounded in literary references in the way that Stern’s revised model is, will describe the within-text ‘personas’ and their relationships from a rather different perspective that speaks directly to problems of self-representation within the advertising system.

**Interactive models**

One of the strengths of Stern’s model is that it seeks to integrate interactivity into the larger traditional advertising system. A successful model of advertising communication must be able to be used to describe the communication process of traditional TV advertising as well as the process involved in internet/HCME advertising; in other words, it must be applicable to all forms of advertising. Currently, however, academic focus on interactivity in advertising has tended to assume that the new interactive media (such as the internet) demand entirely new, and separate, models of advertising communication. In short, interactivity is seen as something that is absent from traditional advertising forms. Consequently, it has appeared natural to assume that advertising research needs two opposing models, one based on interactivity and one based on non-interactivity. Indeed, the pervasiveness of this paradigm is indicated in the manner in which one of the core studies on advertising and interactive technologies, Hoffman and Novaks’ 1996 ‘Marketing in Hypermedia Computer-Mediated Environments: Conceptual Foundations’, characterizes ‘virtually all’ models of traditional, mass media advertising as being based upon the classic Lasswell/Lazersfeld and Katz SMR approach to the communication process and then proceeds to oppose these with a model of ‘Interpersonal and Computer-Mediated Communications’ whose key distinguishing feature is interactivity. Furthermore, though later research has tended to interrogate the issue of interactivity more subtly, it is still the case that, even when
evolved into a concept as rich as Rodgers and Thorson’s (2000) ‘consumer-control’, interactivity remains something that is afforded consumers by advertisers, rather than something that suffuses the whole of the advertising production and reception process. Indeed, this situation appears to be producing a distinct ‘us versus them’ approach in the marketing communication industry, as consumers’ increasing ability to interact with advertisers is seen as either a threat to the effectiveness of advertising and traditional advertising agencies’ or an opportunity to overthrow the old advertising system’s assumptions that are perceived to be now entirely inappropriate. Academic research has been responsible for pitting traditional and interactive models against each other in studies that examine the comparative effectiveness of interactive over non-interactive media and campaigns. This reaction to the potentials of HCME is perhaps predictable in its academic obsession with binary oppositions but ignores the lessons of Stern’s model: the sponsor, as the initial audience of the advertising message, has always been an interactive consumer and the advertising message production system has always had to take into account interactive ‘consumers’ of one type or another. Indeed, the cybernetic model outlined below attempts to demonstrate just how central interactivity is to the entire message production matrix. From this perspective, the advent of HCME technologies and ‘consumer control’ can be regarded as a natural, even gentle, evolution of the advertising system rather than a sudden and unprecedented ‘mutation’.

Summary of challenges

A summary of the strengths and weaknesses of Stern’s model can be seen in Table 1. In building upon the Stern model, the cybernetic model of advertising communication will address such weaknesses while maintaining the strengths.

After a short introduction to the basic concepts underlying cybernetics, the article will expand Stern’s revised communication model from the point of view of a first-order cybernetic approach to system modelling. Fundamental to this approach is, predictably, the modelling of the dynamics of communication and control within this particular communication system so that the issues of integrated interactivity, feedback and multi-producer/multi-consumer can be adequately addressed. Those issues regarding Stern’s concept of the within-text persona will then be approached using second-order cybernetic understandings.

Roots of the cybernetic approach

The birth of cybernetics as a distinct discipline (albeit one founded upon the spirit of multidisciplinary research) can be located in a series of roundtable discussions organized by the Macy Foundation throughout the 1940s and 50s. These meetings were held under the general rubric of ‘Circular Causal and Feedback Mechanisms in Biological and Social Systems’ and at various times were attended
by figures as diverse as Norbert Wiener, Claude Shannon, Margaret Mead, Ross Ashby, Gregory Bateson, Heinz von Foerster and Warren McCulloch (see Hayles, 1999, Chapter 3, for a non-technical, critical account of the conferences). By the time of the first conference, Wiener (1961[1948]) had already published his book coining the term *cybernetics* and defining it as the study of ‘control and communication in the animal and the machine’ and although many of the participants in the conference came from a ‘hard science’, mathematics or information theory background it was clear from the start that social systems were to be as much an object of investigation as, say, electronic or biological control systems.

The prime concern of early cybernetics was the modelling of goal-seeking behaviour. This type of behaviour, of course, can be identified across a vast range of different systems, from very mechanical ones (such as the classic cybernetic example of the thermostat), through to simple biological systems (the maintenance of a particular balance of blood composition in an animal, or the catching of a ball in flight by a human) and on to more complex social systems (organizing a group to achieve a particular task, for instance).

Cybernetics sought to model all these forms of goal-seeking behaviour by applying (or discussing how to apply) the principles of feedback to models of these different types of behaviour. Although the basic idea behind feedback is simple, its

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Table 1  
**Strengths and weaknesses of the Stern (1994) model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths of Stern model</th>
<th>Weaknesses of Stern model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of the simplistic SMR approach</td>
<td>The model is undeveloped regarding the nature of interactions and relationships between actors in the model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of the Sponsor as a ‘consumer’</td>
<td>The use of the ‘Author’ is overly reliant on literary models and sidelines realities of Agency practice and a multi-author message production system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to integrate interactivity into a general model of advertising communication</td>
<td>Interactivity is not clearly implemented across the whole model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of within-text and without-text environments</td>
<td>The focus on message tropes is unbalancing and unnecessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the ‘persona’ as a within-text actor</td>
<td>The ‘persona’ concept can be integrated more fully into the model as a whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The model does not address the way in which the consumer is often split/fractured into actual consumers and focus group consumers (tested consumers)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
adoption represents a significant departure from scientific views of the world as ‘a deterministic linear system’ (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 30). Bale summarizes:

feedback is a recursive process whereby a system’s behavior is scanned and fed back through its sensory receptors. Data about the system’s previous actions, as a part of the input it receives, is monitored, allowing the system to ‘watch’ itself, and thus signal the degree of attainment or non-attainment of a given operation relative to pre-established goals. This process allows a system to alter its output and thereby regulate or steer its behavior in relation to its pre-encoded goals. (Bale, 1995: 34)

Negative feedback occurs when the system is trying to achieve stability (homeostasis) by reducing the difference between its pre-established goals and the information it is receiving from its inputs regarding the attainment of those goals (such as when a client criticizes a presentation as being ‘not what I meant at all!’). Positive feedback is said to be occurring when the opposite is happening and the system is trying to increase the difference between its goals and its inputs (and therefore seeking instability, or, looked at from another angle, reinforcing change); the continual request for something new, something ‘not in any way like the last campaign’ is a familiar instance of positive feedback in the advertising system. Figure 2 shows an example of a simple thermostat control system that uses negative feedback to maintain a particular goal temperature in water. The impor-
tance of the control system’s goals or reference signals is paramount in a cyber-
netic system and is something that will be underlined in the first-order cybernetic
model of advertising communication below.

As can be seen from Figure 2, a system based upon negative feedback processes
is fundamentally teleological: it works towards an end goal (the reference signal).
The connection between goals and feedback, under the guise of ‘knowledge of
results’, has a history prior to the foundation of cybernetics, particularly in learn-
ning theories of the late 19th century, and has also been concurrently extended
into the fields of psychology, information processing and management theory.
‘Knowledge of results’ was the phrase used by psychologists and learning theorists
of the late 19th and early 20th century when referring to a subject’s awareness of
their performance (or the outcomes of their behaviour). These areas of study
culminated in the work of figures like Edward Thorndike, who concluded that
‘without knowledge of results, practice does not lead to better performance’
(Baker and Buckley, 1996: 22) and the Behaviourism-based experimental psychol-
ogists C.L. Hull and C.A. Mace (see Baker and Buckley, 1996, for an overview). In
keeping with Behaviourist doctrine, however, these researchers’ formulation of
goal-seeking behaviour was rigidly based upon a stimulus-response model that
denied any place to ‘consciousness or experience’ (Hull, quoted in Baker and
Buckley, 1996: 24). Ironically, the cybernetics that grew out of the Macy
Conferences, despite its superficially mechanistic patina, rescued the concepts of
goal-seeking behaviour and feedback from the Behaviourists and allowed
researchers to begin to examine the internal, teleological processes that character-
ized them across many different types of systems whether they be electronic,
mechanical, biological or social. In this sense, the development of cybernetic
approaches to social systems can be seen as part of a reactionary movement against
the excesses and weaknesses of Behaviourism and contemporary experimental
psychology. The increasing influence of goal-predicated theories of psychology
and sociology (such as Maslow’s 1962 distinction between basic and growth needs
and the discussion of life goals in Buhler and Massarik’s 1968 collection, as well
as Festinger’s 1957 concept of cognitive dissonance) for example, mirrors the
evolution of the cybernetic paradigm (see Schutz, 1991, for an overview of goal-
orientated theories in the social sciences).

Cybernetics is distinguishable from goal-predicated theories of psychology,
behavioural theories of learning and information theory in that it seeks to eluci-
date the processes by which goals or reference states are reached by systems. The
nature of the goal is not the focus of the discipline: cybernetic principles of feed-
back can be (and have been) applied to the study of how to achieve market success,
how to build a robot, how to shoot a moving target, or even how to achieve
personal happiness. In this sense, cybernetics is eminently applicable to any system
which is teleological. As Jay Forrester has noted, ‘feedback processes govern all
growth, fluctuation, and decay’, adding that ‘they are the fundamental basis for all
change’ (Forrester, 1991: 13). As such, cybernetics stands as a discipline able to
inform a wide variety of goal-predicated theoretical and practical endeavours that
need to accurately model processes of change.
Along with the feedback process, there is a further concept that has come to play a central part in the cybernetic paradigm, particularly in the evolved form known as second-order cybernetics. This is the crucial influence of the status of the observer of a system and how, indeed, the system can be seen as observing itself. Herbert von Foerster summed the matter up succinctly when he remarked that first-order cybernetics is the study of ‘observed systems’ while second-order cybernetics studies ‘observing systems’. The work of von Foerster (1981, 1984, 1991, 2003) and Maturana and Varela (1980) has been focused upon questions of how we make distinctions, how the observer is included within an observing system, how does the distinction-making of the observer effect the nature of the boundary around the observed, and so on. Such areas of research have important consequences for any model of advertising communication in that they provide us with a language with which to formulate the influence of different observers within the system and the way that those observers are at the same time producers and how these issues relate to feedback processes governing message production and interpretation.

The cybernetic model

The first step in the construction of the cybernetic model of advertising communication will be to address the principle weaknesses identified above in Stern’s model. Initially, the model will accomplish this with the introduction of one additional actor, the re-defining of another and the clear delineation of the feedback flows across the system. Figure 3 presents the full cybernetic model. An examination of the model will reveal that it is made up of the following actors, artefacts and processes:

– actors: sponsor, agency, tested consumer, actual consumer;
– artefacts: message in creation, presented message which includes eigenform of sponsor, eigenform of agency, eigenform of tested consumer, eigenform of actual consumer, reference signals; and

Each of these elements will now be described before more general issues raised by the model are discussed.

The actors

Sponsor  The sponsor is the element that bears the most resemblance to its progenitor in Stern’s model. The sponsor is the client of the agency and therefore, following Stern, is an early consumer of the advertising message. The sponsor is in a position where it provides feedback to the agency regarding the progress of the message creation and thus can be seen as one of the co-creators of the message. The cybernetic model does not need to distinguish between a ‘sponsor’ and ‘sponsorial
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Figure 3
Cybernetic model of advertising communication

Sponsor

Message in creation

Agency

PRESENTED MESSAGE

Tested consumer

Actual consumer

Sponsor Eigenform

Agency Eigenform

Reference signals

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/+–

Reference signals

Reference signals

Reference signals

Viewing/auditing

Message creation/transmission of reference signals

Consumer action

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consumer’ as the feedback process it delineates clearly places the sponsor as both a message producer and message consumer (as indeed are all the actors).

**Agency** The production of the advertising message is the result of a continual series of iterations where input shifts from agency personnel to sponsor, to test groups, to market research results, legal department, etc. The ‘author’ of Stern’s model is, in this respect, a rather problematic element; representing the ‘creative’ personnel within the advertising agency, and the highly specious idea that a message has a single creator, it uses a term that inevitably prioritizes a certain grouping over others in the conceptualization of the advertising communication process. Focusing heavily on the literary, copy aspect of the message, Stern’s revised model allows no place for the effect of media strategy upon the presentation/meaning of the message itself and the consumption/interpretation of it. As media planners have argued for decades, the success of the advertising message’s presentation can be dependent upon the media chosen, the time and frequency of insertion, etc. To leave the media strategy out of the communication model thus seems unwise. The term ‘author’ will always widely be understood to mean the figure that creates the message. Consequently, in the cybernetic model we will expand the denotation ‘author’ to cover all elements that have control over the form of the message and introduce the term ‘agency’ to denote the complex of agency personnel (copywriters, art directors, media strategists, etc.) who might work with the other actors in the message production matrix. This is not designed to downplay the importance of the creative personnel but rather to clarify the status of the other elements that exert control over the production of the message. Media planners and strategists, therefore, are included within the ‘agency’ identification. Given the fact that this makes of the one element ‘agency’ an apparently complex collection of disparate voices, it is worth pointing out that the communication process within the agency will in many ways mirror that within the larger model we are proposing: copywriters, art directors and account executives, for example, will communicate with each other and participate in a feedback-driven round of iterations similar to the meta-elements within the model as a whole. This type of recursion is a common feature of cybernetic models and can be used to explain highly complex social behaviour (see Powers, 2004, for examples).

In considering the general applicability of the model, it might be pointed out that some advertising messages are not produced for ‘actual consumers’ or, perhaps more problematically, the ‘actual consumer’ might not be the primary audience of the final message. Instances of this type of situation would include the production of ‘spec’ ads by agencies intended to demonstrate their talents to potential clients, the production of advertising messages designed primarily to compete in industry competitions or the production of ads ostensibly in order to help sell a sponsor’s product but more truthfully intended to sell a small agency’s skills to a larger one (see Rotfeld, 2002, for a discussion). What characterizes all of these instances is that the agency is motivated by a level of self-interest that outweighs the duty to the sponsor. In this sense, we may immediately exclude such instances from coverage by the model because we are no longer dealing with com-
munication performed on behalf of a paying sponsor (and thus we are not dealing with advertising, per se). Nevertheless, it is worthwhile noting that some messages produced by those involved in the advertising communication process will not necessarily conform to the terms of the advertising communication model and it behoves the analyst to discriminate carefully (and as far as is possible) between genuine instances of advertising communication and those that just look like it.

Tested consumer As indicated in Table 1, one clear weakness of the Stern model is the absence of any role for the input of focus groups, test groups, consumer research, etc. These are important voices within the process of message construction and their status is a complex one within the model. In some ways the ‘tested consumer’ is similar to Stern’s ‘sponsorial consumer’ in that they represent another audience for the message before the message is presented to the ‘actual consumer’. Indeed, the message may usually be tested in a focus group before it is ever presented to the ‘sponsorial consumer’. At the same time the ‘tested consumer’ can also be considered one of the message producers in that the replies of the ‘tested consumer’ can control the form of the final message. So too, of course, can the comments of the ‘sponsor’ function as controllers of the message production. The division of consumer into ‘actual’ and ‘tested’ makes explicit the fundamental differences between consumers who are identified as providers of information during the message production process and those that are not. The ‘tested consumer’ is taken as a token for the ‘actual consumer’ but, as the model makes clear, this is not an unambiguous situation and the separated, observed (and observing) status of the ‘tested consumer’ inevitably grants them an entirely different identity (as well as function) to the ‘actual consumer’. These considerations will become even more explicit with the addition of some key second-order concepts to the cybernetic model.

Actual consumer The ‘actual consumer’ is distinguished from the ‘tested consumer’ in so far as standard industry practice distinguishes the two. The cybernetic model seeks to make explicit the consequences of testing in the advertising communication system by embedding Korzybski’s dictum ‘the map is not the territory’ (Korzybski, 1941) within its depiction of the consumer. Instead of unquestioningly treating the ‘tested consumer’ as the ‘map’ by which the advertising system can chart the ‘territory’ of the mass of ‘actual consumers’, the model formally separates the two actors. This separation becomes all the more important when we introduce the possibility of the ‘actual consumer’ being a message producer. As can be seen from Figure 3, the ‘actual consumer’ is indeed depicted as a co-creator, with inputs into the ‘message in creation’, the ‘agency’ and the ‘sponsor’. The lines of control from the ‘actual consumer’ to the ‘message in creation’ or ‘agency’ represent the core of what contemporary theoreticians and practitioners identify as interactive or consumer-controlled advertising. The ‘actual consumer’ can either create entirely or be a part of the creation of the message, influencing how the message appears to them, what the message says to them, etc., and like the other message producers, this is performed within a feed-
back loop determined by their reference signals. Obviously, these lines of control can be non-existent in some situations but their incorporation into the model allows for all actors to influence the ‘message in creation’ thus establishing the fundamental assumption that all actors are both message producers and message consumers. A fuller discussion of the implications of the model for our understanding of interactivity in advertising communication (and the significance to it of the tested/actual consumer separation) will be presented below.

The artefacts

The message in creation  In order to ensure the accuracy of the model, the message itself must be understood to be the result of a dynamic process. As we have already noted, the advertising message that the actors are presented with is the last in a series of iterations. We can illustrate the dynamic of this gradual stabilizing of the message via the broken lines outlining the first ‘message in creation’ element which then leads into the hardened lines of the final ‘presented message’ element. This, combined with the interlocking feedback loops, represents the communication flow that results in the final message presented to the actors. The message itself is not an element in the same way that human actors in the system are: it produces no communication and nor does it attempt to control any other element. It cannot judge an input nor produce an output. The message is an accumulated output. All four of the actors view/audit the ‘message in creation’, compare it to their own reference signals (see below) and then either attempt to change it further or cease to attempt to change it further. The model depicts the ‘sponsor’ and ‘tested consumer’ as controlling the ‘agency’ rather than directly controlling the ‘message in creation’ because industry practice has tended to define the ‘agency’ by this very function. However, the ‘actual consumer’ is depicted in the model as having direct input into the ‘message in creation’ that might be unmediated by the ‘agency’. As we shall see in the fuller discussion on interactivity that follows, modern networking technologies give agencies the opportunity to allow ‘actual consumers’ to be almost the sole creators of advertising messages. It might be more normal (and less potentially hazardous) for agencies to mediate the creative control of ‘actual consumers’ but the cybernetic model provides for the possibility, at least, of comparatively unmediated control.

The presented message  The final message presented to the actors is the combined output of the ‘actual consumer’ and the ‘agency’, whose output in itself is combined with outputs from the ‘sponsor’ and ‘tested consumers’ (and the ‘actual consumer’ if unmediated message creation is disallowed). The presented message is the final iteration of the process of message creation – it becomes final because it satisfies the reference signals of the actors involved in its creation. In its final form of presentation, the message is an input to be processed by the ‘actual consumer’. However, the cybernetic model makes it clear that the ‘actual consumer’ is not the only receiver of the message. All the actors involved in the advertising system are receivers/interpreters of the ‘presented message’.
The ‘presented message’ is depicted as containing four further artefacts; the ‘agency eigenform’, the ‘sponsor eigenform’, the ‘tested consumer eigenform’ and the ‘actual consumer eigenform’. The significance of these artefacts will be explained in the section below on second-order cybernetic perspectives.

Reference signals The feedback process implemented in the cybernetic model is dependent upon each actor comparing their inputs to an internal reference signal and adjusting their outputs accordingly so as to match the input with the reference signal. When analysing machines or simple biological mechanisms these internal reference signals can be quite simple. However, when we begin to analyse and model the higher levels of the human system these reference signals tend to become rather more complicated. For example, let us consider the reference signal that might exist for the ‘sponsor’. It has been a common complaint almost since advertising agencies first appeared (see West and Paliwoda, 1996; LaBahn and Kohli, 1997, for overviews) that the ‘client’ does not understand the idea behind a particular campaign presentation or that the ideas that the client comes up with as examples of the type of campaign they might be looking for are crass, deeply ignorant of marketing realities, etc. In other words, the sponsor has an idea in their head against which they are judging the ideas presented by the agency; furthermore, although they clearly have this idea they might not be able to articulate it very well or convincingly (after all, this would be the job of the creatives at the agency). Frustrations follow. Obviously, a sponsor, when they initially brief an agency (and forever after) are trying to communicate their reference signals (the criteria by which they will be judging work presented to them). Similarly, the agency will be trying to communicate their reference signals to the sponsor, in that the agency will attempt to present and explain campaign ideas so that the sponsor can understand why certain ideas have been chosen and why they should be executed in certain ways. So, too, do the ‘tested consumers’ inform the agency of their own reference signals for an advertisement for the product in question. When a group of ‘tested consumers’ are presented with the advertising message their response is an attempt to communicate how near to, or far away from, reaching their reference signals the advertisement has come. It is the case, then, that the substance of a significant amount of communication within this model is concerned with reference signals. In this context, the ‘presented message’ is a combined output of the reference signals of all four agents of message production.

Processes

The processes present in the cybernetic model are constituents of the single process of control. Cybernetic control is a much more delicate and ramified concept than its association with robotics in the popular imagination might lead us to assume. Each actor in Figure 3 is controlling for a particular ideal outcome: they are continuously adjusting their output to bring about a particular desired end-state, the approach towards which they judge from the information provided by those inputs they are open to. This is a feedback loop: the basis of all first-order
cybernetic thought. Of course, as will be immediately noticed, one element’s inputs are another element’s outputs. Everyone is controlling for something here and any cybernetic system beyond the most basic abstraction is a matrix of these interlocking feedback systems. In the cybernetic model of advertising communication the feedback loops are made up of the following processes:

**Viewing/auditing** All actors in the model view/audit both the ‘message in creation’ and the ‘presented message’. In the case of the ‘message in creation’, viewing/auditing represents an input into the actors from the ‘message in creation’ which is, in its own turn, an output of the actors. In the case of the ‘presented message’, it is an input into the actors that can result in the output of ‘consumer action’.

**Comparison with reference signals** The actors compare the input that is provided through viewing/auditing with their own reference signals. Comparison is thus an internal process to each actor which uses the input of viewing/auditing and produces an output that leads to correction.

**Message creation/transmission of reference signals** Message creation is an output from each actor which seeks to alter the ‘message in creation’ until it matches its reference signals.

**Consumer action** Consumer action is an output of the ‘actual consumer’ to the ‘sponsor’ in response to their viewing/auditing of the ‘presented message’.

**Integration of second-order cybernetic perspectives**

The above description of the cybernetic model has been concerned with the first-order cybernetic elements that constitute feedback loops within the advertising system. We have been looking at a model of advertising communication; in other words, we have been treating it as an observed system. We have considered its elements, their inputs and outputs and we have posited some of the internal processes that occur within the message producers in the system that effect their outputs. However, a significant increase in depth of perspective may be achieved if we observe the system as an observing system. To do so will, naturally, include ‘us’ in the communication frame (a point which will be dealt with at the end of the article) but also allows us to first make some hidden aspects of the first-order model more apparent.

Ever since the incorporation of Spencer-Brown’s Laws of Form (1994[1969]) into cybernetics, fundamental importance has been attached to the act of making a distinction. Francisco Varela (1975) ‘improved’ upon Spencer-Brown’s two-valued (marked and unmarked) system by explicitly adding the third value of self-reference. So, in making a distinction we call into being three clear elements: that which is being marked out, that against which it is being marked out and, finally,
the mark-maker (the point of self-reference). Rapidly extrapolating from this basis, and adopting von Foerster’s work on observing systems (1981, 1991, 2003 and von Foerster and Poersken, 2001), we can look again at our model and note immediately some simple ramifications.

Each element in the model (Figure 3) is an observer first and foremost (for their roles as actors must be founded upon their roles as observers). As an observer, an element makes distinctions between foreground and background (other system elements and environment) and itself. The act of observing is, therefore, necessarily self-referential but also creative: the element makes distinctions. Concomitant to this is the idea that the perceiver and the perceived are created together in the process of perception (perception/observation being synonymous with the act of distinction in second-order cybernetics). Consequently, if we temporarily focus upon one particular element in our model, we can say that the ‘sponsor’, in observing (distinguishing) the ‘agency’ both brings into being the ‘agency’ and brings into being (distinguishes) itself. From a practical standpoint, the relationship between ‘sponsor’ and ‘agency’ is not a relationship between two pre-existing, separate elements but rather a process in which they ‘arise together’ (Kauffman, 2003: 76), defining each other and themselves through their communication.

The process of defining the observed object is one that second-order cybernetics explains with the concepts of eigenform and eigenbehaviours. Here, ‘the notion of a fixed object has changed to become a notion of a process that produces the apparent stability of the object’ (Kauffman, 2003: 76). In other words, the observer distinguishes an element by conferring stability upon it – the stable form being termed the eigenform and the process of distinguishing that stability being the eigenbehaviour. In this sense, all of the elements (eigenforms) in our model are tokens for eigenbehaviours: none of them exist outside of the process of observation. Von Foerster and others have used the concept of the eigenbehaviour to explain how observing systems manage to impose some sense of stability upon observed objects (which would include themselves) in a universe that is made up of process rather than stasis. The eigenbehaviour is an operation that the observer performs upon the observed in order to make the universe into something that can be communicated with. Necessarily, communication is then based upon the observer transmitting the eigenform of the observed element to that element. In other words, in communicating we are transmitting our construction of the observed. This idea actually has its counterpart in Stern’s revised model by way of the presence of the ‘implied consumer’. The ‘implied consumer’ is far more than the understood audience of the advertising message. From a cybernetic perspective, the advertising message contains within it the eigenform of the consumer that the sponsor has created. In observing the consumer the sponsor creates the consumer, settling the dynamic, unpredictable process of being into a stable element. In attempting to communicate with the consumer that it is observing the sponsor will feed the eigenform that it has established back to the consumer. And, as the advertising message is a combined output, not just of the sponsor but also of the ‘author’, ‘tested consumer’ and (potentially) the ‘actual consumer’ it contains the eigenforms that these observers have created of each other. In this way, refer-
ring back to Figure 3, we can see how the ‘presented message’ contains the eigenforms of the four actors in the model.

The cybernetic model, although it is based upon an understanding of interactivity as something that is potentially integrated across all actors in the advertising communication system, must allow for modelling of situations where an actor is not able to fully interact in the production of the advertising message. The ‘actual consumer’, for example, might not be afforded the opportunity to be an active controller of the message content. Indeed, it is possible that the ‘tested consumer’ element might similarly be left outside the message production process (by not being brought in at all or by being strategically ignored). The cybernetic model is able to elucidate what might happen in such circumstances.

Let us imagine that the ‘actual consumer’ is not granted an interactive role in the production of the advertising message. In this situation, the ‘tested consumer’ enjoys a communication relationship with the ‘agency’ and the ‘sponsor’ that is based upon the same type of feedback-centred control system that they themselves are embedded within. The ‘actual consumer’, however, would not be observed in this way. Although all the other agents in the model would ostensibly be looking at the consumer (consumer-focused), the communicative relationship they would really have with the ‘actual consumer’ is one where the consumer is a trivial machine (von Foerster, 1984; Krippendorff, 1996); that is, it is expected to behave in an entirely predictable way based upon the knowledge gathered so far by interaction with the ‘tested consumer’. The trivial machine (which, despite its name, can also be a human or social system) is characterized by an ‘I–it’ communication relationship:

Describing something as a trivial machine is to focus on the predictability of its behavior, ơ, from the conditions that impinge upon it, its input _CLOSED_MathType_1_02D_026_i. This is accomplished by formulating a relation between the two observables, ideally in the form of a mathematical function _CLOSED_MathType_1_02D_026_F: ơ = ƒ(i). Functions do not offer choices. They can explain no more than how things respond to their inputs. As far as such machines are concerned, inputs are undetermined, open, to be specified by outside events, by their users, by the inquiring I, for example, the I who may manipulate them for observable effects. (Krippendorff, 1996: 313)

When the ‘actual consumer’ fails to behave in the way that is expected of it the normal response of the message production matrix is to blame noise in the system or some breakdown of the function:

Deviations from the ideal of a mathematical function tend to be explained either as variations that unaccountably ‘enter’ a trivial machine – in communication theory called noise and in measurement theory called unreliability – or as breakdowns, that is, as unanticipated and perhaps undesirable changes in function. Intentions, agency, creativity, or dialogical practices that largely are responsible for human behavioral variations are not part of this vocabulary and hence ruled out. (Krippendorff, 1996: 313)

In the above scenario, where interactivity is crippled by the exclusion of the ‘actual consumer’ from the creative matrix, the finalized advertising message is presented to something called an ‘actual consumer’ and this element is expected to behave like the ‘tested consumer’. This is, naturally, impossible. The ‘tested consumer’ would be in a communication relationship that is entirely different to that
of the ‘actual consumer’. The ‘tested consumer’ would be, first of all, part of the message production matrix whereas the ‘actual consumer’ would be only a message receiver. Furthermore, for the other agents in the system, the ‘tested consumer’ would be distinguished differently from the ‘actual consumer’. The process of testing separates the ‘tested’ from the ‘actual consumer’, allowing them to enter into a very different form of communication relationship. The ‘tested consumer’ is distinguished in order to be listened to, not sold to. It might occur to the reader at this stage that the existence of the ‘tested consumer’ is a legacy of older advertising systems where the actual consumer is not normally afforded an interactive place in creating the message. Indeed, the scenario outlined above would suggest that as more and more opportunity is given to the ‘actual consumer’ to create the advertising message it would seem wise to involve less and less the ‘tested consumer’ as an actor in the system.

The advertising message itself, then, is composed of the presentation of eigenforms of ‘agency’, ‘sponsor’, ‘tested consumer’ and (potentially) ‘actual consumer’. In this version of the advertising communication model we do not have to differentiate between ‘sponsorial consumer’, ‘sponsorial persona’ and actual ‘sponsor’ because the model sees these as simply different levels of eigenform, or rather different stages of creation of the same eigenform. The eigenform of the ‘sponsor’ contained within the finalized advertising message is a depiction (stabilized distinction) of the ‘sponsor’ that the ‘sponsor’, ‘agency’, ‘tested consumers’ and ‘actual consumers’ jointly construct. It is a commonality, as are the advertising message’s eigenform of the ‘agency’, ‘tested consumer’ and ‘actual consumer’.

It is to be noted that the cybernetic model does indeed see a place for the eigenform of the ‘agency’ in the advertising message: Stern’s model posits the ‘implied consumer’ and ‘sponsorial persona’ which exist within the text but does not see a textual presence for the ‘author’ who, strangely, remains pristinely standing outside the boundaries of the text. The cybernetic model, as already noted, expands the concept of ‘author’ but also insists on the agency’s presence within the text. For how can the designated writer of the text possibly be thought not to exist within the text? The agency’s eigenform exists within the advertising message (and partakes in the presented relationship) whether there is a specific character that we can point to as the ‘agency’ or not. For example, in an advertising message that dramatises a sponsor’s relationship with a consumer that relationship is part constructed through the presence of the agency, which thus exists within the message: this can be clearly seen in the way that the agency presence can be identified by (tested) consumers as a force, even though there is no ostensible characterization of the agency.

Acknowledgement of the presence of the ‘agency’ as an eigenform in the finalized advertising message is one of the opportunities that the cybernetic model gives those involved in the message production matrix to consider more closely the ramifications of their jointly constructed text. It is a common feature of advertising industry technical publications, for example, that the content of any particular advertising message is seen as containing within it the presence of the agency responsible for the work and not just the wishes of the sponsor or the
results of marketing research.’ To think that it is only trade observers who see advertisements in this way is naive. The only real difference is that the trade observer might know the identity of the actual agency responsible – this does not mean that non-trade observers would not be able to identify an agency presence in the message, however.

Although eigenforms are, by their very nature, attempts at fixing or stabilizing continually evolving processes, those contained within the advertising message are fixed in a more particular way. In the communication relationship between ‘agency’ and ‘sponsor’, for example, the ‘agency’ observes the ‘sponsor’ and seeks to distinguish a stable form: this eigenform is not frozen, it adapts to observed changes, discrepancies, the process of time, and the changing nature of the agency’s own eigenform of itself. The eigenform is not, then, a static representation, but rather a continual seeking towards stability. During the joint construction of the message, however, these eigenforms get fixed into the text: they can no longer evolve or adapt and therefore no longer will represent the actual eigenforms produced in the continual process of observation and distinction that goes on as part of the business relationship between sponsor and agency.

The ‘fixed’ nature of the eigenforms in the advertising message means that any advertising message will tend to have a natural tendency to lose relevance in the relationship between the message producers. Even the ‘actual consumer’, in a strong interactivity situation where they have a significant part to play in the creation of their own eigenform in the advertising message, will inevitably find that, once the message is stabilized in the final ‘presented’ form, they will begin to detect a difference between their eigenform in the message and their current eigenform of themselves (for we are just as involved in the creation of eigenforms to stabilize our own identities). The result is that even if the ‘actual consumer’ has contributed to the creation of the advertising message they will soon begin to not fully recognize themselves in it: our eigenforms are continually changing and so move on from their fixed forms in advertising messages. This evolution of eigenforms away from those in the presented message would naturally contribute heavily towards tensions between the various message producers over the ‘relevance’ and success of the final product.

Before moving on to a discussion of the place of interactivity within the proposed cybernetic models of communication for advertising, the relationship between reference signals (from a first-order perspective) and the fixed eigenforms in the advertising message (from a second-order perspective) needs to be addressed. If one takes a step back from the simple model of a control system (Figure 2) and observes the system from the perspective of communication it can be seen that the control system is a system designed to communicate the (internally held) reference signal to some external element (in the case of the thermostat example, the thermostat is communicating its internally set reference, say 30°C, to the water). Put into interpersonal terms, successful communication of the reference signal results in the adoption of the reference signal by the element with which one is in ‘conversation’. The eigenforms in the ‘presented message’ are similarly communicated back and forth between the four actors of the message
production matrix; when they get fixed in the finalized, presented form of the advertising message they are artefacts of the relationship between those actors. Eigenforms are reference signals in the sense that they are tokens for internal representations of desired (or favoured) values. When fixed into the advertising message, these eigenform artefacts represent the communally-derived desired values of ‘sponsor’, ‘agency’, ‘tested consumer’ and ‘actual consumer’ held within the message production matrix at a particular time.

**Interactivity and the cybernetic model**

The cybernetic model offers a number of possible levels of interactivity. Full interactivity would require the involvement of all actors in the message creation process. This would mean, in particular, that the ‘actual consumer’ plays a role in the creation of the message rather than just in its reception and interpretation. This is not generally the case in the industry at the moment, but there are striking indications that it is becoming more widespread as a supported option in campaign design. Recent developments in networking technologies have resulted in a boom in community-based information and knowledge exchanges. Wikis, blogs, podcasts and customer-review websites have all appeared to reflect an underlying strengthening of grassroots media production and the generation of online communities founded upon shared interests and the exchange of opinion. Marketers have been quick to seize upon these networks as a potentially powerful new channel of communication with prospects. Blogs have begun to be used as a medium for paid product placement and agencies have employed people to advocate particular brands or products on customer-review websites or chat rooms. Despite the obvious ethical questions involved here, however, such uses of these new networking technologies are lacking in a sense of what interactivity might really mean for advertising. Again, the ‘actual consumer’ is rarely brought into the message production matrix – rather, their community message streams are used to present a fixed, already-produced message. If, however, agencies and clients choose to listen to the ideas and thoughts of consumers about their products as presented in networked communities then, those audience voices, through the act of being distinguished, are separated out from the ‘actual consumers’ and can either influence the reference signals within the message production matrix or become part of the nexus of ‘tested consumers’. In being listened to, the active, podcasting, wiki-creating consumer is transformed into a ‘tested consumer’. For the ‘actual consumer’ to be part of the message production matrix they must be active participants in the creation process while the message is still not fully determined. A small insight into the growing acceptance of the ‘actual consumer’ as a co-partner in advertising message creation is afforded by the recent growth in advertising campaigns that solicit consumer-created material in some form of competition format. Ban deodorant, Chrysler, Chevrolet, Timex, Hershey’s and Converse have all been responsible for recent internet-based campaigns that have promised to use the most interesting consumer-created copy as foundations for
future ads (and in some cases, this means future above-the-line advertising). Although contests asking consumers to create slogans for a brand have a long and venerable history the current implementation of such a strategy takes advantage of consumers’ access to video and audio recording software so that they can upload fully worked-up creative content that vies for a place within a future campaign or achieves the status of content on the brand’s website. Accepting the ‘actual consumer’ as a co-creator of the advertising message is the litmus-test for whether the message production matrix is serious about the implementation of full interactivity. Handing this sort of control over to consumers can be a terrifying, as well as exhilarating, experience for agencies and sponsors.

The advertising message, then, is a jointly constructed commonality of eigenforms representing hyperstabilized distinctions of the message production matrix presented to a consumer audience that is constituted of (ideally) all actors in that message production matrix. Within this context ‘interactivity’, in the sense of a mutual creation of the communication, is the advertising system. All actors are both message producers and message receivers/interpreters (and, therefore, consumers). Indeed, each actor is an observing (and so also self-observing) element and observing means making distinctions (interpretations, in the sense of where something belongs). In observing the advertising message the four actors are observing the fixed eigenforms of themselves and each other that it contains. Because each of these actors is also a self-observer, there will inevitably be a discontinuity between their evolving observation of themselves (or the stabilized eigenform of themselves) and their perception of the frozen eigenform of the themselves and each other in the ‘presented message’. The cybernetic model thus predicts that even in the most strongly interactive scenarios there will always remain some form of communication dissatisfaction, its degree dependent upon the rate of change in reference signals/eigenforms in each actor.

Conclusion

The cybernetic model of advertising communication that this article has presented is an attempt to profitably expand upon Stern’s revised model. This expansion has taken the form of focusing on the way in which all elements of the model are interacting, (self-)observing systems and that communication between them is a matter of distinction creation and transmission. Table 2 summarizes the ways in which the cybernetic model addresses the weaknesses of Stern’s model identified earlier in the article (see Table 1).

In addition to reacting to and expanding on the potentialities of Stern’s 1994 model, the cybernetic model can also be used to analyse, explain and help towards resolving the following problematic issues in the advertising industry:

1. Tension and divisions between creative personnel and non-creative/management personnel (see Hackley, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, for discussion of these tensions; see also Smith and Yang, 2004, for examples of how divisions can arise around specific
issues of creativity). The model expands the creative/authorial elements into a larger message production matrix which includes the sponsor, the agency and the tested consumers. The production of the message is seen as a joint process whereby each of these three elements form and transmit eigenforms of themselves and each other. The final presented message is a creation of all human elements involved.

2. Strained relationships between sponsors and agencies (see West and Paliwoda, 1996; LaBahn and Kohli, 1997; Ghosh and Taylor, 1999, for discussion and overviews and Waller (2002) for a specific examples in the area of political advertising). The model presents the advertising message as a frozen summation

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified weaknesses in Stern’s model</th>
<th>How the cybernetic model addresses them</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The model is undeveloped regarding the nature of interactions and relationships between actors in the model</td>
<td>Dynamic relationships between actors are central to the conception of the new model – reference signals, eigenbehaviours and feedback loops provide a theoretical basis for the nature of these relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of the ‘Author’ is overly-reliant on literary models and sidelines realities of Agency practice and a multi-author message production system</td>
<td>The cybernetic model replaces Stern’s ‘Author’ with the ‘Agency’ but also makes all actors in the system (potential) authors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity is not clearly implemented across the whole model</td>
<td>Interactivity is implemented across all actors in the cybernetic. The model can also be profitably used to explain what differing levels of interactivity between actors might mean for the relationships between those actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The focus on message tropes is unbalancing and unnecessary</td>
<td>Message tropes have been left out of the model and replaced by an expanded sense of in-text ‘personas’ informed by second-order cybernetic perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘persona’ concept can be integrated more fully into the model as a whole</td>
<td>Adopting the theory of eigenforms and eigenbehaviours, the presented message is depicted as a container for fixed forms of communally-generated personas (eigenforms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The model does not address the way in which the consumer is often split/fractured into actual consumers and focus group consumers (tested consumers)</td>
<td>The division between ‘tested consumers’ and ‘actual consumers’ proposed by the cybernetic model brings a more complex and nuanced depiction of what roles different consumers might play in message creation and interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of eigenforms of the elements in the message production matrix. As relationships evolve (and the environment evolves), the eigenforms in the message remain fixed. When reviewing the relationship between themselves and an agency, a sponsor is observing a series of messages that will most likely portray fixed (non-evolved) eigenforms of themselves, their ‘tested consumers’ and the agency. The model would predict that there would be a sense of disparity present in any such review (when carried out by any element within the message production matrix) that might lead to a questioning of the effectiveness of the relationship. The model can help suggest, therefore, that this disparity be specifically addressed in the continuing professional relationships of sponsor and agency.

3. The separation of ‘tested consumer’ and ‘actual consumer’ reminds us of the way in which the acts of measuring and researching are creative acts that change the system and not processes that produce objective recordings of external realities. When the message production matrix includes a test group of representative consumers, those consumers are no longer representative, they are something else, they have been distinguished from the ground. No ‘tested consumer’ is therefore ever an ‘actual consumer’.

One significant area that is suggested in the model’s second-order cybernetic perspective but is not yet fully developed is the importance of the model-maker as an actor. The final frame that encloses the cybernetic model is the observing frame of the theoretician or model-maker. Any attempt at a theoretical explanation of any aspect of the world inevitably must include the model-maker themselves. It is the model-maker who is making the distinctions between, for example, ‘agency’ and ‘sponsor’. These might well be eigenforms created in common with other model-makers (whether academic and/or practitioner) but they are still eigenforms created through the process of observing. It is always worth questioning, therefore, as model-makers or model-users, just how much of our own process of observing creates the distinctions that we have included in our models? It is hoped that this question, along with many others, can be profitably explored within the terms of the cybernetic model presented in this article.

Notes

1 Although well-attested to (and quite logical), evidence of the influence of sponsors on the message production process tends to be anecdotal in form. See, for example, James Strong’s (Quantas’ ex-chairperson) comments on the way in which current Australian CEOs are reflecting their more analytical approaches in the advertising that they commission (McIntyre, 2004). For secondary literature overviews see Michell (1984), Cagley (1986), Beltramini and Pita (1991). For a more positive perspective on client-agency collaboration, see Caples, 1997: 116–7.

2 Such a typology might be derived from the work of McQuarrie and Mick (1996, 1999), Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) or Stern’s own (Stern, 1988) investigation into allegory and advertising.

3 See Swain, 2005, for the results of a recent survey of marcom professionals regarding issues around interactivity. Swain found, for example, that the sample group ‘per-
ceived that advertising and advertising agencies will experience a decline as consumer control of interactive communication increases, and that public relations and promotional activity and agencies that perform those tasks will increase in importance.

4 For basic overviews of the tested consumers’ input to the message production process see Crimp (2000) and Crouch et al. (2003). For a more critically informed approach (that touches on issues the current article raises regarding the inclusion of the researcher and model designer within the system), see Hackley (2001).

5 See Hayles (1999) for a broad critical discussion of the various interpretations of the use of the word ‘control’ in cybernetics and its popular misconception.

6 For example, when O'Donohoe’s (1997, 2001) respondents use the words ‘they’ or ‘someone’ when talking about the motivation and techniques behind advertisements it is not often clear that they mean the sponsor rather than the agency.

7 It is noticeable that when Advertising Age or, more informally, www.ad-rag.com discuss current campaigns they are primarily concerned with characterizing the advertisement as an expression of an agency’s work rather than as a sponsor’s self-representation.

8 Despite an increase in rhetoric regarding consumer-control, an understanding of what exactly real interactivity might mean for day-to-day practice in the advertising industry has been slow to develop. As Rust and Varki’s (1996) overview of the challenges awaiting the advertising industry in an interactive era makes plain, only the simple ‘click for more information’ strategy can be seen to have been widely adopted by agencies involved in interactive media campaigns. See also Gorm Kunoe’s (1997) article on the shocking unpreparedness of agencies (in Norway) to enter into a full understanding of the one-to-one conversational nature of real interactive advertising.

9 As an indicator of this marketing feeding frenzy, an eMarketer report published in February 2006 stated that the adspend on podcasts would reach $300 million by 2010 at the current rate. The adspend for 2005 on this new medium was approximately $80 million. A good general overview of the current state of play in these evolving areas of marketing communication can be found in Kirby and Marsden (2006).

10 For a recent journalistic overview of this trend for consumer-created content see adrag’s comprehensive roundup, ‘Brands get consumers involved in advertising’ (http://www.ad-rag.com/124013.php, accessed 6/3/2006). In a parallel move Current TV (Al Gore’s initiative to bring TV back to the ‘people’) has expanded its ‘Viewer Created Content’ (VC2) format to include VCAMs (‘Viewer Created Ad Messages’). Viewers are initially invited to create an ad for Sony. See http://www.current.tv/studio/create/vcam, accessed 6/3/2006.

11 Witness Chevrolet’s 2006 online campaign for the Chevy Tahoe. Entitled ‘Chevy Apprentice’, the campaign allowed viewers to upload self-produced spots that had to be constructed from images supplied by Chevrolet’s agency. At least two entries, openly displayed on the competition site, used the supplied images but added text that was clearly meant as a protest against the manufacturing and running of SUVs. See archived news article at http://ad-rag.com/129186.php (viewed 2/4/06).

12 Note that this sounds like a form of scientific relativism, redolent of certain metaphorical applications of quantum theory outside of the appropriate scientific discipline (see Hunt, 2002: 74–80, for a discussion of this trend as it relates to arguments around qualitative market research). However, it is nothing so lazy. The
essential influence of the observer is one central to all second-order cybernetics and is not founded upon an application of, for example, the Schrodinger’s Cat thought experiment. As mentioned above, we can see the foundation of second-order cybernetics’ view of the observer in Ashby’s early discussion regarding designing a model or machine (Ashby, 1956: 250–55).

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**Chris Miles** is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Relations and Advertising at Eastern Mediterranean University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. His research interests include applications of cybernetics to the advertising process, interdisciplinary approaches to marketing, and the philosophy of advertising. Address: Department of Public Relations & Advertising, Faculty of Communication & Media Studies, Eastern Mediterranean University, Gazi Magusa, T.R.N.C., Mersin 10, Turkey. [email: chris.miles@emu.edu.tr]