In total war commercial advertising represents somewhat of an anomaly. Given that supplies are limited and the state seeks to regulate consumption, an industry that has at its core a desire to drive up consumer demand is at once out of place. However, the British advertising industry was active throughout the Second World War taking up valuable space in the press, encouraging consumers to spend when the government urged them to save and making reference to an inaccessible world of luxury. Given the blatant nature of their activities they came in for much criticism and in response sought to justify their on-going existence.

The persistence of commercial advertising throughout the war challenges the notion that the country was totally committed to defeating the Axis powers and mobilised all the nations resources in the pursuit of that goal. How was it that such a flagrant sign of waste as advertising should be allowed to persist? Further, how was it that the advertising industry was able to protect their corporate image to the extent that they were able to emerge from the war largely unscathed and declaring that ‘advertising helped to win the war’? (Advertiser’s Weekly, 14 June 1945, 404). This paper seeks to explore the efforts of the commercial advertising industry in Britain during the Second World War to project a positive image that demonstrated that, contrary to first impressions, they were making a positive contribution to the war effort and thereby helped to ensure that they were able to continue throughout the war largely unfettered.
The advertising industry’s success in projecting a positive image was predicated on their very survival and in the course of this paper I would first like to outline the crisis that faced them during the war both in terms of the knee-jerk reaction of advertisers on the outbreak of war and their financial implications, but also in terms of the curtailment of their activities resulting from government legislation.

The case as presented by the critics of commercial advertising will then be outlined before the image projected by the advertising industry is stated.

**The case against advertising**

In common with many areas of industry, the outbreak of war was greeted in the advertising business with a good deal of anxiety. Clients severely cut their advertising expenditure unsure of how the market would evolve and unsure of the creative angle they should be taking in their advertising. The *Statistical Review of Press Advertising* reckoned that expenditure in September 1939 was almost half of what it had been in September 1938 (Vol. VIII, No. 1, October 1939, 6). There was a very real concern within the advertising industry that the sector would remain depressed throughout the war and that its absence would not be widely mourned. There was a fear that the war years would prove that advertising was not necessary for the smooth functioning of the economy, thereby denying its practitioners of their livelihood.

The ability of the industry to survive came under further threat as a result of the actions of the government. Legislation designed with security in mind and to preserve the important resource of paper caused the complete, or almost complete, disappearance of some advertising media and the severe restriction of others. Aerial advertising, in the form of aircraft borne banners,
was stopped immediately, as were sponsored radio programmes in English from Continental stations. The blackout put paid to illuminated signs that were dependent on lighting in order to convey their message. Direct mail and poster advertising were affected at once by the need to conserve paper, whilst press advertising was limited initially by shrinking issue sizes and ultimately by the Control of Paper (No. 48) Order of 15 March 1942 that set a definite ratio of advertisements to editorial.

Despite the fact that advertising volumes were substantially lower than prior to the war, for some what remained was still too much. It was argued that paper used for the promotion of competitive brands of drink and food was a waste and could not be justified from either an economic or national stand-point (*Hansard*, vol. 370, 26 March 1941 cc. 584 – 5). Commander Stephen King-Hall, M.P. for Ormskirk and founder of the weekly *National News-Letter*, claimed that such advertising was indicative that the country was only committed to a ‘limited war’ by failing to turn over such space to government announcements vital to the war effort (*National News-Letter*, 22 January 1942). Beyond the fact that advertising was consuming a valuable resource, the nature of those advertising messages were also deemed to be inappropriate.

The predominant voice of government was urging people to contribute to war savings, whilst, it was pointed out in the House of Commons, ‘…large quantities of printed advertising matter [were] urging the community to spend…’ (*Hansard*, vol. 371, 28 May 1941 c. 1871). The public image of advertising was that of an industry apparently in direct opposition to the best interests of the nation. Captain John Dugdale, M.P. for West Bromwich, called upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Kingsley Wood, to
...prohibit, for the duration of the war, the display of advertisements upon hoardings in this country calling upon people to spend money upon the purchase of proprietary articles (Hansard, vol. 373, 29 July 1941 c. 1238).

Advertising was further admonished for its role in assisting corporations to avoid the Excess Profits Tax (E.P.T.), introduced in the September 1939 budget. The advertising of goods that were totally un procurable or in restricted supply was seen simply as a way of disposing of company profits rather than pay them to the government via E.P.T.

Commercial advertising in Britain during the Second World War was therefore vulnerable on a number of levels. The very nature of advertising was such that it drew attention to itself and thereby its incompatibility with a nation at war; it consumed valuable paper that was subsequently denied to the government for official messages or news of the war; it seemed to urge consumers to spend when the government insisted that they save, often referring to products and a world of luxury that was now inaccessible; and, it was an outlet for profits that would otherwise have been usefully contributed to the war effort via the E.P.T. In the face of such a substantial case, the advertising industry were compelled to respond, if they were to survive and get through the war years largely unfettered, by projecting a more positive image that highlighted the contribution they could make to the war effort.

In defence of advertising

In the first instance the advertising industry sought to place themselves firmly in the vanguard of British industry as a vital component in the smooth turning of the wheels of commerce vital to the war economy. As if in hope of
becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, Advertiser’s Weekly declared with bravado on 7 September 1939 that

…the whole of the advertising and newspaper world are endeavouring to adjust themselves to vastly changed conditions so that they may uphold the “carry on” tradition of British business. (253)

However, such declarations belied the facts as many advertisers continued to cancel their space orders. The period September to December 1939 was down by 43% on the same period in the previous year (Statistical Review of Press Advertising). Clearly, if advertising was to be sustained, a more proactive approach was required and some consideration needed to be given to the “new” role that was to be played in a nation at war. This cause was championed by Leslie W. Needham, director of advertising at London Express Newspapers, who bemoaned the ‘…failure of advertising to take its rightful place in the prosecution of this war…’ and declared that advertising had an important part to play in the successful prosecution of the war by rousing the people to the national cause through the use of confident and patriotic copy (The Newspaper World & Advertising Review, 28 October 1939, 15. Advertiser’s Weekly, 26 October 1939, 67). Whilst the notion of using copy of a ‘confident’ and ‘patriotic’ nature might have appeared virtuous, it ignored the basic necessity for the advertising industry to find a reason for advertisers to advertise in order to ensure their survival. In response the Advertising Association campaigned to ensure that advertisers kept advertising. Their General Purposes Committee, in their meeting of 21 September 1939, suggested that,
Direct approaches...be made to leading advertisers and distributors to maintain and, where possible, to increase their trade and selling activities... (History of Advertising Trust (HAT) AA 4/1/3)

In order to stimulate such activities the Advertising Association made a concerted effort to explain to client companies who had withdrawn from the advertising market just why they should be advertising in a situation where it appeared to be contrary to the national interest, and even where their products were simply not available or where supply was severely restricted.

Part of that campaign was a series of advertisements issued by the Advertising Association itself in 1940. These were widely distributed amongst the print media to be used at their discretion. Yet, despite the awareness that a strong argument had to be put up to the public in regard to the continuance of commercial advertising, the predominant focus of the 1940 campaign was aimed more at advertisers and appealed to their own personal interests. With a focus largely on protecting the interests of the advertising industry, the Advertising Association urged companies to continue to advertise in order to maintain the goodwill of their customers, as in these 2 examples:

![Figure 1. The Advertising Association Series of Wartime Advertisements, No. 4 (HAT AA 13/16).](image1)

![Figure 2. The Advertising Association Series of Wartime Advertisements, No. 6 (HAT AA 13/16).](image2)
As stated in figure 2, ‘brand goodwill is a capital asset’ to be protected and maintained despite the war in order that when the wheels of commerce are allowed to turn freely once again they can maintain their position in the market and thereby, presumably, sustain their company profits. Major G. Harrison, managing director of one of Britain’s largest advertising agencies, the London Press Exchange, wrote in *The Times*,

By advertising a great many manufacturers have built up a national trade, a universally recognized brand name, an international goodwill. How long will that goodwill last if they cease to advertise? Where will their markets be when the war is over? Must they start all over again? I would recommend all advertisers who have strenuously built up a goodwill for their products to think seriously before they let go their hold upon their public. Even if their output is controlled, even if their stocks have been taken over by the Government, even if their brand names have been absorbed into a common pool, even if they have not at the moment any goods to sell, I would still suggest that they take their public into their confidence, so far as they can, by issuing from time to time a statement of business policy, so that their name is remembered. They will thus be able to rebuild their business when normal conditions return (21 September 1939, 10).

In this case, no reference was made to how the nation might benefit from this continued advertising, or how this would contribute to the war effort; instead the advertising industry represented themselves as the guardians of market position in the post-war world.
From the outset therefore, the advertising industry looked upon the war as a temporary aberration and cautioned their clients to prepare themselves for the competition for world markets in the post-war world.

If the maintenance of goodwill was considered to be purely in the interests of advertisers and their agencies, the advertising industry were equally keen to be seen to be playing their part in the successful prosecution of the war. Prominent figures in the advertising industry, generally speaking out in *Advertiser's Weekly*, suggested that advertising messages be adapted to inform and direct the people. In association with the government, the advertising industry could be of positive assistance to the people by offering them help and advice in dealing with the very different situation in which they now found themselves via their advertising copy. A positive image could be conveyed to the public of commercial advertisers using their copy to fulfil a useful service by providing information that would help the people to deal with the new difficulties of being at war, whilst at the same time selling their goods. If the public could see advertising taking on such a responsible role and fulfilling a public service then the whole business of advertising might be imbued with a ‘new integrity’ and seen as a profession that ‘puts service before gain’ (*Advertiser’s Weekly*, 4 January 1940, 4). In this respect advertising could be used to enhance the reputation of advertising and could hope to find a legitimate role in wartime. A pamphlet produced by the Advertising Association in 1942 in an effort to further explain the function of advertising in wartime, stated that,

…the life of the public has to go on and most of the present advertising of “goods for sale” is not so much offering inducements to purchase as helping the public in the difficult
The idea was that commercial advertising could help to direct consumers towards those products that offered the best value for money and would be the most reliable in a situation where supply was limited and therefore satisfaction had to be guaranteed. Yet, this seemed to fly in the face of the conventional notion of advertising as a means to do precisely what this pamphlet was suggesting it did not do, namely ‘offering inducements to purchase’. In drawing up this pamphlet a rift developed within the Advertising Association itself on the basis that the way in which advertising was being represented was being deliberately bent to fit the situation. Certain parties within the Advertising Association were of the opinion that it was necessary to demonstrate that advertising did not actually drive-up demand but merely managed existing demand by attracting it to one product in preference to the other. Mr. Teasdale, Chairman of the Advertising Association’s General Purposes Committee, felt that such an argument would draw unwelcome attention to advertising in a post-war world. If this pamphlet demonstrated that advertising, in actual fact, played little or no part in growing consumer demand, then they might ‘...put forward a case which will provide government departments with something in which they can find reasons for reducing or redirecting advertising’ (HAT AA 3/1/2/4). Irrespective of those objections, the Advertising Association continued to follow that line and encouraged advertisers to adopt an informative and educative angle in their copy and thereby give the impression that the advertising industry were making a positive contribution to the war effort.

In a similar way, the Advertising Association hoped to demonstrate that commercial advertising could help to maintain the morale of the nation by
adding colour to an otherwise drab existence. Irrespective of the uncertainty, doubt and depression that might actually exist within business, advertising could give an outward expression contrary to that and thereby create in the public at large a more positive feeling and dispel the ‘present gloomy atmosphere’ (HAT AA 4/1/3). A profusion of commercial advertising could also create the impression that a great variety of choices still existed in the marketplace and could help to circumvent the sense of deprivation that might otherwise be felt. This went rather further than the normal rationale for advertising, that of selling goods, and invested it with a more philanthropic purpose. Norman Moore, President of the Incorporated Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (I.I.P.A.), addressing the Annual General Meeting of Fellows and Associates in 1940, said,

Advertising had a special opportunity of serving the public by maintaining a spirit of cheerfulness. In helping the public it was serving the Nation’s interests (HAT IPA 16/2).

Whilst advertising might have always served such a purpose, to draw attention to this in the current circumstances would serve to reinforce the positive contribution that advertising was making. In their 1942 pamphlet the Advertising Association claimed that commercial advertising was a vital part of the press, offering ‘…variety and relief in the daily newspaper…necessary if public morale is not to suffer’ (TNA BT 60/68/4. Italics original). Though no evidence was offered, the pamphlet maintained that in this way advertising was making a positive contribution. It was argued that by maintaining a level of commercial advertising in the press, a reassuring image of normalcy was offered to the people at home, whilst at the same time demonstrating to outside parties that war had not disrupted the everyday fabric of life. By circulating such messages via a variety of channels an image could be
successfully conveyed that, in fact, commercial advertising was playing a vital role in the prosecution of the war. The successful transmission of such a message and its wholesale acceptance were vital to the ongoing practice of commercial advertising. Yet, the Advertising Association were also keen to ensure that they were not drawing unwanted attention to themselves by observing a certain decorum in terms of advertising content.

The Advertising Association, under the auspices of their Advertisement Investigation Department (A.I.D.), took on the responsibility of “policing” standards in commercial advertising. The A.I.D., under their terms of reference, stated that they had a responsibility to uphold the good name of advertising and,

…to promote confidence in advertising through correction or suppression of abuses which tend to undermine that confidence upon which return from advertising and sales effort depends (HAT AA 1/1/4).

Whilst in times of peace that task was largely confined to cautioning advertisers against making extravagant or fraudulent claims in their advertising, or otherwise misleading consumers, in time of war that role was extended. In common with other parts of the press, advertising came under the remit of the Defence Notices, which were concerned to

…prevent the publication or dissemination, whether at home or abroad, of matter which is likely to assist the enemy or to be prejudicial to the national security or well being (TNA INF 1/159).
The fear was that advertisements might contain very definite information or that inferences might be drawn from such advertising. The Defence Notices stated that:

Advertising matter may often convey information of vital interest to the enemy. Advertisements inserted by firms engaged in work of national importance, or containing aerial views of factories, docks or similar places, are obvious examples (TNA 1/522).

In common with the rest of the press, the censorship of advertising was reliant on a process of self-regulation and there were very few instances where those codes were breached to the dissatisfaction of the government. However, the concerns of the Advertising Association extended beyond that as they were concerned with the public profile of the advertising industry in general. It was important to them both in the present, and into the longer term, that the advertising industry were not seen to be acting in bad taste or exploiting the war situation to their own advantage and to the advantage of their clients. With this in mind the A.I.D. kept an eye on what was deemed to be appropriate and that which was not and might bring the name of advertising into disrepute. For instance, in October 1941 the Ministry of Food (MoF) approached the A.I.D. to express concern about advertisements for Seven Seas Cod Liver Oil, which they considered to be of a depressing nature and thus bad for morale. In response, the A.I.D. spoke to the advertising agency concerned and they at once agreed to change the copy. However, disturbed by the government’s involvement in this particular case, and keen not to have their autonomy infringed, the A.I.D. wrote to all media owners advising them that they had a responsibility to project positive images and messages into the public domain and drawing their attention to examples of the type of copy which might meet with their disapproval (HAT 1/1/5). Such an advertisement,
thought to be in breach of this code even after these guidelines had been issued, came from Wincarnis Tonic Wine:

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 3. Source: Picture Post, 18 October 1941, p. 28.

In the eyes of the A.I.D. this clearly breached their rules of conduct given that it was playing on people’s anxieties associated with the Blitz in order to sell their product:

A blitz leaves more than bomb damage behind – it leaves nerve damage too, and over a much wider area.

It might even be argued that such an advertisement was in breach of the Defence Notices given that it suggested that people are vulnerable on a number of levels to the effects of bombing and thereby might be considered to
be ‘prejudicial to the national well being’. On contacting the agent, they responded that their client was very anxious not to cause offence and their advertisement copy was altered at once: whereas Wincarnis had previously been known as ‘The Tonic Wine for trying times’, it was now ‘The Wine of Life’ (see for example Picture Post, 2 October 1943, p. 4).

Whilst these cases came under the remit, or at least extremely close, to the terms of the Defence Notices and were thereby likely to draw unwelcome attention to the advertising industry as acting in contravention of the national interest, the Advertising Association were also keen that advertisers did not exploit wartime messages and themes to their own personal advantage. To be seen to be acting selfishly would definitely be considered to be contrary to the war effort in the public’s eyes. The A.I.D. thus concerned themselves with the nature and implied tone of advertising copy where it was thought that certain themes were being over exploited. One such example was the use of the “V” for victory sign in advertisements, which they investigated after having received a letter from a Mr. Edward Tillett of the Yorkshire Post asking them if they could discourage its use (HAT AA 1/1/5). Mass-Observation noted in their report on the Victory-V campaign of September 1941 that,

During the two months between July 3 and September 2 [1941] inclusive, 30 advertisers made use of the V symbol, and produced between them 118 advertisements covering 736 inches of space… [Mass-Observation Archive: File Report 863]

as in this example for Miner’s Liquid Make Up:
Here we see a ‘…pretty girl doing her daily dozen and kicking the Victory V at the same time’. This might fairly be seen as advertisers capitalising on a current trend and manipulating it to fit their own purpose. But by over exposure and, perhaps, inappropriate use the fear was that the true meaning of the message would be undermined. Such an accusation, if made, would not sit well with the advertising industry and would bring it into disrepute. In this case the A.I.D. agreed that ‘this campaign had got beyond control’ but felt that it had ‘gone too far to be checked’ though the comments of Mr. Tillett were ‘noted with approval’ and a degree of circumspection was adopted in regard to future excesses (HAT AA 1/1/5).

**Conclusion**

On one level one might consider the record of the commercial advertising industry in Britain during the Second World War to have been a negative one.
It consumed vast quantities of the finite and valuable resource of paper and in so doing, promoted goods that were either in short supply or simply not available at all. Further, it was a vehicle whereby companies spending “excess profits” on advertising rather than making payments to the government could avoid financial contributions to the war effort. Given that certain vocal parties were reaching such conclusions, and with the tacit acknowledgement of the advertising industry that their role in a nation at war was tenuous, a deliberate effort had to be made to portray a more positive image.

In the first instance advertising allied itself with the main body of business, highlighting how they were a central component in the free turning of the wheels of commerce. Their initial efforts were inevitably largely targeted at sustaining their own income. In the face of the uncertainty that struck the business community at the outbreak of war, advertising expenditure was drastically cut and consequently threatened their very livelihood. The Advertising Association set about educating business on the rationale of advertising in time of war. They cautioned about a post-war world in which competition would be fierce and companies would have to battle for market share: allowing their advertising to lapse now and thereby letting brand names slip from the mind of the consumer, threatened their standing in that post-war world.

To rely purely on encouraging clients to advertise, while sustaining the industry financially, did not necessarily assign a positive role for advertising in public eyes. To overcome objections in this quarter, the advertising industry were keen to encourage their clients to adopt an informative and educative approach in their copy which they could then point to as making a positive contribution to the war effort. Without advertising, it could be argued, the
government would have to work twice as hard, and at twice the cost, to educate the people in terms of how to get by in this new wartime existence.

Finally, it could be claimed that advertising provided a useful distraction from the national obsession with the war. By continuing to advertise a wide selection of goods, some of which were not actually available, an illusion could be created of variety that would be beneficial to the country. The variety and creativity of advertising, it could be argued, was helping to sustain the morale of the nation by adding colour to an otherwise drab existence, thus demonstrating that a positive contribution was being made to the war effort.

To ensure that any credits banked were not undermined, the Advertising Association, via the A.I.D., were careful to police advertisement content to ensure that the situation was not overtly exploited in the interest of private concerns. Whilst it was inevitable that advertisers would adopt the language of war, some caution was urged on the grounds of taste and decency in pursuing such a course.

Whilst there were critics of advertising throughout the war, at the cessation of hostilities the industry was able to reflect that they had made a positive contribution. Throughout the war they were able to go about their business with the minimum of interference from the government or any other body. Brand names were kept in the public mind, even where those products were simply unavailable, so that at the end of the war they could pick up where they had left off. However, most significantly, whilst advertising expenditure was severely depressed through those years, the advertising industry emerged at the end of it intact. They had been able to ward off the various assaults and criticisms and left the impression that, if they had had not made a significant
contribution to the fighting of the war, they had at least been able to quell those assaults sufficiently to allow them to go peaceably about their business.

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