

Call for Papers

“Consumer Engineering” – Mid-Century Mass Consumption between Planning Euphoria and the Limits of Growth, 1930s-1970s

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“Consumer engineering” as a concept has been central to both proponents and critics of mid-twentieth century American mass consumer society; capturing aspirations of unlimited growth and abundance as well as concerns about wastefulness and consumer manipulation. The term “consumer engineering” was coined by marketing experts during the Depression of the mid-1930s and referred to creating consumer demand through the appearance of product innovations, new color variations, creating new applications and finding other ways of “making goods desirable.” Consumer engineering also rested on the assumption that companies could create demand by better understanding the psychology and demographics of consumers. Expanding existing knowledge about consumers and their psychological motivations became paramount. “Consumer engineering” put “the consumer” at the center of corporate marketing strategies ranging from pricing to product innovations and advertising. To critics of postwar mass consumption, however, “consumer engineering” embodied marketing trends which created wastefulness through “planned obsolescence” and which “duped” consumers into participating in a never-ending “rat race” of acquiring an ever-growing array of material possessions.

Going beyond this familiar narrative of consumer manipulation, this workshop seeks to reassess the history of consumer engineering in a comparative, transnational framework. Looking at developed consumer societies in North-America and Europe, we will address six interrelated sets of questions:

1. What does the mid-century career of the term tell us about the development of mass consumption in the United States and Europe? More than simply a result of the Great Depression, professionalization movements in various fields have to be taken into account as well as progressive social reform efforts. To what degree was “consumer engineering” simply an expression of a peculiar mid-century “durable-goods consumerism” based on household modernization and large-scale production that emphasized technological innovation over service sector spending?

2. Do we need to broaden our understanding of “consumer engineering”? The emphasis on durable goods and household modernization in the literature on mid-century mass consumption reflects the increasing importance of changing fashions in mass-produced products. Other areas of consumption, from music to entertainment, however, were also affected by the growing importance of fashion and fads. To what degree can a more comprehensive examination of mid-twentieth century marketing incorporate the growing overlap between entertainment and the consumer goods sector e.g. through cross-marketing, novelty products, and product licensing?
3. Was “consumer engineering” a peculiar American phenomenon? The concept is frequently – both positively and negatively – associated with an American mass consumption model. Interwar pioneers of the concept, however, very much looked to European efforts in consumer psychology and modernist design and many of the most successful early “consumer engineers” were European immigrants. What impact did consumer engineering ideas have in European economies where American marketing innovations frequently made inroads following World War II and in the context of the Cold War?
4. Who were the principal actors in the consumer engineering field and how did expert discourses translate into marketing practice on the level of the company? There is a need to distinguish between the transatlantic circulation of ideas and concepts and their practical implementation. In what ways did consumer engineering ideas spread in companies and advertising agencies? Did the practical application of consumer engineering differ between the United States and Europe or between various branches of industry?
5. How can we place “consumer engineering” within a broader context of mid-century social engineering and enthusiasm for modernist planning and design? Rather than cynical corporate manipulation, to what degree can consumer engineering be understood as one variant of a broader phenomenon of social engineering that similarly impacted e.g. public attempts to re-engineer housing and urban development in the Atlantic world? The enthusiastic embrace of new production and consumer technologies or modernist styling of consumer goods was owed as much to technological (and utopian) visions of modernity’s future as to economic and profit considerations. The vigor of postwar consumer engineers in some ways mirrored a more general belief in the possibility of boundless affluence and growth in modern societies, a paradigm that was seriously challenged only by the 1970s with a growing awareness for the “limits of growth.”
6. What accounts for the demise of “consumer engineering”? The rise of a new environmental movement attacking “planned obsolescence” along with a new consumer movement and

generational shift to “post-materialist” value systems are generally seen as contributing factors for a caesura in postwar mass-consumer culture. On the one hand, this may well interlink with a broader disillusionment with modernist euphoria and various forms of grass-roots rebellion against social-engineering schemes more generally. Market segmentation was not only a way for companies to break down the “consuming masses” and to target specific groups, it also reflected a broader, emerging awareness of the pluralism of modern societies and the relevance of e.g. generational cohorts. Especially since the 1960s, changes in marketing and broader social and value change became heavily intertwined. On the other hand, changes in technology and production regimes allowed for more flexible production and increased hyper-segmentation that diminished the appeal of Fordist mass production/ consumption models. Did demand manipulation become less important as production became for flexible and targeted? And, did the 1970s truly mark the end of “consumer engineering” schemes or did they simply live on in different guises?

To address these questions we are inviting historians of business, communications, consumption, marketing, science and technology, as well as scholars working in the fields of design, environmental, economic, intellectual, and social history, whose work touches on questions of consumer demand and related issues. Comparative and global perspectives on marketing developments (connecting e.g. European and North American markets with developing economies in Asia or Latin America) are particularly welcome. Possible topics include:

- (Re-)Defining “Consumer Engineering”: Mass Consumption at Mid-Century
- Origins of Consumer Engineering in Interwar Marketing
- Wartime Consumption as a Catalyst?
- Consumer Engineers: Becoming Professional Taste Makers
- Engineering in Practice: Changes in Corporate Marketing Strategies
- Adaptation and Rejection: Transnational Transfer In Marketing and Design
- Cold War Consumption and Competing Regimes of Social Engineering
- Wastemakers and Hidden Persuaders? Critiques and Challenges to Consumer Engineering
- Limits to Growth -The 1970s as a Caesura? Niche marketing and personalized consumption as break with or continuation of postwar trends.

Please, send a title, short abstract (max. 500 words), and CV to the GHI Washington (fabricius@ghi-dc.org) **by April 15, 2014**. Conference language will be English. For further inquiries you can contact Jan Logemann (logemann@ghi-dc.org).