

9-30-2008

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Recommended Citation

Wharton, Daniel (2008) "Caroling Commercialism: The Rhetorical Power of Christmas Music," *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*: No. 1, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2008.1.10>

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Caroling Commercialism: The Rhetorical Power of Christmas

Music

by Daniel Wharton

"Caroling Commercialism" focuses on the tiny topic of Christmas music and uses this as a lens through which the author examines the growing commodification of the Christmas holiday.

At the surface, the expanding season during which radio stations play holiday music seems more like an annoyance than a problem. But the practice is actually a harbinger of a more dastardly intention. In short, there is economic incentive for retailers to pay more money for advertising during the holiday season. Because Christmas music puts consumers in the holiday spirit, stations are more likely to comingle holiday advertising with holiday music. And Christmas as a holiday is becoming more entangled with Christmas as a shopping season, which has a significant effect on the audience of "Christmas" as well as the holiday's impact for true believers of the Christian faith.

While it is true that Christmas is not the only holiday that is becoming increasingly commercial (Valentine's Day, anyone?), it may be true that this trend as a whole is becoming more and more true of American society. There is a rising debt crisis in America, and many consumers already spend more than they can really afford. If there is a purpose to this article, it is to help people think about becoming conscious consumers and to limit their holiday spending to what is within their budgets.

Isn't it hard to believe that all of this came out of hearing "Jingle Bell Rock" one too many times??

Let me be frank—I consider myself an insightful and intelligent person. But even I didn't consider the corrupting power that radio stations subject us to every holiday season. All I ever knew is that when I heard the opening bars of "Winter Wonderland" and it wasn't Veteran's Day yet, I knew I was in for a long two months.

I'm not a cynic. I like Christmas music. I just happen to think that seasonal music should be, well, seasonal. It seems to me that Christmas music starts playing earlier and earlier each year, and that my tolerance for it decreases to lower and lower levels. By the time December rolls around, it's hard to scan the stations on my radio dial without running into Nat King Cole or any of his offspring singing about the white stuff—on *every station*. And it seems to me that since I can't wear white after Labor Day, I'm being forced to wear green and red from September to December.

And, just like many of you, I accepted my fate with little thought. After all, it's only a problem for two months of the year, isn't it? And Christmas is a time for warmth and love and happiness, so why not overindulge in the music?

But after a week of studying while listening to the radio, it finally hit me that the problem isn't actually Christmas music—the problem is how the songs are being used. As an economics major, I began to wonder *why*

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Christmas music is played so often and for such long periods of time. I can't believe that any Radio DJ would want to play "Carol of the Bells" for three months in a row. The problem must lie with the incentives for music to be played—that is, advertising. Radio stations make revenue off of advertising; organizations pay money to get their ads played in between songs. And during the Christmas season, advertising is especially valuable because of increased consumer purchasing. Advertisers know that if they can hook consumers early, those consumers will buy more items over a longer period of time. And the way the stations hook listeners, much to the delight of the advertisers, is by playing seasonal music. Innocent holiday music.



Am I the only person angered by the thought of being duped by Corporate America in an Elf suit with strains of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" playing in the background? Doesn't that get under your skin? Advertisers pay big bucks to radio stations to get them to play the Christmas music, which puts listeners in the "Holiday Spirit." This holiday spirit is inextricably linked in America with shopping. An almost Norman Rockwell-like ambiance is the perceived cultural norm, with families huddled around the Christmas tree and *opening gifts*, a fire blazing, and eggnog heating on the stove. But wait, isn't Christmas a Christian holiday with deep religious meaning about the power and purpose of God? Why is it treated like a secular shopping season?

When speaking of Christmas music, I like to think of two categories of songs. There are songs associated with Christmas through the Christian religion. Some of these include "Silent Night," "O Come All Ye Faithful," and "Little Town of Bethlehem." I will call these songs "religious" songs for convenience of use. The second variety includes traditional holiday songs that have been associated with Christmas by repetition and pop songs written about Christmas. In this category I would include songs like "Jingle Bell Rock," "Winter Wonderland," and "Merry Christmas to

You." I will call these "pop" songs even though some are pop versions of religious songs. The important difference between the two varieties is the exclusion of religious figures and symbols from the pop songs.

The two types of songs are often mixed and intermingled into what we associate with holiday music. It's not as though during Christmastime the pop songs are played on pop stations and the religious songs on Christian-based stations. The songs are played together, and this technique helps remove some of the religious associations that may make the content unappealing to those who don't celebrate Christmas. By combining them in this way, radio stations package the idea of "Christmas" as non-secular. Everyone can enjoy Christmas because it's really not about the birth of Jesus—it's about commercialism.

By removing the religious slant of the holiday, advertisers widen their base of consumers. Christmas advertising focuses on Santa Claus and elves, not on Jesus. The focus shifts to gifts for everyone. This separation helps boost sales by removing

disparate viewpoints from the discussion. Everyone can agree that giving and receiving gifts is a good thing. Focusing on the secular facets of the holiday would cause some to ignore the message of the songs and the ads, which is this: Get to the stores and BUY SOMETHING!

The

"If hearing "Carol of the Bells" for the fifth time in one day isn't offensive, I don't know what is."



"Christmas music" by hans s, Flickr

problem with Christmas music on the radio is that listeners are essentially a captive audience. They are restricted to hearing content from their local stations, constrained by the physical limitations of frequencies and wavelengths. There are only a certain number of stations that can be tuned into at one time. Also, as stated in the U.S. Supreme Court case *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978), because many listen to the radio in the confines of an automobile, they are unable to tune out or leave when something offensive begins to play. And if hearing "Carol of the Bells" for the fifth time in one day isn't offensive, I don't know what is.

Needless to say, radio as a medium is both subtle and unavoidable. And when it gets closer and closer to Christmas time, more and more stations begin to play their holiday selections more and more frequently. Included between the songs are advertisements, a selection of which I heard in only half an hour of listening to the radio during the Christmas season last year:

- PetsMart is having a holiday sale. "Oh Christmas Tree" is playing in the background of the commercial, just in case I didn't remember that Christmas is right around the corner.^[1]
- Ed the Elf tells me about Elder-Beerman's 6 a.m. sale on Wednesday where I can save 50 percent. ^[2] (By the way, what other time of the year is it appropriate to wake up at 3:30 in the morning to go shopping?)
- "Some people say it's better to give than to receive," the ad for Polaris Fashion Place tells me. Obviously not, because I want to receive the \$25 gift card they're trying to sell me.^[3]
- Luckily, Meijer is having a "Pressure of Holiday Shopping Got to You?" Christmas Sale so that I won't feel the pressure of holiday shopping. Of course, if they weren't pressuring me to do holiday shopping, I wouldn't feel so . . . pressed.^[4]
- Even the weather forecast on this station has been corrupted. The "Polaris Fashion Place" Snow Watch will eventually let me know if I'll be having a White Christmas.^[5]

All of these ads are intermixed with Christmas music, and there's no way to escape. If you want to listen to the music, the ads come with it. And when you listen to the music, it draws you into the ads and makes you feel as though Christmas is upon us, and shopping is necessary.

The power structures of radio and advertising are self-sustaining. People tune in to listen to the Christmas music on the radio and hear advertisements for retail stores and other businesses. They then go to shop at these businesses, boosting

holiday sales. Seeing the effective marketing strategy paying off, businesses then pay more for holiday advertising the next year. Businesses pressure radio stations to play the holiday music earlier and earlier each year so that they may boost sales even more by extending the Christmas shopping season. The ones who are exploited in this scenario are the consumers, who are led blindly to the stores and fleeced of their earnings each and every year—all in the name of Christmas spirit.

All of this speaks to the commodification of Christmas—that the holiday has become a tool of the powerful capitalist system. But what questions does this raise about the cultural significance of Christmas? After all, Christmas is a Christian holiday, and to say that all people (especially in America) are involved in Christmas is an ethnocentric viewpoint. Shouldn't Christians be the only people concerned with this bastardization of Christmas music?

Not necessarily. In commodifying Christmas—in making it marketable and extending its reach to those who would not normally celebrate the holiday—those in power (i.e. Corporate America, advertisers, and radio stations) have actually removed much of the religious meaning from the holiday.

Obviously, the use of Christmas music as a tool of advertisers to get people into stores and buying things has implications beyond the realm of Christianity. Non-Christians should want to avoid getting swept up in the frenetic rush that is the Christmas holiday season so as to avoid the exploitation of marketers all in the name of a savior in whom they don't believe. But Christians also have a stake in keeping the separation between Christmas and Christmas shopping. The integrity of the holiday should be important to true Christians. While there is the secondary cultural importance of Christmas—the gathering of family and friends together—true followers of the religion should also grasp the primary spiritual importance of the birth of their messiah.



"christmas shopping" by Ilja, Flickr

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In the spirit of interactive fun, I'd love to hear what you have to say:

- Are radio listeners truly a "captive audience"? Are there enough stations to enable free choice of content by consumers? And what impact does this "free choice" have on the allegedly exploited consumers?
- Do you ever feel your strings being pulled by the puppetmaster that is Corporate America? How do you respond when such situations arise? Do you turn off the radio? Do you boycott the holidays? Do you write a strikingly fresh yet wonderfully coherent rhetorical analysis in order to enlighten the public?
- How do you define a rational consumer? What constitutes good decision-making when it comes to gift buying? Is

the main thrust of advertising to inform the public or to ensnare? If advertising is purely informative, is the above-described phenomenon of commodification actually possible? And if the purpose is to ensnare, how do consumers make more rational choices—how do you avoid becoming ensnared?

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Notes

[1] "Oh Christmas Tree" PetsMart commercial. WLCT 93.3 FM, Columbus. 4 Dec 2007.

[2] Ed the Elf Elder-Beerman's commercial. WLCT 93.3 FM, Columbus. 4 Dec 2007

[3] Polaris Fashion Place commercial. WLCT 93.3 FM, Columbus. 4 Dec 2007

[4] "Pressure of Holiday Shopping" Meijer commercial. WLCT 93.3 FM, Columbus. 4 Dec 2007

[5] Polaris Fashion Place Snow Watch. WLCT 93.3 FM, Columbus. 4 Dec 2007