



When news sites go native: Redefining the advertising– editorial divide in response to native advertising

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Abstract

Professional journalism's normative commitment to autonomy has long dictated the separation of editorial functions from advertising. However, the emergent practice of online native advertising complicates this division, resulting in conflicting visions of how journalistic authority should be established for digital news. This study examines reactions to a controversial Church of Scientology native advertisement on the *Atlantic* web site to assess how competing processes of norm-making and boundary work shape normative understandings of online journalism. Emergent understandings of content comprising both editorial and advertising components require new models for critical inquiry sufficiently sensitive to the online news environment.

Keywords

Advertising, autonomy, journalism norms, native advertising, online news

Introduction

On 14 January 2013, lunchtime readers of the *Atlantic* site encountered an odd story bearing the title 'David Miscavige Leads Scientology to Milestone Year'. The lead read, '2012 was a milestone year for Scientology, with the religion expanding to more than 10,000 Churches, Missions and affiliated groups, spanning 167 nations – figures that represent a growth rate 20 times that of a decade ago'. Even the comments at the bottom of the story were positive. Aside from the press release-tone of the writing, readers were

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clued into the promotional nature of the story by a yellow box bearing the words ‘Sponsor content’ and a marker at the bottom reading ‘Sponsor content presented by The Church of Scientology’.¹

At first glance, the placement of advertising within a space normally associated with news raises red flags from the standpoint of journalism ethics. The close connection between journalistic autonomy and authority supports a separation between a news organization’s editorial and business functions, both internally through their discrete operations and in the news product through the unambiguous marking of what is editorial and what is advertising. These distinctions feed into the strictures of journalistic professionalism and the ideal that journalists be left alone to control their jurisdiction without interference (Abbott, 1988; Schudson and Anderson, 2010; Waisbord, 2013). From this perspective, the *Atlantic* erred by allowing an advertiser access to editorial space in a visual manner mimicking other news content – especially an advertiser as controversial as the Church of Scientology.

But a more thorough examination of the response to the *Atlantic* ad reveals something more complex than a breach of journalism ethics. No collective interpretation congealed to explain just exactly what the *Atlantic* did wrong. This was not a clear-cut ethical violation. The ad was clearly marked, and a reader would quickly perceive from its aberrational tone that this was not an ordinary *Atlantic* article. And yet it did prompt outcry. The *Atlantic* incident brought to the surface the increasingly popular practice of ‘native advertising’ in which advertisers create or sponsor content intended to blend in with the editorial content. The practice has become increasingly common, with nearly three quarters of online publishers using some form of native advertising in mid-2013 (Marvin, 2013). Although a pervasive promotional form, it took the controversy around the Scientology ad to thrust native advertising into public view. This reaction was not paradigm repair in which speakers ostracize deviant actors to protect norms (Bennett et al., 1985), but an example of paradigm building involving efforts to negotiate developing forms of native advertising. What emerges through the discourse around the Scientology ad is competition over what native advertising should or should not be. Proponents acted as ‘norm entrepreneurs’ (Sunstein, 1996) seeking to normalize advertising–editorial hybrid forms through a set of emerging arguments regarding the need for news sites to govern the totality of content – both editorial and advertising – to strengthen relationships with fickle online audiences. It is only through attending to this process that a critique can be made of the potentially insidious commercialization of online news content. Baker (2002) warns how ‘The boundary between acceptable advertising and corruption is subject to constant cultural negotiation, with commercial pressures obviously pushing to expand the realm of the acceptable’ (p. 54). What this study interrogates is the cultural negotiation of native advertising.

The controversy surrounding the *Atlantic*-Scientology native advertisement provides a case study of norm construction efforts concerning the fundamental relationship between advertising and journalism for online news. It begins by tracking literature on advertising and journalistic autonomy before turning to how various actors identified specific wrongdoing at the *Atlantic*. It then examines broader arguments for and against native advertising with a special interest in how advocates act as norm entrepreneurs. But beyond the positions espoused by journalism and advertising practitioners, the

diminishing boundaries between editorial and advertising inherent in native advertising necessitate new analytical approaches. With past accusations of veiled advertising influence (Baker, 1994, 2002) giving way to emergent models of explicit advertising–editorial hybridity, journalism studies needs to reevaluate its perspectives on journalistic content in order to critically engage with increasingly popular forms of native advertising.

Journalism and advertising: An uneasy relationship

In the United States – and increasingly the rest of the world – the news media have traditionally occupied a dual role as vehicles of civic information and profit-making. Particularly as party sponsorship of newspapers in the 19th century gave way to professionally oriented journalism emphasizing the core norms of objectivity and autonomy in the 20th century (Schudson, 1978), journalists worked to insulate themselves from external influences by accepting a greater reliance on advertising as the chief funding source for increasingly large media organizations. To accommodate journalists' demands for autonomy while also filling the coffers of owners, publishers instituted a separation – sometimes called the 'Chinese wall' or 'church-state division' – that would, in theory, render editorial decisions free from business ones (Coddington, 2014). Ideally, news organizations provided advertisers with access to difficult and costly to reach mass audiences on the condition that no influence over news content could be wielded. Exceptions abound, but it has remained a steadfast principle of journalism. Hallin (1994) attributes the apex of 'sacred' editorial functions of news being left unsullied by 'profane' business concerns (p. 171) to post-World War II political consensus and the economic success masking journalism's professional incongruities. Over time, journalists' defense of this segregation became entrenched both functionally and normatively. Autonomy from advertiser influence encapsulated the ideal of the press as an independent institution unhindered in pursuing its normative commitment to objectivity (Maras, 2013), which further supported journalists' arguments for cultural authority. As Pauly (1988) argues, 'The myth of editorial autonomy not only protected the self-regard of the news worker, but also affirmed the higher social goals claimed on behalf of the daily newspaper as an agent of civilization' (p. 255). These are lofty goals, which journalists pursued through a shared sense of professionalism that explicitly discarded responsibility for generating income.

Despite the normative rigidity of editorial independence, in practice the forces of commercialism have always compromised journalistic autonomy – inescapably so in primarily for-profit systems like the United States. From the meddling of the press baron (Pauly, 1988) to the facelessness of corporate media (Bagdikian, 2004; McManus, 1994), scholars have shown how commercial pressures shape journalism. Even if journalists escape concern with revenues, news hierarchies must include managers tasked with both allocative power over newsroom resources and enhancing revenue. Decisions over the provision of resources affecting news content – bureaus, sections/desks, new positions, terminations, technological innovations and so on – are all driven by revenue. Even with structural divides in place, we can surmise that journalists internalize the need to attract audiences – and perhaps to avoid irritating advertisers – in their decision-making.

Questions surrounding the influence of advertisers also call attention to larger issues of media commercialism. Baker (2002: 11) argues that with for-profit, advertising-supplemented news media, the interests of the audience are often at odds with advertisers seeking to create an advantageous space to promote their products. Elsewhere, Baker (1994: 44) describes the tendency of news organizations to privilege the need to sustain advertising – rather than a commitment to democratic norms – by shaping news practices to both directly and indirectly serve advertisers’ interests. From the adoption of an uncontroversial tone to story selection based on attracting certain desirable demographics, advertiser needs leak into news decisions. More recently, the intrusion of advertising into content has led to what McChesney (2004) terms ‘hyper-commercialism’ (p. 145), in which he warns ‘corporate power is woven so deeply into the culture that it becomes invisible, unquestionable’ (p. 167). This trend emerges in advertising strategies emphasizing subtle immersion in daily life (Serazio, 2013). With native advertising, it is important to recognize how the trend toward the imbrication of advertising and media content – including journalism – complicates efforts to draw sharp boundaries between editorial content and advertising. For Bourdieu (2005), pledges of journalistic autonomy run up against ‘forces of commercial heteronomy’ (p. 43). He associates this development mainly with commercial television in France, but it is an apt description for journalism in other settings (see Waisbord, 2013: chapter 4). The journalistic field remains beholden to the political and economic fields, which compromises its own self-rule. Or, as Altschull (1997) more bluntly warns, ‘The content of the news media inevitably reflects the interests of those who pay the bill’ (p. 259). Despite pledges of autonomy, advertising-supported journalism has long remained open to influence.

Online advertising: Surveillance and hybridity

As journalism moves online, evaluations of the advertising–editorial nexus require attention to the materiality of the medium. First, unlike rough measures of attention – ratings, circulation numbers and audience surveys – available to print and broadcast news organizations and their advertisers, the architecture of digital communications allows for more exact measures. Audience metrics make possible granular data about news consumption – including which stories receive attention when and which go unclicked. Given the emphasis news sites place in attracting audiences, audience metrics threaten journalists’ autonomy to establish newsworthiness (Anderson, 2011; Usher, 2013). For advertisers, this data-rich environment supports a sea change away from mass messaging to customizable ads targeting specific users (Turow, 2012). Second, the medium eases barriers for online journalism start-ups that diverge from legacy news models. In balancing both editorial and business demands (Briggs, 2011), these entrepreneurs are able to experiment with new advertising forms. Third, digital spaces have altered assessments of the audience commodity from attention (Smythe, 1977) to digital labor (Fuchs, 2012) as users participate in creating and sharing content. Finally, and most specific to the present study, online media spaces allow for the intermingling of advertisements and editorial (Bærug and Harro-Loit, 2012; Howe and Teufel, 2014; Rodgers, 2007), with native advertising emerging as more integrated than its print antecedent of visually offset paid advertising sections. Taken together, the particularities of online news compel careful

attention to how the medium affords different kinds of advertising–editorial relationships than what has existed in legacy media.

Understanding the growth of native advertising warrants recognition of the generally weak revenue prospects for online advertising. Unlike the substantial advertising revenue print and broadcast news media exacted through access to mass audiences, a glut of online sites has sharply lowered the price of advertising. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2013) estimates that for newspapers every dollar earned online equates to 15 dollars lost from print. More alarmingly, the growth of newspapers’ digital advertising revenues has slowed. In this dismal economic context, native advertising offers new sources for growth (Marvin, 2013). It has been popular among new start-ups like BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Gawker, and Mashable. But it also used by older brands like *Forbes*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Even as an emerging form, sponsored content earned online publishers US\$1.9 billion in 2013 (Sebastian, 2013). BuzzFeed, which derives its revenue solely from native advertising, expects to earn US\$120 million in 2014 (Advertising Age, 2013). Many of these outlets employ in-house studios facilitating content with advertisers, which suggests the further institutionalization of advertising–editorial collaboration. Yet, while native advertising has spread, it is also still in its infancy, which is why the *Atlantic-Scientology* advertisement deserves attention for how it touched off a public moment of reflection for journalists and advertisers.

Methodology

The *Atlantic-Scientology* incident provides a case study to analyze how a flurry of evaluative responses from a variety of journalism and advertising stakeholders publicly negotiated understandings of native advertising. This discussion was captured through a qualitative analysis of 51 news stories located first through Lexis-Nexis and Google searches, and second by following links within already captured stories. The material comes from a variety of media types, including newspapers, magazines, the journalism, advertising, and technology trade press, and online news. While it cannot be certain that every story was captured, the presence of links within online stories ensures a comprehensive sample of the mediated conversation surrounding the *Atlantic-Scientology* ad.

The articles were then analyzed using textual analysis informed by the procedures of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Close readings of the texts began with the application of two open-ended questions: What problems did speakers identify with the Scientology ad and/or the practices at the *Atlantic*? How did speakers use this episode to speak about native advertising generally? That is, the analysis focused on both specific diagnoses of the incident and more general discussions of the underlying practice. Open and axial coding techniques allowed for the assembly of persistent interpretive patterns into themes identified by the author. The sections below recount the main themes that were found, with careful attention to the discursive choices made by the speakers.

‘We Screwed Up’ – Defining deviance at The Atlantic

After facing hours of what *Adweek* called ‘The collective fury of the media chattering class’ (Warzel, 2013), the initial reaction of the *Atlantic* was to replace the Scientology advertisement with an apology and explanation for what it had done:

We screwed up. It shouldn't have taken a wave of constructive criticism – but it has – to alert us that we've made a mistake, possibly several mistakes. We now realize that as we explored new forms of digital advertising, we failed to update the policies that must govern the decisions we make along the way. ... We remain committed to and enthusiastic about innovation in digital advertising, but acknowledge – sheepishly – that we got ahead of ourselves. We are sorry, and we're working very hard to put things right.

While the *Atlantic* accepted blame, its vagueness left room for critics to diagnose what went wrong. Critics weighed in with several specific problems with what the site did.

First, some critics targeted not the embedded advertising but the client. The Church of Scientology aggressively resists journalistic investigations into its clandestine workings, and the timing of the *Atlantic* ad coincided with the release of a critical book (Wright, 2013). Unsurprisingly, many commentators blasted the *Atlantic* for accepting any sort of advertising from the group. Most colorfully, former *Atlantic* blogger Andrew Sullivan took aim at the Church of Scientology on Twitter: 'Seriously, that is ad-whoredom of a particularly egregious variety. The *Atlantic* is now partly sponsored by the Church of Scientology?' (Ingram, 2013). As *Slate* noted, 'This wasn't an advertisement for a new car or watch, but for a (in)famously secretive religion practiced by Tom Cruise and other Hollywood stars' (Voorhees, 2013). The reputation of the Church of Scientology was then contrasted with the august reputation of the *Atlantic*, notably on *Gawker*: 'The *Atlantic* – the one time publisher of Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edith Wharton – is now publishing Scientology propaganda' (Berman, 2013).

Other critics lambasted the *Atlantic* for allowing the Scientology ad to mimic the look and feel of editorial content – aside from a yellow box marked 'Sponsor content'. The *Washington Post's* Paul Farhi (2013a) referred to the 'chameleon-like' quality of the ad, or what Andrew Sullivan (2013) cheekily called 'enhanced advertorial techniques'. Within discussions of form, many decried an obviously moderated pro-Scientology comment section mirroring the style of a normal story. *Forbes*, a site that regularly includes native advertising, chastised the 'Astroturf-like false impression of favorable reader response' (Bercovici, 2013). The exclusion of negative comments undercut the function of comments as a place for readers to challenge news stories (Robinson, 2010). As one critic puts it, 'You are presenting a tiny selection of comments by supporters of your client as the entire conversation. You are telling a lie' (Kissane, 2013).

A third area of critique regarding tone blasted the Scientology ad as 'a pretty poorly done advertorial' (Masnick, 2013). Reuters media columnist Jack Shafer (2013) described the ad as 'composed by tone-deaf propagandists' for its press release-type language. In its excessive praise, the advertisement became an 'unintentionally hilarious paean to Scientology' (Gillmor, 2013). The jarring disconnect with the rest of the *Atlantic's* content led critics to ask why any *Atlantic* reader would actually read the piece.

Whatever the complaint, the *Atlantic*-Scientology ad quickly came to symbolize the perils of embedding advertising into space normally reserved for editorial content. Even among the advertising community, *Advertising Age* dubbed it 'Exhibit A in just how wrong "native advertising" can go' while the online site *PaidContent* explained how 'The venerable *Atlantic* is being made the poster child for what happens when native

advertising goes wrong' (Roberts, 2013). Symbols of deviance become powerful as they accrue meaning over time (Carlson, 2014). And critics interpreted this particular episode as an example of deviant behavior and a warning about blurring boundaries between advertising and editorial content.

But just what was this incident a symbol of? Accusations of journalistic deviance are regularly made according to violations of clear journalistic norms, including plagiarism (Hindman, 2005), fakery (Carlson, 2009; Eason, 1986), or comprised objectivity (Reese, 1990). That this episode involved an advertisement on a news site introduces ambiguity over what went wrong. Even the *Atlantic's* apology, recounted above, is vague, spurring the *Washington Post's* Erik Wemple (2013b) to ask 'Was the screw-up in the accepting of an advertorial from Scientology? Was it in the presentation? Was it in the handling of the comments?' Wemple's (2013a) pursuit of clarification from the *Atlantic* yielded further obfuscation from a senior manager: 'It's a general apology for not having thought this through overall. I wouldn't want to assign the apology to a specific portion of this'. Given this ambiguity, the *Columbia Journalism Review's* Dean Starkman (2013) declared, 'no one is sure exactly what the *Atlantic* did wrong'. The lack of a commonly understood violation evinces haziness surrounding native advertising. What this incident exposes is not individualized deviance but a lack of consensus around advertising and editorial hybrids.

The next sections examine how generalizations of the *Atlantic*-Scientology controversy yielded two distinct arguments about native advertising. The first set comprises warning that blurring boundaries between advertising and editorial content severely diminish the credibility of online news. For these critics, native advertising amounts to trickery or betraying the audience. However, a second response promotes native advertising as serving readers while generating much-needed revenue for news sites.

The danger of blurred boundaries

Critics interpreted the *Atlantic's* Scientology ad as signifying the threat to journalistic autonomy incumbent in distorting the editorial–advertising divide. The *Washington Post* called attention to 'native ads' as 'pushing even further across the lines that separate news content from advertising' (Farhi, 2013a). These arguments holding editorial and advertising to be necessarily separate domains constituted boundary work seeking to define journalism from non-journalism (Carlson, 2015; Gieryn, 1999). This need was voiced most forcefully within the journalism trade press, with Rim Rieder (2013b) warning in the *American Journalism Review*: 'The problem is sponsored content appeals to advertisers because it feels more like news and less like advertising. That can be a very slippery slope. It's crucial to keep the boundary sharply delineated'. This warning stems from a deep-seated defense of journalistic independence from advertising's reach, which connects to two arguments explored in this section: first, native advertising amounts to trickery, and second, it imperils journalistic credibility by betraying readers.

The charge of native advertising as trickery assumes readers were fooled into thinking the Scientology ad was independent *Atlantic* content. Although it is unclear how many – if any – failed to realize the ad's origins, this allegation arose uncritically. Even within the advertising trade press, *Advertising Age* credited the ad's withdrawal to its being

'mistaken for editorial content' (Poggi, 2013: 13). The narrative that the *Atlantic* did not properly label the ad took root, as evidenced by Rim Rieder's (2013a) claim in *USA Today* more than two months later: 'Native ads resemble a site's editorial content, and it's important to make clear that they actually are ads. The *Atlantic* found itself in the midst of controversy when it failed to do so with a Scientology package'.

Whether or not readers were fooled, the *Atlantic* incident spurred a broader critique of native advertising existing only to trick readers into mistaking advertising for editorial content. Edward Wasserman (2013), journalism program director at the University of California, argued on *Huffington Post* that native advertising's 'camouflaged' appearance equated to trickery: 'There's still an irreducible element of subterfuge to the whole enterprise'. The goal is not merely to generate greater exposure than display advertising, but 'to appropriate the format of the surrounding publication and harness its credibility to strengthen the authority and persuasiveness of the advertising'. Similarly, *Wired's* David Dobbs (2013) argued that native advertising leaches credibility from news:

If the Church of Scientology wanted to run an ad, they'd buy an ad. But they wanted something more: They wanted some of the credibility that goes with being editorial content at the *Atlantic*. That's the whole point of sponsored content or advertorials whose design mimics that of the magazine or occupies layouts that are, by design, meant to tell the reader that This Is The Magazine (or website): to pass as editorial content, or something very much like it, and thereby borrow – no, steal – some of the credibility that writers and editors have worked hard to grant that space.

Trickery becomes the goal: 'By dressing up as editorial content, advertorials exist primarily to disarm, if not fool, readers and viewers' (Farhi, 2013b). The consternation directed toward native advertising for fooling readers rested on the presumption that journalistic objectivity normatively forbade such tactics.

Critics ruing the collapse of advertising–editorial boundaries feared violating readers' expectations of journalistic autonomy would harm journalism's standing. The *New York Times's* David Carr (2013) warned, 'Publishers might build a revenue ledge through innovation of the advertising format, but the confusion that makes it work often diminishes the host publication's credibility' (p. B1). In this argument, confusion over the origins of any piece of editorial casts suspicion on all. If unchecked, Carr argued, any 'publisher looking to save the village commons of journalism through innovation should be careful they don't set it on fire in the process'. This slippery-slope argument assumes readers will recoil from being constantly tricked by news organizations if traditional boundaries separating advertising from editorial diminish.

Others castigated native advertising more harshly for betraying readers. In an essay on CNN's site, digital advertising specialist Ian Schafer (2013) called the ad 'a betrayal of an implicit contract that should exist between a publication of the *Atlantic's* stature and its readership'. Similarly in *Wired*, Dobbs (2013) considered it 'a huge betrayal of writers and readers, to turn [editorial space] into a sales room'. Josh Stearns (2013) argued news sites 'shouldn't auction off their relationships with readers to the highest bidder'. The relationship between journalists and readers invoked through these claims excludes interference from third parties, particularly advertisers. But beyond readers,

this argument further expresses the professionalized ideal of journalists being left alone to do their work.

Native advertising as giving readers what they want

Given the negative reception above, why would journalism organizations even pursue native advertising? Many commenters on the Scientology ad pointed to the difficult economic conditions facing online journalism. Whereas print and broadcast media organizations extracted ample advertising revenues due to the scarcity of mass content, the abundance of online sites lowers advertising rates while ad placement software siphons spending away from traditional display advertising. News organizations cannot simply shift to digital delivery platforms and continue their offline revenue strategies. Moreover, no new funding scheme has yet to replicate past success. These conditions impel organizations to innovate with new revenue streams, including native advertising.

Online journalism's economic pressures received ample attention within discussions of the Scientology ad. As *PaidContent's* Mathew Ingram (2013) remarked, "'native' advertising is one of the few bright spots – or potential bright spots – in a landscape that is riddled with charts of ad revenue that are going in exactly the wrong direction'. The *Wall Street Journal* positioned native advertising, even with its 'reputational risk', as a means of achieving profits:

For online media like the *Atlantic*, sponsored content such as the now-pulled Scientology commercial is a chance to escape the nickel-and-dime game of automated banner ads paying a few dollars per thousand views, and try and move into the more high-value ads that sustain big media companies, print and TV alike. (Gara, 2013)

This comment links native advertising to a virtuous circle of both consistent revenue and respectability.

The economic imperative of finding new revenue sources explains only part of the argument for native advertising. In contrast to critics lamenting the inclusion of native advertising within the editorial space of news, other observers began from the opposite direction to reprimand the *Atlantic* for failing to host native content of interest to its readers. This argument appeared within the advertising trade press in *Adweek*:

While the nature of the Scientology-based content is bound to spur its own journalistic ethics debates, from a business perspective, the greatest sin of the *Atlantic* ... may be licensing uninteresting and bizarre content that falls well outside the walls of the magazine's brand. (Warzel, 2013)

Similarly, *Mediabistro's* Karen Fratti (2013) argued 'to make a campaign successful, the sponsored content for a questionable entity has to mesh with the editorial content. In look and feel and in tone'. The 'native' of native advertising necessitates sufficiently interesting content to offset its promotional characteristics. An executive at BuzzFeed, a site relying solely on sponsored content, echoed this belief: 'People will know on some level that it's an ad, but if ... it's just a promotion, that's not shareable' (Farhi, 2013a).

The *Atlantic* management hewed to this interpretation by admitting that the Scientology advertisement did not blend in *enough* with accompanying editorial content. In a company wide memo issued after the incident, Atlantic Media president M. Scott Havens acknowledged that ‘we did not adequately work with the advertiser *to create a content program that was in line with our brand*’ (Bloomgarden-Smoke, 2013, emphasis added). Similarly, another senior vice president told *PaidContent*: ‘The biggest mistake in retrospect was that *it wasn’t harmonious to our site and it didn’t bring any value to our readers*’ (Roberts, 2013, emphasis added). These statements shed light on internal understandings of native advertising within a storied media outlet in their departure from entrusting advertising to advertisers (with minimal tests ensuring inoffensiveness) to the belief that advertising should be a carefully controlled and complementary part of the site’s content strategy. This shift in characterizing the relationship between editorial and advertising alters foundational understandings of what news content is, a point raised in the conclusion.

A different variety of boundary work emerged from the belief that native advertising should blend in with the editorial content. Criticisms of the Scientology advertisement for failing to connect with the *Atlantic* audience worked to establish the contours of appropriate native advertising practice. When native advertisements mimic advertising copy instead of editorial content, they cease to be native. NewsCred founder Shafqat Islam argued that because ‘*Atlantic* readers don’t find that content interesting’, it was ‘a mistake and *not an example of native*’ (Starkman, 2013, emphasis added). From this perspective, ‘native’ describes only advertising content able to entice readers on its own merits. The editor of Mashable underscored this point by defending his site’s use of native advertising as legitimate content: ‘I know what an advertorial is. These [native ads] are pure editorial’ (Vega, 2013). These discussions expose active efforts to disentangle native advertising from other advertising forms, including traditional well-marked advertorials appearing in print news. The *Atlantic*-Scientology incident comes to exemplify not the perils of editorial–advertising hybridity, but the failure of this mixture.

Native advertising and norm-making

In the midst of Scientology ad criticism, *Salon*’s technology writer Andrew Leonard (2013) asked what is perhaps the most central question underlying the incident: ‘Who decides what’s verboten and what’s acceptable?’ The question underpins both the lack of settled norms governing native advertising and the role notable incidents play in the social process of establishing norms. Leonard added, ‘There’s certainly an element of holier-than-thou hypocrisy for anyone to say, this variety of sponsored content is OK, while this is anathema. But lines will get drawn anyway’. This study argues that the erection of boundaries around native advertising involves discursive labor to define how the *Atlantic* erred and to construct a normative framework from which to make such judgments. Borrowing from Sunstein (1996), we can consider agents who argue for the characteristics of *proper* native advertisements as ‘norm entrepreneurs’. This perspective goes beyond the mechanics of native advertisements to the systems of meanings surrounding this advertising form. Overcoming entrenched normative positions advocating advertising–editorial separation requires a rival normative framework redefining the relationship between advertising, editorial content, and audiences. The formulation of

this relationship sketched by norm entrepreneurs below eschews concerns over native advertising's trickery to instead argue for its value to audiences.

Norm-making around native advertising proceeds from a distinction with traditional forms of editorial–advertising hybrids. TechDirt founder Mike Masnick (2013) made this clear:

Many point out that ‘advertorial’ is nothing new, and that’s accurate, but true native content is something different. For years, when we’ve talked about these concepts, everyone has complained about said ‘advertorial’, suggesting that it’s annoying or misleading ... But, when done right, it doesn’t need to be either annoying or misleading.

From this perspective, the Scientology ad erred in mimicking traditional advertorial language. In this quote, ‘right’ indicates advertising that is either indiscernible to the reader or of sufficient quality to not matter. Masnick further distinguished native as ‘creating useful and engaging content that wasn’t misleading or just pure propaganda’ from non-native as ‘the content sucks and no one wants to see it’.

The growth of native advertising within the space of editorial content requires reimagining traditional journalistic norms separating advertising from editorial functions. Visually, native advertising blurs this division, and internally newsrooms confront closer connections to funding sources. On the *Guardian* site, Dan Gillmor (2013) confronted questions of boundaries:

Every day, it seems, we see traditional boundaries – which were always less rigid or tall than journalists pretended – being breached by the old guard, who’ve been panicked by the revenue implosion of the past decade. Many of the new players, especially in the social part of the media ecosystem, have jettisoned the traditional tactics almost entirely.

The twin forces of economic upheaval and institutional invention invite reconsiderations of this boundary. As *Medabistro* puts it, ‘Marketing and advertising departments are always separated from the newsroom. But like all things digital, seemingly separate things converge in unexpected ways’ (Fratti, 2013). These comments carve out digital news as a separate space comprising its own norms and contextual pressures.

Norm entrepreneurs repeatedly responded to the *Atlantic* by offering advice to digital publishers engaging in native advertising. This guidance mainly focused on sustaining reader relationships. For example, the PBS MediaShift project acknowledged thorny questions raised by native advertising: ‘Getting an answer to “how far?” can force a delicate balancing act between making money – precious revenue needed to keep the operation afloat – and doing something that causes more damage than the money is worth’ (Benkoil, 2013). To strike this balance, 12 principles were suggested, including, ‘Serve the community, first, but accommodate the client. Your first obligation is always to the people consuming what you do’. This advice illustrates the difficulty of simultaneously serving news audiences and advertisers who fund the news – a situation unfamiliar when strict organizational divides largely ameliorated this discussion. Now the encroachment of native advertising increasingly requires news publishers to assess this balance in real time for each new campaign. Making judgments requires a commitment to supplying readers with content that is both interesting and has integrity – like any other content. This position can be gleaned in advice from *PaidContent*’s Mathew Ingram (2013):

'keep your readers in mind: sponsored content has to be as useful as the kind you produce, if not more so, and it has to be aligned with your brand, or it will fail – sometimes spectacularly'. Such comments further diminish advertising as a separate realm, instead including it as another form of content within the editorial space, all of which is intended to lure audiences.

Arguments for treating native advertising as content assume a holistic approach eschewing the traditional isolation of the news from advertising. Digital journalism designer Erin Kissane (2013) argued this amalgamation does not automatically diminish news norms:

[T]he whole point of actual journalism – as distinct from, say, 4chan or tabloids – is that it works within an ethical framework to accomplish something of use to the public. And those ethical positions can't stop at the 'Chinese wall' that is supposed to separate ad sales (and thus financial pressure) from editorial work, *because from the outside, and sometimes even on the inside, it is all the same thing.* (Emphasis added)

By inverting the focus from news organization to news audience, this view posits a core need to establish cohesiveness across content – editorial and advertising – on a given site. Kissane further suggests advertising's push from direct sales pitches toward narrative forms means online publishers can no longer sustain separate standards for news and advertisements: 'If you have ethical guidelines about what you publish, they should apply to what you publish. Anything else shows a contempt for your readers that will eventually and rightfully catch up to you'. Such statements would make little sense in the context of broadcast or print news. Rather, they indicate the need to account for the materiality of digital news media in assessing emerging news and advertising forms, especially in offering up critiques.

Conclusion

The *Atlantic* drew sweeping condemnation for its decision to turn over a chunk of its front page to 'sponsor content' from the Church of Scientology that resembled little more than a chirpy press release. But the shape of this condemnation was anything but uniform. Attacks on the site crystallized into competing assessments roughly corresponding to either fear that native advertising weakened the credibility of news sites or advice for how to improve the practice by making it more integrated into the fabric of news content. *BusinessWeek* summed up the significance of this latter point: 'At their best, native ads are a seamless part of the reading experience. Depending on who you are, that's either great or horrible' (Keller, 2013). The position of those who may find it 'horrible' emerges from the steadfast belief that journalism organizations ought to keep advertising and content separate. This organizational division reflects a core normative commitment to journalistic independence, including from funding sources. Critics of the *Atlantic* urged the perpetuation of this practice for online content. But reactions to the Scientology ad exposed a competing set of beliefs based on the conviction that online journalism cannot sustainably mimic offline news forms – an argument borne out in paltry online display advertising rates. Instead, proponents of native content envisioned advertising as another mode of content embedded *within* news, predicated on providing readers a useful array of content choices.

Making sense of these competing positions requires foregrounding the differences between online and traditional media. Print and broadcast journalism thrived during an era of media scarcity when advertisers paid handsomely for access to the audiences accrued by news organizations (Hallin, 1994). Audiences with relatively few alternatives consumed these news media – along with their ads – in larger numbers. By contrast, media abundance brought on by nearly endless online content shifts the problem to enticing audiences to stay and return to one's site given the other options available. The shift from scarcity to abundance pushes advertising from an add-on to news content into becoming part of the effort to convince readers to stay and share content with other potential readers. Advertising moves from an afterthought to part of the package, which causes editorial and advertising arms of news organizations to comele in uncharted ways that cannot be properly analyzed through reference to existing scholarship predicated on the pre-digital journalism–advertising relationship. New conditions require a new critical perspective on journalistic autonomy.

To formulate a critique of native advertising, it is necessary to attend both to the unique economic and technological context of online news and the ongoing norm-making process surrounding the practice. Sunstein (1996) usefully combines norm-making and context in his concept of 'norm entrepreneurs', which provides an analytical perspective to monitor how various journalism and advertising stakeholders redefine advertising as acceptable news content. Confronting deep-seated opposition embedded within the ideology of journalistic professionalism (Deuze, 2005; Waisbord, 2013), pro-native advertising norm entrepreneurs shifted the focus to the relationship between news sites and their audiences by establishing an imperative of providing content that audiences would find attractive. To betray the audience, from this perspective, is to allow Scientology-like heavy-handed advertising instead of content more subtly connected to a sponsor. This vision of native advertising shifts meanings of journalistic independence away from its traditional workings to redefine the authority relation between journalists and audiences around a broader curatorial norm of providing a coherent mix of both editorial and advertising content.

The implications of this new normative terrain for journalism warrant close scrutiny during this nascent stage of native advertising. At worst, the continued erosion of boundaries demarcating editorial from advertising content quashes previous normative understandings of journalistic autonomy. Instead of editorial content being used to attract audiences who are then exposed to advertising, advertising itself begins to attract audiences. This scenario appeals to the dictates of revenue generation – needed as it is by online news sites. But it raises foundational questions underlying the generation of news content. All native advertising rests on a set of criteria based, in the end, on increasing brand awareness rather than on the professional judgment of journalists. Of course, this latter proposition may seem overly idealistic as journalistic autonomy is weakened by the economic necessity to attract news audiences. The literature on journalism is rife with critiques of revenue-enhancing soft news overtaking hard news essential to the maintenance of democratic governance. But what should not be lost is the distinction between journalists creating certain material to entice audiences generally and advertisers working to create content to heighten their brand specifically. The latter transforms the commercialization of journalism into something qualitatively different in line with McChesney's (2004) idea of 'hyper-commercialism'. In this environment, native

advertising gives rise to new forms of cooperative interdependence between advertisers and journalists that present a radical break from previous organizational arrangements – especially for such vaunted news brands as the *Atlantic*. Placing advertising content under the auspices of editorial content eradicates the distance between journalists and its funding sources, altering news practices in ways that cannot yet be understood.

Native advertising obliges new innovations for analyzing both the political economy of news and journalists' work practice sensitive to the workings of online news. In this way, the *Atlantic* case challenges journalism studies to reflect on core assumptions delimiting its scholarly terrain. In its interest in practices, texts, and audiences, journalism studies has nearly exclusively focused on news as distinct from other types of cultural outputs. Except in the case of its intrusion into newsmaking, advertising appearing alongside news has been an afterthought only rarely looked at in context (an exception is Williams' (1974) study of television flow). This will not do. As norm-making labor transforms boundaries between editorial and advertising content, journalism studies will also have to question its boundaries of inquiry and extend its purview. This requires exploring forms, practices, and norms accruing to new types of output. In the end, what the *Atlantic-Scientology* advertisement portends is a broader vision of journalism as a sphere of blurred content boundaries deserving increased scholarly attention.

As a way forward, it is necessary to study native advertising in context, both within the newsrooms where it is assembled and in the response from audiences who consume online news. But it is also imperative to monitor and critique the work of norm entrepreneurs who are developing not just new practices for news, but, more importantly, new normative underpinnings justifying these practices to the point of redefining what constitutes the field of journalism. To respond, journalism scholars need to also become norm entrepreneurs to develop a normative position of what is allowable and desirable. Because moments of upheaval and innovation tend to coalesce into sturdy structures, the need for critique and intervention is now.

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