

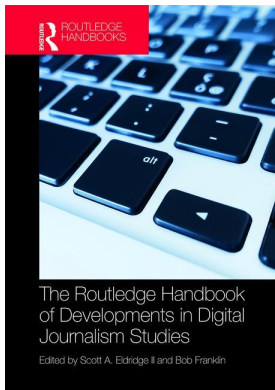
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NATIVE ADVERTISING AND THE APPROPRIATION OF JOURNALISTIC CLOUT

Raul Ferrer-Conill and Michael Karlsson

The use of native advertising has sparked a heated debate within traditional news media. While similar formats have a long history within journalism, this new iteration furthers the blurring of boundaries between news and ads by producing ads that look and feel like news but that are clearly labeled as advertising. The novelty of native advertising is that it advocates for openly merging commercial and editorial content, aggravating an existing tension between the professional and commercial logics of journalism. This open relationship between journalists and marketers calls for revisiting the traditional narrative that sustains journalistic autonomy.

Of all the metaphors comprising the social imaginary of contemporary journalism, the figure of *the wall* is by far the one that has contributed the most to establish the symbol of journalistic autonomy. During the golden age of journalism, the wall exemplified the organizational division between the editorial and commercial operations of news media (Coddington, 2015). A strong, impenetrable wall meant that journalists could escape political and commercial pressures and focus on objective, autonomous, and ethical reporting (McNair, 1998). The image of watchdog reporting is based upon this premise. The so-called fourth state cemented its legitimacy by pledging allegiance to the public (Hampton, 2010; Lewis et al., 2008), an allegiance that could only be sustained by an independent group of newswriters that adhered to the norms and values of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007).

Of course, news media organizations do not conform to a monolithic form of journalism, and the metaphoric wall ranged from reinforced concrete and steel to paper-thin porous materials (Bagdikian, 2004; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). While there are several accounts of permeability where political and commercial actors influenced editorial content, journalistic autonomy remained relatively unproblematic during the second half of the twentieth century. However, during the last two decades, journalists have experienced an accelerated challenge to their autonomy in the newsroom (Sjøvaag, 2013). This happened mostly on three fronts: first, on the technological front, where new publishing channels, new digital means of production, and technical innovations often dictate how information is gathered, formatted, and disseminated, reducing journalists' control over their own material; second, on the professional front, where the demand for new skills and the power increase of non-journalistic actors – technologists, business people, and PR practitioners – within newsrooms have reduced the authority of journalists to control what news is; and third, on the commercial front, where the decline of sales and advertising

revenue have spurred news organizations to find alternative sources of income, often deriving in commercial pressures on the editorial front (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014).

Commercial news media are still trying to find a viable business model that can keep their operations profitable: on the one hand, the revenue of traditional advertising decreasing, mostly due to ineffectiveness of former ad types and advertisers migrating to bigger audience broker platforms like Facebook and Google, and on the other hand, the digital business still developing, trying to find a sustainable revenue portfolio. Thus, native advertising has gained notoriety across various types of digital content (Couldry and Turow, 2014; Matteo and Dal Zotto, 2015) as well as within journalism (Carlson, 2015). Within the context of news media, native advertising is defined as “a form of paid content marketing, where the commercial content is delivered adopting the form and function of editorial content, with the attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content” (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 905). The relevance of native advertising stems from the fact that it (a) openly tries to make advertising look like editorial content, (b) has spread rapidly across several digital publishers, including legacy media like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Washington Post*, and (c) is championed by chief editorial roles at those publications. In this sense, native advertising not only questions the insulating capacities of the wall metaphor, but it effectively transforms the wall into a sliding door. For news media, this signifies a potential challenge to the autonomy that contemporary journalism is built upon. Our goal is to provide an overview of native advertising as an emerging practice in the context of news media and to problematize its adoption both in terms of discursive and potential outcomes.

With this chapter, we aim to critically address the phenomenon of native advertising from three different angles. First, a historical and conceptual discussion on native advertising brings to the fore earlier models of native advertising that were referred to with different terms, as well the current understanding of what native ads are. Second, the current normative debate about native advertising is teased out to shed light on the rhetorical shift that seems to be permeating the news industry. To publishers, this kind of advertising creates important streams of revenue; to advertisers, it appropriates journalistic reputation, transforming their coexistence from an agonistic relationship to a symbiotic one. Finally, the potential challenges and benefits of adopting native ads vis-à-vis digital journalism are presented, aiming to demystify a commercial initiative that could lead to economic viability but also could question journalistic allegiance to the citizen and threaten the legitimacy and autonomy of contemporary news media.

The many names of native advertising

Almost paradoxically, it was a stronger commercialization of journalism that proved to be vital for the professionalization and independence of newspapers against political influence in the middle of the nineteenth century (Conboy, 2004). A commercially robust press could afford to be free, and the need to appeal to a wider population curtailed partisanship. This led to a long-standing use of advertising as a revenue stream, mostly in the form advertorial in print and banners in digital. Traditional advertising was clearly demarcated as advertising and attempted to convey commercial content without aspiring to mimic editorial content or blurring its advertising nature. Any covert transgression of these boundaries has normally been considered as unethical (Hamilton, 2004). The current trend, however, seems to be moving from that position.

In itself, native advertising can be traced to the traditional advertorial, a form of advertising appearing in the 1940s that loosely resembled editorial content (Kim, 1995). The advertorial already brought to the fore issues of transparency and deceptiveness (Ellerbach, 2004; Palser, 2002). Advertising industry trade literature identifies the traditional advertorial clearly as an advertisement that attempts to sell a product, whereas native advertising is not as blatant and

sales-oriented and instead takes an informative approach that looks even more like news (Joel, 2013; Sharma, 2015). Thus, native advertising seems to differ from older forms of advertising because it conflates both editorial and commercial perspectives into one single narrative that is not overtly commercial. Interestingly, even if native advertising is the newest expression of an old trend of journalism commercialization, it is rapidly spreading across the digital journalism landscape (Nielsen, 2016). The explanation may lie behind the fact that native advertising has been – if we understand successful in terms of profitable sources of revenue – successfully adopted by new media actors, who openly welcome this business model, mixing advertising, entertainment, and news (Campbell and Marks, 2015).

As it gains popularity in the current news media market, the term *native advertising* competes with other terms that seem to be referring to similar practices: *paid content* (Herbert and Thurman, 2007), *paid-for-news* (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2010), *look-alike-news* (Schechter, 1997), *content integration* (Li and Leckenby, 2004), *editorial integration* (Stamm and Underwood, 1993), *embedded marketing* (Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2006), and *branded content* (Carpenter, 2010). However, these practices seem to differ in terms of how transparent – or indeed how opaque – they are when disclosing the origin of content. Even when labeled with the umbrella term *sponsored content* (Cole and Greer, 2013), this content is aimed to suit the publisher's editorial line while offering content that aims to capture the readers' attention without openly attempting to promote products or services. The signifying factor is not only the appearance but also the intent to create cohesive, attractive content that conveys a message without directly attempting to sell a product; such content informs the reader while also delivering branded content that can be shared and spread to other networks. In other words, native advertising is not designed to sell items openly but to raise awareness and draw attention to topics advertisers and readers are invested in. Thus, it provides news that is appealing to both the reader and to the marketer.

The difficulty in distinguishing between formats again raises the question of autonomy and legitimacy. In his extensive literature review and qualitative study with journalists, Macnamara (2014) states that native advertising, along with any other commercial and PR transgression into editorial content, is generally seen as a negative challenge to journalists' autonomy, worsening journalistic content as well as raising transparency questions. This is supported by Edström's (2015) study on Swedish journalists. In her study, journalists express concerns and ethical dilemmas in the use of native advertising, fearing loss of credibility and trust. Such an approach should provoke skepticism among legacy news media outlets. In the next section, we discuss how native advertising is being widely adopted in the current digital journalism environment and the rapid evolution of discursive tactics.

Shifting discourse – from agonism to symbiosis

The pervasiveness of advertising in news media that led to the professionalization of journalism also became one of its weaknesses, as commercial success became necessary for journalistic endeavor. In digital journalism, this development became even more apparent when legacy media outlets made the decision to offer their content online for free, in the hopes that advertising alone would become a viable business model. However, as news media sites lost popularity in favor of social media platforms, advertisers followed the users and advertised elsewhere. Furthermore, the irruption of new media platforms such as the Huffington Post, Gawker, or BuzzFeed strengthened innovative forms of advertising (Couldry and Turow, 2014). Native advertising became a viable advertising stream for these new media outlets, and while they were not direct competitors of legacy news media, their economic success quickly became of interest to traditional news organizations.

In early 2013, most legacy news media openly advocated against native advertising (Ferrer-Conill, 2016). The agonistic discourse – in the Foucauldian sense – by which contemporary

news media used the metaphor of the wall to keep advertising in check was still brandished to reinforce the moral authority of well-established news organizations. Advertising, however, was as necessary to the enterprise as was the need to keeping it separate from the editorial content. Advertising was supposed to fund the news operation by coexisting with news in print and online, and the struggle to present both news and advertising in the same product was the key factor legitimating journalism. Without the presence of external influences that *could* shape news, there was no need for maintaining the claim that news is objective and therefore uninfluenced by these pressures.

Eventually, the struggle narrative gave way to a collaborative – if problematic – relationship with marketers. This shift can be exemplified by a statement by Gerard Baker, editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, who claimed that “(t)he clear delineation between news and advertising is becoming more and more blurred. We have to resist that” (Pompeo, 2013). He labeled native advertising a: “Faustian pact”. Only six months after those remarks, the *Wall Street Journal* published its first native ad, a story titled “Cocainomics”¹ detailing how Colombian drug-lords impose their business globally. The native ad was sponsored by Netflix in support of the show *Narcos* (Sebastian, 2014a). In an almost identical turn of events, Alexandra MacCallum, the *New York Times*’ audience development editor, when discussing the commercial practices of BuzzFeed, said, “(t)he mission of *The New York Times* is about the best journalism in the world and giving people accurate, timely information. I don’t think that BuzzFeed is competing in that space” (Moses, 2015). The attempt here was to establish a distance from the newcomer by adopting the role of a superior, legitimate news producer. However, the *New York Times* circulated in 2014 an internal innovation report in which the leadership stated that

“(t)he very first step should be a deliberate push to abandon our current metaphors of choice – ‘The Wall’ and ‘Church and State’ – which project an enduring need for division. Increased collaboration, done right, does not present any threat to our values of journalistic independent.

(2014: 61)

The same year, the *New York Times* published its first native ad in support of a Netflix show, this time *Orange Is the New Black*. The ad, titled “Women Inmates: Why the Male Model Doesn’t Work”,² focused on the raising population of female inmates in American penitentiaries (Sebastian, 2014b).

New media actors – Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, and Gawker among others – employed native advertising successfully for advertisers and the audience, gaining traction with younger audiences without harming their reputation (Campbell and Marks, 2015). Since it worked for them without any apparent loss of credibility, legacy news media tried to adopt the format. One by one, almost all American mainstream traditional news outlets started adopting native ads. Since then, a similar development has occurred in several other Western countries, including Spain, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the UK, and Israel (Knudsen et al., 2017).

The speed with which native advertising was adopted is surprising. While changes to journalistic norms and practices have traditionally happened over an extended period of time (Rodgers, 2007; Stoker, 1995), such a rapid change in practice – and the transition from decrying native advertising to adopting it – required revisiting discourse of change. This narrative sees an agonistic discourse, separating advertising from editorial content, quickly evolved into a symbiotic discourse that welcomed advertising in collaboration rather than as a necessary evil that ‘pollutes’ journalism’s editorial purity. In order to justify the adoption of native advertising, high-ranking figures in news media were outspoken in favor of native advertising, playing down the metaphoric wall and the commercial and editorial divide (for more on the discourse change, see Ferrer-Conill, 2016).

The novelty here is not in news media and advertising coexisting in a symbiotic relationship. This was long embedded in the commercial nature of newspapers, as marketers bought exposure in news media to reach an audience that advertisers could target, allowing newspapers to sustain their operations. This remains. However, the previous discourse around this relationship was distinctly agonistic. There was a need to make the public believe these conflicting worlds were separate. Over time, as advertisers found larger audiences in search engines and social media, traditional news media could no longer compete in audience size and precision – leading to a crisis within the newspaper industry. Native advertising, however, provided the mechanisms by which news organizations could leverage their existing credibility in exchange for establishing a more symbiotic editorial/advertising relationship. This required shifting the discourse from news media toward marketers so that it would be apparent they could collaborate with news media – the agonistic discourse giving way to a symbiotic one, thereby securing a way to maintain and increase advertising revenues.

As is the case with most discursive shifts, the transition requires a well-planned balance for it to work. Decades of cementing *the wall* cannot be undone overnight, and hence, adopting native advertising requires negotiating certain boundaries that had differentiated ads from journalistic content. In the following section, we detail how native advertising materializes in journalistic contexts.

Appropriation of journalistic reputation

The discursive construction of native advertising is particularly interesting because it has attempted to change a well-established norm of journalism – the metaphor of the wall – in a very short time, allowing the public to witness the process. Just as Carlson (2015: 862) suggests,

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.

What are then the underpinnings of native advertising and its fast deployment? If there is in fact a transition from an agonistic to a symbiotic relationship, it must then enforce the need to satisfy both partners: advertisers and news organizations.

From the perspective of the advertisers, mixing advertising and editorial content is viewed as a way to counter traditional advertising's limited reach and effectiveness in an increasingly cluttered and competitive environment (Goodlad et al., 1997; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Furthermore, banner fatigue and the increased use of ad blockers render traditional online ads less effective at reaching the audience. Since native advertising appears as “regular” content, it slips through the filters of ad blockers (Dowling, 2016). Finally, and most importantly, it is the blurring of boundaries between ads and editorial content that makes native advertising more attractive. On the one hand, simply appearing in an article format resembling editorial content increases readership, exposure, and reach, making it more effective (Wojdyski, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). On the other hand, the degree of trust associated with branded websites and editorial content such as newspaper articles is much higher than, for example, online banner ads or advertising on social networks (Campbell and Marks, 2015). Thus, the value lies in the association of an advertiser with a trusted publisher that has established legitimacy with an audience. Embedding their message in the form of an article offered by a trusted newspaper, advertisers effectively appropriate its reputation and influence and borrow credibility from its editorial content (Cameron and Curtin, 1995).

For news organizations, native advertising primarily represents a new form of revenue. The business of native advertising is growing and generates billions of dollars (Cameron and Ju-Pak,

2000; Campbell and Marks, 2015; Wojdynski and Golan, 2016). Native advertising can be understood as a way to retain advertisers and slow the exodus to social media platforms and to capitalize on advertising more effectively. According to Erjavec (2004), advertising rates for publishing what she calls *promotional news* are about three times higher than regular advertising. Furthermore, it can be argued that a well-designed and profitable native advertising strategy could also attract readers – due to a more enticing form of writing and producing content – as well as curbing the influence from older types of advertising and other pressures from other public relations actors (Schauster et al., 2016). News organizations could also claim that native advertising can also be good reporting and, at the same time, fund more investigative reporting that is not part of a commercial scheme. Additionally, considering the current job market and the loss of many journalist positions in the media sector, native advertising specialists could be unemployed or freelancing journalists that have the necessary storytelling skills to dress up a commercial message in editorial clothing with the necessary sensibilities of journalistic content (Hallahan, 2014; Wright, 2016).

At a simple glance, most enthusiastic newswriters may be able to outline a win-win situation. However, the problem with the symbiotic discourse is that it only operates at the theoretical level; the same win-win situation is much less balanced than what the positive narratives appear to suggest. At a practical level, the majority of risk of native advertising is placed on the publisher and its reputation and credibility, while the advertiser is barely exposed to potential drawbacks of the relationship. If the public believes journalistic independence is sustained, then the legitimacy of the democratic values of journalism remains intact, as does the publisher's reputation (Soloski, 1989). However, if this sense of independence is in question, it becomes difficult to claim the audience's interests are central to the operation.

Past cases show there is simply too much room for potential damaging outcomes. Following Carlson's (2015) sense making of the case of the *Atlantic*, alongside its use of native advertising, there were several other potential sources of controversy. The reputation of the client – the Church of Scientology – seemed to draw a big part of the reaction, including claims that selling space to such a marketer contests the reputation and authority of the *Atlantic*. Additionally, another source of critique was the quality of the text itself. The excessive praise and propagandistic tones of the ad seemed to betray the readers' expectations of quality content within the *Atlantic's* pages, with negative reaction directed at the magazine.

Any native advertising published in news media risks exposure to similar criticism and outcomes, while the advertiser barely faces criticism. This is because the advertiser fulfills what is expected of it, which is to advertise its message. Conversely, the news outlet introduces a new behavior that transgresses the norms and values of what journalism is supposed to be, despite attempts to shift the discourse from agonistic to symbiotic. Legitimacy and trust may be questioned once autonomy is compromised (Amazeen and Muddiman, 2017). The risks also may not materialize, and instead some news organizations (including new digital-only outlets) are able to capitalize on this partnership. The symbiotic discourse builds on the notion of a win-win relationship; however, we argue news media are the ones with higher stakes, as losing trust and credibility might have a deeper impact on their legitimacy.

In the following section, we address how the native advertising discourse manifests in reality. We turn to the contradictions within practice and the negotiations that news organization need to go through in order not to trigger criticism.

Shiny camouflage

The proponents of native advertising argue that such forms of revenue carry no drawbacks as long as readers understand they are reading commercial content; to advertisers, native is attractive because it mimics editorial content in such a way that readers barely identify it as commercial

content, hence appropriating journalistic clout. The critics claim disguising ads as news not only deceives the readers but also potentiates the loss of credibility news media claim to have. Native ads camouflaged as news transfer some of the newspapers' reputation to the advertiser, for good or ill.

What seems clear is that native advertising is by definition a contradictory format, at least in the way proponents claim it should work. As Wu et al. (2016: 1504) suggest, "the effectiveness of native advertising is connected to audiences' unawareness of its advertising nature". The same study found that user evaluation of the content was more positive when it was published in a high-credibility media and a high-credibility company. Thus, native advertising will be most effective when it is incorporated in the most reputable and credible media. This is why native advertising is appealing for advertisers, because it adopts the publisher's format and readers associate the ads with the publisher, transferring their influence from the advertiser to the publisher. To maintain the image of autonomy, publishers claim the disclosure of the ads is visible enough for readers to see. As long as the disclosure is visible enough, native advertising, they claim, is not a problem. The issue is that these claims are contradictory. Even though it is the most prevalent practice, disclosing native advertising as such goes directly against its intended effect. On the one hand, native ads try to look as similar as possible to regular news content, with the aim of making readers believe they are news. On the other hand, publishers are expected to label the pieces as native ads as a warning to readers. These two characteristics point toward one of the main issues of native advertising, deceptiveness (Wojdyski, 2016). If publishers really wanted to disclose native ads as ads, then the effort to mimic editorial content would not be necessary. Furthermore, if native ads were clearly identified as ads, then their value would not be three times that of regular ads.

Thus, it is in the interest of the publication to make sure that the balance between mimicking and disclosure is as subtle as possible, just enough to be profitable and not lose the readers' confidence. This seems to be a paradoxical shiny camouflage; inconspicuous enough that readers mistake advertising for editorial content but shiny enough to claim that they were warned.

An added difficulty is the different approaches to implementation that each publication adopts. While the theoretical discussion of how native advertising can influence journalism is done at a general level, the empirical analysis depends entirely on the cases to study. News organizations like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Guardian* have their own in-house dedicated native advertising departments – T Brand Studio, WP Brand Connect, and Guardian Labs, respectively – but many others rely on external marketers to create their native ad campaigns, with even less autonomy in negotiating the final product. In the next section, we address how researchers have tried to study native advertising and some of the difficulties that they have found.

Measuring native advertising

Scholars researching native advertising and journalism face a difficult object of study. Theoretically, native advertising becomes relevant through the discursive construction of journalism, its norms and values, and what its metaphorical constructs – like *the wall* – are experiencing. Methodologically, the toolset seems to focus on qualitative approaches to gauge the attitudes and opinions of producers and newswriters. The audience is often approached through experimental methodologies that target their cognitive and affective reactions to distinguish between editorial content and native advertising and the possible impact they may have on consumption. Ultimately, the assessment becomes an empirical exercise that offers limited room for generalization. The empirical studies done in native advertising follow three different camps: production, content, and consumption.

With the production process, Artemas et al. (2016) found that the interactions between business and editorial and staff members of news organizations in the US increased as the economic

situation worsened. The ‘wall’ weakened as the commercial pressures grew. Schauster et al. (2016) found that journalists, advertising, and public relations executives agreed that there are economic benefits behind native advertising while raising concerns about the deceptive nature of the format, the lack of transparency, and the fact that readers are unaware of its promotional and persuasive nature. Additionally, respondents attributed the responsibility of achieving a balanced product to others than themselves, with journalists the group expressing more concerns. The last finding is supported by similar studies (Cameron and Curtin, 1995 and Edström, 2015), even though some producers believe the majority of readers could identify native ads among the editorial content (Goodlad et al., 1997). An ethnographic study in the US (Eckman and Lindlof, 2003) found resistance from the news department of a mid-sized daily newspaper when the advertising department requested a stronger resemblance between editorial and commercial content, claiming that journalistic tradition was stronger than economic hardship. In a similar ethnographic study in Slovenia, Erjavec and Kovačič (2010) found a different outcome; it was the advertisers who shaped all stages of journalistic production – gathering, selection, writing, and editing – in the creation of advertorials. Consequently, journalistic ideals were not, in this case, a major consideration during the process of production. In Estonia, Harro-Loit and Saks (2006) suggest smaller media markets are more susceptible to blurred lines between the editorial and advertising departments as the competition for limited resources increases. Interestingly, when looking at ethical guidelines in various organizations in Finland and the US, Ikonen et al. (2017) found that sponsored content or native advertising was rarely mentioned, and neither were transparency and disclosure procedures.

When it comes to content, Cameron and Curtin (1995) found advertorials present in the US, while Goodlad et al. (1997) found them in the Scottish press. Ferrer-Conill (2016) found uneven patterns of introducing native advertising in the US, the UK, and Spain, while Sweden’s legacy media had not then started using native ads. Edström (2015) found native advertising practices in Sweden emerging later on. The content most commonly associated with native advertising seems to cover travel, lifestyle, and health (Cohen, 2002; Erjavec, 2004; Harro-Loit and Saks, 2006; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005; Wojdyski and Golan, 2016). Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) concluded that many advertorials were not following recommendations to signal their distinction as advertising – different typestyle and typesize, design, content, context – thus making it unnecessarily difficult for readers to separate editorial and commercial content.

On the user dimension, several experimental studies (Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015; Kim, 1995; Wojdyski, 2016; Wojdyski and Golan, 2016; Wu et al., 2016) have established that native advertising is often difficult to identify. Readers generally fail to correctly identify native advertising/advertorials as advertising. Furthermore, their ability to recognize articles as advertising usually indicates a lower assessment of article quality and news credibility for the publisher, decreased intent to share the news story, and negative attitude toward the advertiser. Incidentally, Dix and Phau (2009) found that news consumers were more concerned with the harmful effects on media credibility and confidence in advertising than agencies and advertisers. However, Wojdyski and Evans (2016) showed that clearly labeling or wording the text as advertising did not greatly increase respondents’ ability to correctly identify the piece as advertising. When it comes to credibility, Cameron (1994) found that readers tend to experience higher credibility from editorial content in comparison with advertorials. In a similar way, van Reijmersdal et al. (2005) found that the audience perceived advertorials to be more misleading and less acceptable than editorial content. This is supported by Wu et al. (2016), who claim that identifying advertising as such triggers users to decode the content more critically. However, van Reijmersdal et al. (2005: 51) conclude that “the more an advertising message is intertwined with its carrier, the more readers are inclined to respond positively”. This suggests that when readers manage to differentiate between editorial and commercial content,

they favor editorial content, but as both become more entwined, the readers favor the message regardless of its commercial nature. This would explain why advertisers are interested in influencing editorial formats and content, and why *the wall* is such an important element of contemporary journalism.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have argued that despite the well-established journalistic norm of keeping the commercial and editorial endeavors of news organizations separate, the adoption and proliferation of native advertising has been out of the ordinary, both in depth and in reach, and native advertising has become a controversial source of income for news media organizations. This controversy, we argue, is due to well-established tensions between the commercial and professional logics of traditional journalism, often separated by the metaphor of *the wall*. Additionally, the narrative behind native advertising carries an attempt to change the discourse around native advertising. The discourse of separation – an agonistic discourse – is being replaced rapidly by narratives of collaboration between marketers and news organizations (Drew and Thomas, 2017), dismissing the wall and proposing a mutual understanding between the two camps – a symbiotic discourse. Nevertheless, the fact that news media carry a reputation of objectivity and autonomy makes native advertising a more dangerous venture for news organizations, who risk losing the legitimacy to decide what news is, a privilege they have acquired during the professionalization processes of the last century. For that reason, the discourse within legacy media is still aimed at making a case for incorporating native advertising and at the same time at maintaining their legitimacy as high-standards journalism producers (Russ-Mohl and Nazhdiminova, 2015).

The relevance of this phenomenon is not merely economic, as it potentially redefines the tensions between journalists and publishers, questioning the allegiance to the citizen and threatening the legitimacy and autonomy of contemporary news media. Its reach spans across borders and media systems, spilling over several types of journalism, and amalgamates disparate actors who can openly influence news content – from marketers to politicians (Iversen and Knudsen, 2017). While news organizations argue that native advertising is unproblematic as long as it is recognized as advertising, research shows members of the public usually find it difficult to distinguish commercial and editorial content; when they do, their attitudes tend to be negative. This highlights a key issue this type of advertising is only profitable precisely because it is difficult to identify. The need for commercial content to mimic editorial content, while still using labels to clarify its commercial nature, endows native advertising with a characteristic akin to ‘shiny camouflage’ that is contradictory in nature. For the advertiser to successfully appropriate the journalistic cachet of the publisher, the article needs to look like regular editorial content. For the news media to be able to justify native advertising, they need to clearly label ads as ads. The resolution of these challenges is far from even across the journalistic field. If news media manage to make native advertising work, it could be a viable business model that funds the rest of news operations. If they do not manage to do so, it could lead to the downfall of journalistic legitimacy and further accentuate the crisis in which journalism is immersed.

Further reading

This chapter has drawn inspiration from Shoemaker and Reese’s *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective* (2014) and Martin Conboy’s *Journalism: A Critical History* (2004). To further explore the overt and covert erosion of the separation between of editorial and commercial content, the work of Ben Bagdikian (2004) and Mark Coddington (2015) has

proven to be particularly insightful. Matt Carlson's (2015) and Raul Ferrer-Conill's (2016) articles further contextualize the use and discursive changes of native advertising occurring in journalistic contexts.

Notes

- 1 www.wsj.com/ad/cocainomics
- 2 <http://paidpost.nytimes.com/netflix/women-inmates-separate-but-not-equal.html>

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