



advert over the internet before it airs on TV, they [M&S] are giving their Facebook fans and Twitter followers the opportunity to vote on a name for Rosie's dog in the advert".

Clearly, a huge endorsement for the retailer, the article nevertheless appeared under the byline of one of its established writers.

In August this year though, it was much more explicit about who was paying for content when it ran the article: "Is there a slave living on your street?" As the *Press Gazette* illustrated, the article was written in the MailOnline style and appeared as indistinguishable from other articles on the site. However, just above the name of the author, Kieran Corcoran, were the words, "sponsored by the Home Office".

## Mass penetration

It's little wonder that governments and corporations want to sell their wares through MailOnline. The latest *National Readership Survey* figures indicate that, staggeringly, the Mail brand (Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday and MailOnline) is read by almost half of all British adults. The NRS estimates almost 14m people a week read either the Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday or MailOnline and as the Mail itself points out, its "newsbrand" reaches 48.27% of the population.

When you also factor in that MailOnline had 180m global monthly unique users in August 2014, it's evident that we are dealing with a media operation of huge scope.

The Mail's own research has confirmed the attractions of branded content. Consumers are now considered to be extremely guarded against naked marketing techniques, so many companies are resorting to selling brands in the "trusted" form of journalism content which engages with the audience through information and entertainment.

It is felt that, particularly online, disrupting the users' experience with traditional ads is rarely productive – and in some cases demonstrably damaging to customer relations. The point with branded content is that the consumer can engage with a particular product by deciding to read an article. He or she, in theory anyway, is more likely to be attracted to something if it is not "hard sold".

## Guardian Labs

It is not only the Mail that embraced branded content. In February the Guardian launched its "Unilever sustainable living partnership". Its press release stated: "Guardian News and Media (GNM) today officially launches Guardian Labs – its branded content and innovation agency – which offers brands bold and compelling new ways to tell their stories and engage with influential Guardian audiences."

And the brands are prepared to pay for such content. The Guardian/Unilever deal is said to be worth "over seven figures". Meanwhile MailOnline's head of US operations, Jon Steinberg, has stated he is hoping that clients will pay £65,000 per native advertisement thanks to a guarantee of 450,000+ page views.

According to some experts, native content is set to grow remarkably in the next few years. It's predicted that as much as US\$3bn will be invested in native advertising formats by 2016.

The rise of marketing such as this can be seen as further evidence of the lines between journalism and PR becoming blurred and in many ways this is old news. In 2008, Cardiff University's School of Journalism found the content of domestic news stories in our quality media was heavily dependent on "pre-packaged news". In 2011 a nameless News International employee told the Daily Mail that under the stewardship of Rebekah Brooks, the Sun and The News of the World were in thrall to the PR industry. "Scores, if not hundreds, of front-page stories were written by the PR men," he said.

But as branded content increases what happens to journalists becomes entirely predictable. As Andrew Edgecliffe Johnson reports, employment in US newsrooms has fallen by a third since 2006, according to the American Society of News Editors; for every working journalist in America there are now 4.6 PR people.

The key point is that building brand content is definitely not journalism. Not if we understand journalism to be about facts and objectivity. Anyone writing copy for branded content is interested in one thing primarily: showing their client in the best possible light.

All this being the case, it would be easy to condemn The Guardian for betraying its values, but this would be to deny the financial realities in a media world of diminishing returns and the huge importance advertising has always had in the success of newspapers. The notion, too, that the media once enjoyed a "golden age" of complete editorial independence and transparency is a foolish one. Alliances such as the one with Unilever represent the best way for the Guardian to actually *survive*. And, in this media landscape, that remains a news organisation's overarching ambition.

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