

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

## Branded content: how online advertorials are changing the shape of modern journalism

October 14, 2014 6.20am BST



Any room for journalism in there? David Erickson

A deal was struck with 20th Century Fox to run a native advertising campaign on MailOnline and Metro.co.uk to promote the release of Ben Affleck's latest film, "Gone Girl". The movie was advertised in two features exploring "trust in your partner" with content written by MailOnline staff.

Quoted in media and marketing magazine, the Drum, 20th Century Fox's media promotions executive Maria Buttaci said: "MailOnline and Metro.co.uk have given us the perfect opportunity to editorially place the film at the heart of the websites' content."

Of course the idea of sponsored content in newspapers is not new. As Emily Bell, of Columbia Journalism School has pointed out, the origins of "advertorials" stretch back almost a century to 1917 when the American Federal Trade Commission settled a case with the Muensen Speciality Co, over an ad for its vacuum cleaner, which it presented as a favourable newspaper review. Bell wrote:

*Today you might expect to see something similar, but in the form of a viral link circulated round your social network, entitled "13 vacuum cleaners that suck in the wrong way, and one that doesn't".*

MailOnline began investigating the possibilities of what has become known as "native content" before Christmas 2013 when the "traditional" Marks and Spencer festive commercial appeared on its site. Heralded with the headline: "Watch it here first! M&S unveil magical Christmas ad", the accompanying article also featured M&S lingerie and told its readers that as well as "releasing the

### Author



**John Jewell**

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

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.



Internet   Newspapers   branded advertising   Social advertising   Online advertising   Digital journalism  
Native advertising