



Native advertising and the cultivation of counterfeit news

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It has long been an article of faith that while advertising subsidizes news and other editorial content, it stands alone in its appearance and appeal. As early as the late 1880s, years before the professionalization of journalism began to manifest itself in codes of ethics and other expressions of newsroom norms, Charles A. Dana, for nearly three decades, the prominent and influential owner and editor of the *New York Sun*, proffered his own eight ‘maxims or professional rules’, one of which made clear the importance of keeping news and advertising separate and distinct: ‘Never print a paid advertisement as news matter. Let every advertisement appear as an advertisement; no sailing under false colors’ (quoted by Dicken-Garcia, 1989: 220).

By design, native advertising sails under false colors. A web-based form of ‘stealth marketing’ (Goodman, 2006), native advertising represents a shift from, to use Matteo and Dal Zotto’s (2015: 178) terminology, the ‘logic of interruption’, when advertisements stand out from other content, to the ‘logic of seamless integration’, when advertisements blend in with other content. Described variously as advertising ‘created to be consistent with the online experience a consumer is enjoying’ (Campbell and Marks, 2015: 600), advertising that ‘mimics editorial content in both form and positioning within the editorial space’ (Iversen and Knudsen, 2017: 2), and advertising that exists ‘in the same place where standard news is located – following the same format, style and tone of the medium’ in which it appears (Matteo and Dal Zotto, 2015: 176), native

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advertising succeeds as it deceives. Native in the sense of appearing to be indigenous and natural – as opposed to invasive and out-of-place – native advertising masquerades as content judged by journalists to be appropriate and acceptable. However, emphatic publishers might be that disclosure thwarts deception, native advertising, labeled as such or not, sows confusion by blurring the line between journalism and commercialism.

To be sure, the mischief associated with native advertising stems from a deliberate lack of clarity about where news ends and advertising begins. Normally, as a matter of principle, policy, and practice, news media disassociate themselves from the content of advertisements in much the same way – and for some of the same reasons – telephone companies disassociate themselves from the content of conversations; for a price, both agree to ‘carry’ certain kinds of content without judging the content’s quality or value. In the case of native advertising, however journalism jettisons its ‘common carrier’ role vis-à-vis advertising and substitutes for it a commitment to apply to advertisements many of the same standards of quality – mostly, though not entirely, standards of style – that apply to news-editorial content. This commitment to quality elevates the status of native advertising by positioning media managers – and by implication the journalists they manage – as patrons of content of purposefully unclear provenance. A type of counterfeit news as pernicious as the fabricated facts of ‘fake news’, native advertising tries to fool the public not by pretending to be true but by pretending to be authentic.

Authenticity looms large in our account of native advertising because native advertising plays havoc with journalism’s most fundamental question: what makes news news? To address this issue, we begin with Charles Taylor’s (1991) account of authenticity, which in its application to journalism rests on an understanding of the press’s ‘appointed task’, an obligation John Nerone (2012) usefully describes as an effort ‘to discipline the presentation of news’ (p. 455). We end with a few remarks about the unremarkable but remarkably neglected claim that native advertising poses as journalism and therefore poses a threat to journalism.

The meaning of authenticity

Building on Taylor’s (1991) work, we understand authenticity as a ‘powerful moral ideal’ (p. 15), which Taylor goes on to describe as an ‘ethical aspiration’ intended to combat ‘the spread of an outlook that makes self-fulfillment the major value in life and that seems to recognize few external moral demands or serious commitments to others’ (p. 55). Dynamic, not static – a process, not a product – authenticity, as Taylor conceives it, denotes the quality of the *choices* individuals make, which we take to be analogous to the quality of the *judgments* journalists make. While it might at times feel stable and fixed, authenticity endures in history, not in nature. From fine art in museums to graffiti on abandoned buildings, from operas appreciated by a few to popular music enjoyed by just about everyone, authenticity, like ‘creativity’ and ‘originality’, exists as an essentially contestable social construct, not an immutable attribute of objects, places, people, or performances.

The conception of authenticity Taylor puts forth, and the one we want to use to question journalism’s embrace of native advertising, begins with the proposition that we can and should move away from the relativism and subjectivism that treat freedom of choice,

regardless of what the choice might be, as an end in itself, as though the ‘power of choice’ is ‘itself a good to be maximized’ (p. 22). Taylor stands opposed to conceptions of authenticity that trivialize the role of others in the choices we make, including, especially, the role played by ‘significant others’;¹ he worries about the consequences of ‘self-defeating ... modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment *in opposition* to the demands of society, of nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity’ (p. 40); he rejects the prevailing ‘culture of authenticity’ and its ‘liberalism of neutrality’ (pp. 17–18), namely, the widely held belief that society can have no interests independent of an aggregation of individual interests; he laments the rampant individualism that eclipses any sense of community, for a ‘society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are “enclosed in their own hearts” is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government’ (p. 9). From Taylor’s perspective, in short, no one gets to define, achieve, or bestow authenticity unilaterally and uncritically.

How, then, do we decide what’s authentic? By turning away from what Taylor describes as the ‘more debased and shallow modes of authenticity’ (p. 120), the contours of which we crammed into the preceding paragraph, and by turning instead to individuals in dialogue with each other about what authenticity means, why it matters, and when and where it applies. To avoid the worst forms of subjectivism, to confront the corrosive effects of viewing morality as altogether personal and private – ‘the view that moral positions are not in any way grounded in reason or the nature of things’, as Taylor puts it, ‘but are ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves drawn to them’ (p. 18) – authenticity needs to be understood as providing ‘a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where “better” and “higher” are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire’ (p. 16).

Native advertising and the authenticity of news

Nerone (2012) wisely points to the importance of distinguishing between news and journalism. News comes from many places and takes on many forms; it could be just about anything that prompts the response, ‘That’s news to me’. Journalism, on the other hand, is what Nerone describes as a ‘belief system’, one that ‘defines the appropriate practices and values of news professionals, news media, and news systems’ (p. 447). News associated with journalism comes with expectations that would not apply elsewhere, expectations that presuppose *judgments* – or in Taylor’s language, *choices* – that imagine a public purpose for news, a purpose at odds with – or at least orthogonal to – the purpose of advertising. If, as Nerone argues, ‘any form of journalism will distinguish news that falls under its discipline from other forms of news’ (p. 447), then native advertising circulates as undisciplined news, a status concealed by disguise or camouflage. By evading the judgments of journalists, native advertising eludes the discipline of journalism and thereby forfeits any claim of authenticity.

Whether we view it as a debased form of news or an innovative form of advertising, given its pervasive presence, its near ubiquity, native advertising represents a sea-change in the commercialization of news. While for well over a century, critics of the political economy of Western journalism, especially American journalism, have worried about the corrupting influence of advertising *on* news (Baker, 1994), they must now also worry

about the corrupting influence of advertising *as* news (Carlson, 2015). With regard to the latter, we face, with some urgency, a simple and stark choice: either we give up on a disciplined relationship between digital journalism and online news – and basically accept anything that looks or feels like news as news – or we accept Taylor’s invitation to view authenticity as a moral ideal, an ethical aspiration that for our purposes highlights the importance of publicly affirming the distinctive quality of the judgments journalists make, judgments made not for the benefit of advertising and the consumers it seeks but for the benefit of democracy and the citizens who face the task of governing themselves. Meanwhile, we should remind ourselves that silence amounts to acquiescence: when we stand aside and quietly condone native advertising, we are in effect complicit in the cultivation of counterfeit news.

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Note

1. Taylor uses the notion of ‘significant others’, derived from George Herbert Mead’s (1934) idea of the ‘generalized other’ (p. 154), to make the point that we come to define ourselves through dialogue, especially ‘through exchanges with others who matter to us’ (Taylor, 1991: 33).

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