

THE BRANDCASTING ON THE EXAMPLE OF ADVERTORIALS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of brandcasting in the particular case of a controversial advertorial (ADL) - paid messages in the media sponsored by organized interests to create and sustain a favorable environment to pursue their respective goals. An advertorial is an advertisement masquerading as a journalistic article, blurring the dividing line between editorial content and advertorials.

Based on the content analysis technique of 284 advertorials of *Newsweek*, *Polityka* and *Time*, the most widely circulated and read weekly newsmagazine in Poland and the United States of America, the author documents the placement of ADL: proportions of commercial and non-commercial content, detailed typologies, brand positioning, sponsor disclosures, the degree of similarity with journalistic texts and corporate and non-corporate interests.

The newspaper advertorial borrows, or just steals editorial credibility from the newspaper and pollutes reliable information. There, of course, might be a place for such kind of advertisements, but they should be more thoroughly distinguished from editorial content than is currently the case. As shown in the article, media do not place sponsor disclosures prominently.

Keywords: *brandcasting, advertorial, content analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Brandcasting is an emerging, unprecedented process in a media environment where the pull strategy prevails. It is based on commercial hybrid content that engages consumers by means of relevance, entertainment, and information. Commercial hybrid content includes native advertising, content marketing, brand journalism, sponsored content, advertorial (ADL) and many other terms coined to describe similar practices in the fields of advertising, digital marketing, PRs, entertainment, and infotainment. More than 60% of the surveyed American adults say sponsored content hurts the credibility of media outlets. Other studies showed that it was challenging for readers to recognize the persuasive nature of such advertisements [3]. There are many legitimate concerns about the blending of design and content of advertorials with content pages.

An advertorial (advertisement and editorial) is defined as paid message in the press sponsored by organized interests to create and sustain a favorable environment to pursue their respective goals [4]. It is an advertisement masquerading as a journalistic article, blurring the dividing line between editorial content and promotion. ADL looks congruent with the design, length, content, domain, and other general aspects of press content from an editorial point of view. This way ADL is perceived as primarily informative.

Therefore, a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of advertorials is needed to digest and deconstruct this controversial promotional tool. The purpose of the article is to present a proposed outline of the advertorial study; moving the theory towards a framework that enables the conceptualisation of this type of communication. This orienteering map will allow each case to be placed in its proper location, to be described, and at the same time will allow the overlaying of new forms of advertising that are bound to appear in the media sphere. The structure of the map is determined by a set of questions that will be applied to test the proposed native advertising study outline:

1. How often is native advertising published in a particular title? (one can ask more broadly about the proportion of editorial and commercial content, including native advertising)
2. What are the types of native advertising (here referred to one of its types, namely advertorials)?
3. What organisations are most likely to reach out to native advertising – i.e. what organisations are the sponsors?
4. What content is the most frequently covered in native advertising?
5. What formal characteristics are conducive to making advertorials similar to the content of the advertisement (questions about size, ways of marking or lack thereof, similarity of typographic elements of the layout, layout, appearance and aesthetics of texts, arrangement of textual and illustrative materials on the page, etc.)?

The study consisted of collecting, coding and analysing advertorials that appeared in the national edition of *Newsweek* and *Polityka*, as well as the American *Time* in 2020-2021.

For the purposes of this analysis, I have chosen texts from the *Polityka*, *Newsweek* and *Time* weekly magazines, the most widely circulated and read weekly newsmagazine in 2020/2021. So the criterion for the selection of these press titles was the ranking of readership of opinion weeklies. In December 2020, *Polityka* was ranked first with an average circulation of 101,000 copies. Sales of *Newsweek* was at the level of 91,000 copies [1]. *Time* has the biggest circulation

among the American weeklies at the level of over 370,000 copies [2]. The purchase of the *Time* weekly by Marc Benioff was another event in a series of high-profile acquisitions of the printed press by billionaires from the high-tech sector. In 2013, Jeff Bezos, founder and chief executive of Amazon, bought the *Washington Post* daily, while in 2017 Laurene Powell Jobs, the widow of Steve Jobs, acquired a majority share in *The Atlantic* magazine. All of these new owners have declared that they would not interfere in day-to-day editorial matters.

To accomplish this goal, this study conducted a content analysis of 284 advertorials of *Newsweek* (102), *Polityka* (35) and *Time* (147) (a categorisation key was used). It included categories relating to the above questions. Features on ADLs were extracted by reading their contents. In the case of *Polityka*, 34 issues (out of 52 that appeared during the year) were marked, in *Newsweek* – 28 issues (out of 51), in *Time* – also 28 (out of 26 issues). All advertorials present in these (bi)weeklies were analysed – their entire discourse field relating to promotional content.

RESULTS

Proportion of editorial and commercial content

Commercial content included promotional content in which:

1. The content is clearly marked as "advertisement", "promotion" or "sponsored article". Their form also indicates the advertising nature of the message (different colours, font, exposed product, slogans, logo, incentives to buy):

- the name and photo of the product, the brand, the name/logo of the service provider and/or
- the price, the address of the shop and/or
- the description of the product is positively described without any criticism.

2. Advertorials, one of the types of native advertising defined as paid media press coverage expressing the specific interests of an organisation so that stakeholders or the wider social environment would support the realisation of those interests. Its form resembles (or is identical to) the adjacent editorial articles. These are promotional contents that are not marked as the advertising, or in a way not clearly indicating the advertising character, i.e. "partner presentation", "partner content", but their contents indicated the advertising character through:

- statements made by "expert" representatives of a particular organisation,
- the lack of polemical character of the text, clearly favouring the discourse, the position presented by the above-mentioned experts,

- advertising adjacent to the article - advertorial, the content of which refers to the scope of activity of the company advertised next to it.

3. Launch native advertising - looks like regular content; its form resembles the journalist's recommendation (of the products). In contrast to advertorials, it refers to a product launch, a planned and coordinated effort to debut a new product to the market and make that product generally visible, recognizable and available for purchase (links to an online store provided). Five-seven products are placed on one page and promoted (not marked as "advertisement") as "best new products", "technological gadgets", "top trending products", etc.

On the other hand, non-commercial content includes articles, columns, reports (e.g. world news), and other texts unrelated to the subject of the advertisement placed next to it.

Table 1. Summary of the analysed material – proportion of editorial and commercial content

Weeklies title	Number of issues analysed (in pages*)	Editorial (non-commercial) content (%)	Traditional advertising (%)	Advertisements adjacent to advertorials (%)	Advertorials supported by traditional advertising (%)	Single advertorials (%)	Launch native advertising (%)
Polityka	34 (3922)	83.3	15	0.2	0.3	0.6	0.6
Newsweek	32 (3297)	77.8	17	1.3	1.4	1.7	0.8
Time	32 (3132)	82.8	11.1	0.3	0.4	4.3	1.1
		Editorial content	Commercial content				
Average number		81.3	18.7				
			Traditional advertising	Native advertising			
Average number			14.4	4.3			

**Quantity of material is measured by unit of page, not e.g. cm² due to the similar format of all titles*

Source: own source

One set of questions relates to the frequency of advertorial placement. Table 1 presents the data regarding the number of editorial content (column 3) versus commercial content (columns 4,5,6,7,8), as well as the total number of advertorials (column 6,7).

The average was 81% non-commercial to 18,7% commercial content (including 4,3% of native advertisement).

Types of advertorials

The main categories are defined as image&advice-based and lobbying/defensive advertorials.

Image&advice-based advertorials are messages designed to gain favourable public opinion. Four types can be identified:

- advertorials building recognition of the organisation indicating its scope of activity, name/ logo.
- associative/ideological advertorials that fit into currently discussed issues, socially important values,
- socially engaged advertorials, which inform the public about the "good", "necessary", "appropriate" activities of a specific organisation,
- how-to advertorials containing advice or information designed to help readers make decisions and take action regarding, for instance, home renovation, types of insurance, environmental protection, choosing the right diet, etc.

Lobbying&defensive stories are paid media stories designed to get some support for an organisation's position on controversial issues; advertorials recruiting, agitating for support to build the agenda, support the organisation's position by joining in the action (e.g. joining a campaign) and/or encourage participation in this political/social initiative,

These types were coded as present/absent in the material, with the following results:

Table 2. *The number of image&advice versus lobbying&defensive advertorials*

Press title	Image&advice ADL(%)	Lobbying&defensive ADL (%)	Sponsors (%)
Newsweek	93.8	6.2	85
Polityka	75	25	72
Time	86	14	104

Source: own source

The most common type of advertorials in *Newsweek*, *Politics and Time* are image&advice ADLs. There are much less lobbying&defensive advertorials what suggests the predominance of public relations strategies, at the expense of issue position espousal.

While the significant number of sponsors/purchasers of advertorials indicates a plurality of the sources, a small proportion represents organised group interests. The ratio of image &advice to lobbying&defensive advertorials is 85% to 15%.

Types of organisations

As many as 261 unique organisations (sponsors) were identified. Each was assigned a number and classified into one of five categories:

1. Corporations, or other businesses, promoting their products or services.
2. Other business organisations – economic associations, branch organisations, unions of entrepreneurs, employers as well as trade unions.
3. Public interest groups, non-governmental organisations, public benefit organisations: foundations, NGOs, religious associations, civic organisations representing the interests of specific social groups, transmitting the postulates of their members to decision-making centres, influencing the authorities, public opinion and thus influencing political decisions.
4. Public institutions – institutions of culture, education and science, social assistance, public administration, uniformed services.
5. Government institutions – ministries, ombudsmen, agencies of the European Union, the United Nations, protection offices e.g. for competition and consumers, etc.

Table 3. *Types of sponsors*

Title	Corporations, or other businesses (%)	Other Economic (%)	All Cause (%)	Institution (%)	Government (%)	Total
Newsweek	87,3	2,3	2,3	4,7	3,4	85
Polityka	53,8	7,5	6,2	25,7	6,8	72
Time	62,1	13,5	17,6	3,5	3,3	104

Source: own source

The question was about the types of interests presented in advertorials, the proportion of corporate/business, social, political interests. Business interests, especially corporate interests, have a privileged position in terms of the representation of their interests in the press titles analysed. "Other economic organisations" and non-economic interest groups are more often represented in *Time* than in the Polish weeklies. Public interest groups represent 17.6% in *Time* and only 2.3% in the Polish edition of *Newsweek*. In the second category, especially in *Time*, trade associations dominate (11.2%), followed (and only in *Time*) by health organisations (1.6%). Public institutions, a broad category including universities and cultural institutions, accounted for only 3.5% of advertorials in *Time*. On the other hand, *Polityka* noted their significant share at 25.7%.

Governmental institutions, especially European Union agencies (in *Polityka* and *Newsweek*), and ministerial institutions (as research project partners) accounted for slightly over three percent (*Time*, *Newsweek*) and nearly 7% of advertorials in *Polityka*. Thus, the representation of public use organisations in the press discourse of the analysed titles is small. This may result from the limited financial resources of such organisations, as well as low effectiveness of relations built with journalists who do not address the issues and problems they deal with.

Definition of formal features of advertorials and ways of their disclosure

It is assumed that broadcasters of native advertising try to hide persuasive intentions and aim to make the content and forms similar to the surrounding journalistic messages. Consequently, such a message does not focus on the sponsor and/or the brand. Information about them will not be placed in the headline or in the main body of the feature. Therefore, examining whether and where the sponsor/brand is mentioned in the text of the native advertisement may enable us to answer the question of whether and to what extent brand casting communication strategies are used.

Table 5. *Placement of sponsor and brand/product/service/sponsor information*

1. Disclosure the sponsor and/or its brand/product present in the message as an advertisement	<i>Newsweek</i> (%) n=102	<i>Polityka</i> (%) n=35	<i>Time</i> (%) n=147
Q1. The presence of the promoted brand/product/company/ sponsor was clear in the article. The message was positive about the brand/product/service/company. The message was not marked as an advertisement or a sponsored feature	68	67	53
Q1. The brand/product/company/sponsor was not clearly indicated in the text of the feature. However, readers may have the impression that an attempt was made to influence the attitudes, opinions of the recipient.	26	19	32
Q1. The article talked about consumers/shopping, but there were several different brands/products/companies not always (only) positively reviewed. It seemed that the message was not trying to influence the attitudes or opinions of the readers. There was no attempt to sell a particular product/service.	6	14	15
2. Transparency of sponsor/broadcaster/message provider			
2.1. It was not clear who paid/was the sender/sponsor/creator of this feature. One might <u>get the impression</u> that the journalist was a creator.	96	92	85

Source: own source

The next question is: In which part in the text of the native advertisement was the sponsor/ brand/product/service information placed?

This category refers to the mention of the sponsor/ brand/product/service directly in the article. We can then identify four indicators regarding where this information was placed:

1. Prominence: the sponsor’s name is mentioned in the headline, the first or the second paragraph; this category also includes cases where the sponsor information also appears later in the text;

2. The brand as the main object: at the centre of the message. Communication is completely focused on the brand and its product.

3. Secondary position: the sponsor’s name is placed somewhere in the feature other than the headline, first or second paragraph;

Brand in the background – put at the top or bottom of the page, on the right or left, in the corner.

4. Brand adjacent to the journalistic article, clearly linked to it by its subject matter or form (the same colour formatting, font, graphic elements, etc.).

5. Brand/sponsor does not appear explicitly: other references (statement made by a company representative). Absent brand: it does not appear in the text, but the feature indicates a way/suggests getting more information about it.

Table 6. Brand/sponsor positioning

Indicators of brand/sponsor positioning	<i>Newsweek</i> (%) n=102	<i>Polityka</i> (%) n=35	<i>Time</i> (%) n=147
Prominence: the brand/sponsor in the centre	5	4	1
Secondary position	11	5	7
Brand adjacent to a journalistic article	21	15	11
Brand/sponsor does not appear explicitly	63	76	81

Source: own source

Ways of representing the brand (logo/product) were different. The brand slogan was integrated/connected with the title of the article or corporate colour formatting/visual identification were shown. The issues mentioned in the article the most often were interspersed with brand/product information as a statement made by a company representative.

Types of references to the journalistic text - similarities and differences

The size of the text/message was similar to the standard size of journalistic texts. The most popular in *Newsweek* and *Polityka* were several-page advertorials (2-3 pages). They accounted for over 60% of advertorials in *Newsweek* and almost 50% in *Polityka*. The advertorials occupying less than one page (or half of a page) were almost non-existent there. In *Time*, most advertorials were full-page (60%), followed by multipage ads (25%). The third in line were the ads longer than half a page, but smaller than a full page (15%), and ads of less than half a page were the least frequent (6.3%). Considering the high prices of advertising in these weeklies, especially in the *Time* magazine, this shows the financial status of the sponsors. More than three quarters of advertorials did not share page space with any other content. Apparently, organised interest groups are convinced that it is important to reach the readers of the most popular weeklies; they are ready to pay PLN 115,000 (*Polityka*), PLN 126,000 (*Newsweek*), or over USD 230,000 (*Time*) per page for the opportunity to present their position.

The layout of the text, i.e. column width, amount of light, use of graphic elements, appearance of the title and leads, distribution of photographs, infographics – the layout of the weeklies were almost identical (42% texts published in *Time*, 33% in *Newsweek*, and 31% in *Polityka*) or similar (no author's signature, slightly different font for the title and subtitle or for the whole text).

CONCLUSION

A distinctly higher degree of native character in *Time* magazine than in Polish weeklies – the form of texts is more similar to editorial material. If a sponsor appears (usually a corporate entity), it is mentioned as a party involved in solving a problem. Logos and corporate identities are much less prominent. The sponsor is presented more as a partner in communication, an active interlocutor rather than (as in Polish weeklies) as the only interlocutor, an expert who openly mentions their own services in the context of the discussed issue. Native advertising is a form only just being developed in the Polish media, while in the United States it is a mature form of advertising, which tends to conceal its commercial interests completely. In the Polish media, such forms are still treated as quite controversial practices, hence "certain elements" indicating the "other" character of this type of messages are preserved.

The newspaper advertorial borrows, or just steals editorial credibility from the newspaper and pollutes reliable information. There, of course, might be a place for such kind of advertisements, but they should be more thoroughly distinguished from editorial content than is currently the case. As shown in the article, media do not place sponsor disclosures prominently.

According to disbelief, distrust, and suspicion are likely to be activated only when consumers are aware of the persuasion attempt of the persuasion agent [5] as would be the case with a required disclosure. When either the attempt or the role of the agent is not evident, consumers are left to process concealed marketing efforts without the defense mechanisms. They will not be as likely to discredit the message or the source what is the aim of AVL. Purchase decisions may be based, in part on the perceived credibility of the message and source. Policy-makers should consider requiring disclosure when brand mentioned in editorials is sponsored or paid.

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