1-22-2016

Popular Sources, Advertising, and Information Literacy: What Librarians Need to Know

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ABSTRACT

Sponsored content, also known as "native advertising," is a relatively new form of advertising in which corporate sponsors fund articles in periodicals and often exert significant control over the editorial process. This model is a dramatic reversal from past practice; throughout the 20th century, allowing advertisers and sales departments to dictate editorial content was considered unethical by most observers both inside and outside of journalism. Because the information literate student is one who can navigate both library databases *and* the open web, this article urges academic reference and instruction librarians to gain a deeper understanding of how advertising impacts the popular sources their patrons use.

INTRODUCTION

The publishing industry is in a state of turmoil as it undergoes a transformation from being a print medium to a primarily electronic one. One aspect of the industry undergoing rapid change is the relationship between publications and their advertisers. At *Time* magazine from the 1920s to the 1960s, Henry Luce and his staff famously maintained a symbolic wall between editorial and editorial departments, calling it the separation of "Church" and "State" (Turow, 1994, p. 39). In 1960, the practice of blurring the lines between advertising and journalism was already frowned upon. Federal law enacted that year, however, took the matter a step further by making attempts to deliberately confuse readers this way illegal:

> Whoever, being an editor or publisher, prints in a publication entered as second class mail, editorial or other reading matter for which he has been paid or promised a

> valuable consideration, without plainly marking the same "advertisement" shall be fined under this title. (18 U.S.C. § 1734)

Today, however, this wall of separation appears to be crumbling, and the number of publications that reach readers via the United States Postal Service's "second class mail" is dwindling.

While the impact of the shift from print to digital on book publishing and academic journal publishing has been examined in the library literature, the effect of digitization on popular magazines has not received a comparable level of scrutiny. Indeed, popular sources exist in a kind of limbo, with librarians and teaching faculty often tolerating their use, while not actively encouraging it. Generally, students are told to use peer-reviewed sources because, as Mark (2011) notes, "[a]cademic librarians view peer reviewed information as authoritative while information not vetted by peer review is not considered verifiable or reliable for academic work without stringent critique" (p. 6). Nevertheless, newspapers and magazines are important library sources that are widely used among college students, particularly among the introductory-level, less information-literate students found in freshman writing classes. In the library classroom, these sources often function as something like training wheels: It is expected that as students become more information-literate, they will transition or progress to using peer-reviewed sources. There is a downside to treating popular sources as an indulgence for beginning researchers, however; in practice, it is the more experienced students who are using the more clearly vetted peer-reviewed sources. The less-seasoned students rely disproportionately on popular sources, which are actually harder to evaluate since the editorial procedures used in their creation are not as standardized as they are in academic journals. Furthermore, an approach to research that reflexively devalues popular sources represents a missed opportunity to train students to cultivate a sophisticated awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of different types of sources, and may prevent them from using the sources that happen to best satisfy the unique research requirements of their chosen projects. The fact is, some popular sources are vigorously and evaluated for accuracy before publication; McPhee (2009), for example, quotes a *New Yorker* fact-checker who insists that each word in that publication “that has even a shred of fact clinging to it is scrutinized” (p. 56). Other popular sources may have no editorial commitment to accuracy at all. From an information literacy standpoint, the problem is not an absence of vetting (since many are subjected to rigorous review), but the lack of transparency and consistent standards throughout the world of magazine and newspaper publishing.

In a higher education environment in which popular sources are not held in high esteem and their use not particularly encouraged, not much attention will be paid to trends in magazine and newspaper publishing—no matter how important they may be to the overall health of the information ecosystem. One aspect of contemporary publishing that is not well understood by students, teaching faculty, or library faculty—and that makes assessing popular sources difficult—is financial sponsorship and its role in shaping and influencing the content of popular sources. In fact, the tendency of teaching faculty and librarians to recommend popular publications with longstanding reputations for accuracy and authority—e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Atlantic*—to students with rudimentary information literacy skills may need to be reconsidered; as the wall of separation between the editorial and business sides of publications has begun to come down, many publications have started to embrace new, untested ways of supporting their operations.

The name of this sponsorship model is generally referred to either as “sponsored content” or “native advertising.” Although the two terms can be considered synonymous, the latter term makes the concept’s meaning abundantly clear: “Native advertising” is advertising that is “native” to the publication in which it is found, meaning it is designed to appear indistinguishable from all the other content in the same publication (Couldry and Turow, 2014, p. 1716). In theory this should mean that the article is of the same quality as the magazine’s or newspaper’s articles that go through a more traditional editorial process. Still, it is hard to see how a publication’s staffers can ever be unconscious of the needs and preferences of sponsors when they are fully aware who has commissioned the article and why. It may be that the native advertising model is better suited to Buzzfeed’s Geico-sponsored cute cat photos and listsicles than it is to traditional news topics and publications.

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that native advertising and sponsored content are not the same as old-fashioned advertorials. Advertorials are generally faux articles that directly promote products. Native advertising is more sophisticated. It does not promote products except perhaps in a subliminal way. Rather, it is designed to send a positive message to consumers that enhances the stature of a brand. So in the old days a tacky advertorial might extol the use of vitamin supplements for weight loss in a women’s magazine. Today’s more subtle sponsored content might be a thoughtful piece about the scientist Alan Turing, sponsored by the Weinstein Company as a way of promoting the movie studio’s Turing biopic, *The Imitation Game* (T Brand Studio, n.d.).

Although this new sponsorship model has swept the industry, the term “native advertising” is little known to readers of the news. This article seeks to explain this new model for underwriting journalism, as well as make a case as to why the changes currently roiling the newspaper and magazine industries are important for librarians to understand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the past few years, use of the phrase “native advertising” has grown exponentially in the popular press. The term “sponsored content” has appeared in business journals for a longer period of time. One must emphasize that these scholarly business articles address the efficacy of advertising strategies for *advertisers*. Since business journals explore the success or failure of business strategies, that coverage has been quite positive. Becker-Olsen (2003) writes, “[t]he studies demonstrate that web communities and advertisers both benefit from sponsored content.” She elaborates: “Specifically, sponsored content can be an effective advertising tool to engender positive response toward an advertiser and increase feelings of customer responsiveness, product quality, category leadership, and even purchase intention” (p. 17). In other words, sponsored content is even better than traditional advertising at making people want to buy things.

Tutaj and van Reijmersdal (2012) admit that sponsored content is an advance over previous forms of internet advertising in that it is less likely to alienate potential customers, writing, “the subtle sponsored content item was found to be more informative, more amusing, and less irritating than the prominent banner ad. Internet users seem to enjoy reading sponsored content more than encountering banner ads on informational websites” (p. 15). Creating web-based advertising that is as effective as print advertising is a problem that has bedeviled advertising people for nearly two decades, so the research confirming the effectiveness of these techniques from a business standpoint is noteworthy. A lasting revolution in how journalism is financed appears to be underway.

The term has also received attention in the communications literature. Howe and Teufel (2014) note that publishers have good reason to embrace native advertising, since their research indicates that readers don't know that they're reading sponsored content, even when publishers do provide some kind of labeling. This suggests that publishers are unlikely to have their journalistic reputation damaged as they adopt this new, more effective form of sponsorship attractive to advertisers.

Still that cause for optimism is cause for concern for Couldry and Turow (2014). They write that native advertising "violates the norms of the American Society of Magazine Editors" because even with clear labeling, readers might not understand that so-called "sponsored content" is different than journalism sponsored in the traditional way, in that advertisers have had greater input into the editorial process (p.1717). Since readers don't really know what it means for an article to be "sponsored" or a post to be "paid," they might believe that the advertising sponsor has simply underwritten an article that the magazine would have conceived of and published even without advertiser support. They may not realize that sponsored content is actually advertising, not journalism.

Searches of the library science databases Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts and Library Literature and Information Science Full Text for the terms "native advertising" and "sponsored content" yield no results. Because this form of advertising has, on the one hand, enormous implications for American journalism and American democracy, and because on the other it seems to be the silver bullet that could solve publishers' money woes, it is time that consequences for information literacy are addressed by librarians. If, as per the

Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) "[i]nformation literacy is, in fact, the basis of a sound democracy," it is hard to see how citizens who don't understand how the information they rely on is financed, and who can't readily tell the difference between a new form of advertising and old-fashioned journalism, will be able to understand or examine that information critically (ACRL, n.d.).

HOW POPULAR SOURCES HAVE CONSTRUCTED THEIR AUTHORITY

While it is impossible to recount the 500-year history of publishing in the scope of this article, it is helpful to briefly look back to the past to note some of the strategies used in the past to sell publications. One strategy, present from the earliest days of publishing, was for publishers to try to establish a reputation for credibility (perhaps justified or perhaps not), thereby reassuring readers that the printed materials sold by them may be considered trustworthy (Johns, 1998, p. 175). The legacy of their success can be seen today in the way published information is received. Although it seems obvious, one can point out that there is nothing inherently *more* credible about something that is "published" rather than something handwritten, although in general, contemporary readers automatically give more credence to the former. In reality, of course, Emily Dickinson's handwritten poems are more "authentic" than the 1890 posthumous publication of her collected poems since the editor of the collected poems took liberties with the poet's punctuation (Zauha and Ragains, 2011, pp. 69-70). Similarly, for religious Jews, a handwritten biblical scroll is traditionally considered more authoritative than those same words printed in codex form.

Authority, then, doesn't reside in the technology of print; it resides in the traditions associated with that technology (Johns, 1998, p. 2). In American society, published material is granted a certain amount of authority and credibility because authority and credibility (or at least the appearance thereof) have long been among the products publishers have been selling. (After all, the first printed Western book was the Bible.)

Ironically, it is the migration of traditional print publications onto the web that has created confusion for college students and led to the urgent need for information literacy training. In the late nineties, web-based information was generally deemed unreliable. Had publishers steeped in publishing tradition stayed away from the nascent medium and left it to hucksters and amateur bloggers, librarians would still be focusing on print-oriented bibliographic instruction rather than information literacy. Because so much of traditional print publishing has migrated online, digital publishing has inherited the stature that has long been associated with print.

In academia, peer review is a clear methodology for establishing credibility. Although popular sources are assembled differently, with different methods, the standards of accuracy are not *necessarily* lower. In fact, a business model in which consumers paid for access to information long worked reasonably well to produce quality journalism. A publication would work to establish its credentials as a reliable purveyor of information, and its success was often dependent on its ability to maintain that reputation. Challenges to credibility over the past forty years have included journalists who turned out to be either plagiarists, water carriers for political operatives, or fiction writers manqués; Janet Cooke of *The Washington Post*, Stephen Glass of *The New Republic*, Mike Barnicle and Patricia Smith of *The Boston Globe*, and Jayson Blair and Judith Miller at *The New York Times* did not merely violate journalistic standards but constituted existential threats to their respective publications, and they were dealt with accordingly: all five journalists lost their jobs. That Barnicle went on to write for *The Boston Herald*, and to become a prominent MSNBC commentator suggests that for those two news outlets the entertainment value of information is as or more important than its accuracy and reliability. (More on that in the next section.)

NEWS AS ENTERTAINMENT

It is obvious, however, that popular sources do not *always* cater to readers' noblest instincts. Reliability is not the only quality that sells magazines, books, and newspapers as readers want a variety of things from their reading material—not all of it noble and uplifting.

It can be argued that the reader-focused subscription-based model encouraged sensationalism in that it often required pandering to the lowest common denominator. This is what happened at the turn of the 20th century with the battle for subscribers waged by newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Their rival papers, *The New York World* and *The New York Journal*, engaged in an ever-escalating years-long circulation battle characterized by what came to be called "yellow journalism": news as a form of lurid entertainment featuring sex crimes, titillating gossip, and shocking violence.

In his 1891 novel *New Grub Street*, George Gissing—a British writer who briefly lived in the United States and wrote for American newspapers—satirized the publishing industry's inclination to pander to the lowest common denominator in the effort to find readers. Gissing expressed his cynicism about journalism via the character Jasper Milvain (though this fictional creation seems far less troubled about the imperative to pander than his creator). Gissing sets a scene in which Jasper counsels his sister on how to best make money freelancing for women's magazines:

The art of writing for such papers—indeed, for the public in general—is to express vulgar thought and feeling in a way that flatters the vulgar thinkers and feelers. Just abandon your mind to it…(Chapter 28)

Were Gissing alive today, he might be surprised to learn that many people regard his era—a period unlike our own, in that there was robust demand for print publications—as a golden era in which the business model favored the highest quality journalism and nobly served the public.

THE DOMINANCE OF ADVERTISERS

Attracting paid subscribers, however, isn't the only way to support journalism. In fact, there are traditionally two ways that for-profit publishers to finance their publications: by the sale of their product and by the sale of advertising space in their product. The end result is that there is always a question of who the intended "audience" of any given article is, since editors may be trying to appeal to readers—or to advertisers. For example, a story in a women's magazine about makeup trends may be valued by readers, but it is also conceived by editors with advertisers' preferences in mind (e.g., the material is utterly non-controversial and is designed to encourage spending and consumption). On the other hand, while advertisers may want to be associated with important, well-reported stories, an article about carcinogens in cosmetics is clearly designed to appeal to the consumer's interest in personal health; few beauty companies are eager to expose their product's dangers or shortcomings. Broadly speaking, advertiser-oriented journalism will tend to shy away from controversial topics, while reader-oriented journalism frequently relies on controversy to generate interest.

It is the contention of this paper that both these strategies (and sponsorship models) have their strengths and weaknesses. The natural caution of advertisers actually discourages yellow journalism—but it also discourages anything that courts controversy, which includes any kind of hard-hitting investigative journalism. The consumer's desire for readable, engaging articles with plenty of human interest can lead to tawdry sensationalism—or highly relevant journalism that can galvanize citizens and inspire positive social change.

There is no sponsorship model (including non-profit ones) that cannot be corrupted or tainted. In fact, one might suggest that the existence of multiple strategies in the newspaper and magazine marketplace created a great age of journalism in the mid-20th century. As the reader-sponsored model finds itself in danger of extinction, however, one wonders whether a model that is completely dominated by advertisers can offer similar advantages.

To find a similar moment in the development of new technology, one only need look back to 20th century news broadcasting. As Pondillo (2010) notes, "As they had with radio, television sponsors in the early days directed the content of the shows they 'owned.'" The very first television news program was NBC's *The Camel News Caravan*, sponsored by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco company. As one young news writer of the time later noted: "What Camel wanted Camel got." Just what did Camel want? The sponsor had clear guidelines on what could and could not be shown. Football (to attract male viewers) and fashion (to attract female ones) were to be featured. On the other hand, shots of "no smoking" signs, cigar smoking, and real camels (rather than the sanitized cartoon version used for the brand's logo) were all taboo (p. 179). This story from the world of 1950s television finds its analogues on the web today. For example, a piece of native advertising published online by *The New York Times* and sponsored by Chevron explores the “future of energy,” but neither climate change nor the hazards of hydraulic fracturing are mentioned (Aston, n.d.).

It remains to be seen whether web journalism will transition to a more mature, editorially substantive stage, as happened with television news. (This is not to say that television does not have its own version of native advertising, the so-called “video news report” or VNR) (Rushkoff, 2009, p. 134). It is possible that the conditions of the 1950 news environment—which included a robust print news sector, and professional norms that included the separation of advertising and editorial will never be repeated; some commentators have pointed out that the 20th century might have been an aberrant period in which the balance of power in the publication-advertiser relation skewed in the publication’s favor. Anderson, Bell, and Shirky (2012) have observed of 20th century journalism, “how unusual the confluence between wealthy capitalist institutions and the public-minded journalism they produced actually was.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMATION LITERACY

Some publications are better suited to the adoption of native advertising than others. Forbes, the so-called “capitalist tool” has, for example, embraced this advertising model (DVorkin, 2015). One may assume, however, that the magazine would be publishing encomia to corporate America and hagiographies of CEOs whether or not it had been paid by advertisers to do so. In a sense, this type of content really is “native” to Forbes; it may be virtually indistinguishable from the magazine’s usual fare. This model becomes extremely problematical, however, for a publication such as *The Atlantic*, which has created a reputation based its storied history—editors as respected as James Russell Lowell and William Dean Howells and gadfly writers such as Mark Twain. Still, *The Atlantic* has become reliant on sponsored content, and it suffered great embarrassment when it published a glowing article about the Church of Scientology, for which it had to issue an apology (Raabe, 2013).

At the moment, it appears that sponsored content is not included in library databases. For example, "Women Inmates: Why The Male Model Doesn't Work," a piece produced by the *New York Times*' T Brand Studio (Deziel, n.d.) and sponsored by Netflix in order to promote the online series *Orange is the New Black* cannot be found in Lexis-Nexis. It is available via the open web, and it is marked (in tiny font) as a "paid post" on the *New York Times*'s website. The piece embodies all the complexity and contradictions of contemporary journalism. It is a compelling and well-reported piece that incorporates the stories and voices of women who were once incarcerated, using both text and video interviews. At the same time, it includes an interview with Piper Kiernan, author of the prison memoir on which the television series *Orange is the New Black* is based. In another era, an interview with Kiernan would have found its way into the entertainment section of the newspaper, and be kept separate from a news story about more typical female ex-convicts (i.e., those who have not written a best-selling book that became a blockbuster TV show).

While the blend of news and entertainment doesn't in any way diminish the reasonably high quality of the piece (in fact, Kiernan is as engaging and seemingly authentic as the other women profiled), the package does lead to some uncomfortable questions. For the moment, the presence of sponsored content on *The New York Times*' and *The Atlantic*'s websites might simply be one more reason for librarians and teaching faculty to insist that students shun the open web in favor of library databases. (It is also a good reason to emphasize the importance of an article's dateline, as many sponsored articles are published without a date.) Still, the presence of sponsored articles in these well-respected venues does present a number of thorny questions for librarians that are not so easily resolved. For example, if large amounts of money and reportorial energy are going into sponsored pieces, shouldn't they be available to database subscribers? Also, what is the implication for students as lifelong learners? Once they leave college and no longer have access to their academic libraries, will they be sufficiently information literate to detect the difference between journalism and advertising, since even supposedly reputable publishing brands are in the process of drastically changing their editorial practices and standards?

The examination of "paid posts" has potential for the information literacy classroom. One classic information literacy exercise involves the identification and study of hoax websites by students. Similar activities could be devised to point out omissions and biases of sponsored content found on otherwise reputable newspaper and magazine websites. For example, comparing the *New York Times*'s journalistic coverage of the energy industry with T Brand Studio's Chevron ad could teach students a great deal about searching for information on the open web and help them understand why a *New York Times* article found in a (native-advertising-free) library database might be a safer choice than one found on nytimes.com.

CONCLUSION

This article does not endeavor to solve the publishing industry's problems; dozens of tomes have tried and failed to do that over the past decade. What it does attempt to do is put the failure of the current publishing business model into an information literacy context.

The present author does not support the notion that the traditional editorial review of popular sources is necessarily less reliable than peer review or that replacing popular sources with academic journal articles always provides better or more relevant information. Research requires that both types of sources be available. In fact, a freshman composition paper about, say, the impact of Ebola in Africa or the gentrification of Harlem would benefit from the inclusion of popular sources (e.g., eyewitness accounts and journalistic interviews). One may ask whether emphasizing the importance of peer-reviewed sources really serves students' educational needs or helps them to write better papers. Again, Mark's (2011) analysis is trenchant. She observes that the deeply ingrained practice of insisting that students privilege peer-reviewed over popular sources might mean that teaching faculty and librarians are imposing their values and attitudes on students since "faculty place value on the type of information that confers status upon them… Teaching in higher education thus places value on students' ability to acquire and use peer-reviewed literature" (p. 6).

This paper takes the position that popular sources are necessary and valuable for student research. Therefore, librarians need to be vigilant where these sources are concerned, and able to provide critical information about their nature and their reliability. Part of the process of becoming information literate involves learning, but part of it involves *unlearning* out-of-date or unhelpful information and challenging old assumptions; as Cahill and Chalut (2009) observe, the process of helping library patrons might lie in "changing their own entrenched information seeking behaviors" (p. 243). If patrons (or librarians, for that matter) reflexively regard *The New York Times* as the journalistic gold standard, it might be time to impart a more thoughtful and vigilant approach to using that publication for research purposes.

Native advertising may become a dominant and enduring model for sponsoring journalistic content. The issue that remains for librarianship is how librarians are to deal practically with changes in sponsorship models that may impact not just the accuracy—are the facts correct?—but also the scope and subject matter of popular sources. (Is it complete or has it left out important details?) It is imperative that librarians remain involved and alert to important changes in the business practices of the publishing industry. Furthermore, information literacy classes need to address these changes with an approach that goes beyond how to search databases and navigate their interfaces to ask meaningful questions about what their value and limitations are. Academic librarians may need to address the confusion that students feel when citing sources. To take one example: Does a *New York Times* "paid post" qualify as a "newspaper article" or is it something else entirely? A contexual approach to information literacy that encourages comparison and corroboration will be more helpful to students, researchers, and readers than information literacy checklists (Meola, 2004; Ostenson 2014). The more nuanced ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education can provide guidance. More research should be done on how the new framework might be employed to help students understand the rapidly changing journalistic landscape.

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