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A Qualitative Analysis of the Native Advertising Model with Reference to the Conventions of Journalism

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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
THE NATIVE ADVERTISING MODEL
WITH REFERENCE TO THE CONVENTIONS OF JOURNALISM

A Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Science in Media Arts

By

Aaron Warnick

May 2016

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Aaron Warnick

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ABSTRACT

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Master's Thesis supervised by Michael Dillon, Ph.D.

Native advertising has rapidly gone from a relative unknown form of content marketing to a highly sought-after form advertising online in a few short years. With the help of ad blocking services and consumer rejection of advertisements that consumers perceive to invade their privacy, native advertising is projected to continue its rapid growth in popularity. By design, native advertising assumes the form and function of its host's own content. This study examines whether native advertising has adopted not only the aesthetic form and goals of journalism, but the conventions of journalism formed over more than the past century.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FTC: Federal Trade Commission

NYT: *the New York Times*

SEC: Securities and Exchanges Commission

SPJ: Society of Professional Journalists

WP: *the Washington Post*

WSJ: *the Wall Street Journal*

I - Introduction

In September 2013, David Carr of *the New York Times* ended a cautionary editorial with “publishers looking to save the village commons of journalism through innovation should be careful they don’t set it on fire in the process.” Carr’s ‘new peril for journalism’ was native advertising (Carr). Native advertising, a relatively new form of advertising that is designed to follow the form and function of its host’s content, has become a viable advertising method for many of the United States’ largest news providers, including the late-David Carr’s employer, *the New York Times* (Hoelzel).

Native advertising is projected to continue to grow at a rapid pace. Further, the fledgling form of content marketing may receive a boost from the proliferation of ad blocking technology. In the form of browser extensions, software and mobile applications, ad blockers identify and remove common display ads for individual users. Native advertising content side-steps these ad blocking methods by presenting as in-feed or, as by design, the host’s own content (Hoelzel).

Market research and a recent study from Grady College conclude that native advertisements created from their inception to at least December 2015 are likely to confuse viewers by too closely matching the content of the host’s own content. These studies take a quantitative approach and return varying percentages of subjects being unable to identify native advertisements as advertising content. The research from Grady College concluded that the placements of disclosures was highly impactful on whether or not their subjects were able to correctly identify a native advertisement.

This study explores the problem of confusion from a different angle by asking, beyond aesthetic similarities, do native advertisements appear to follow the conventions of journalism? With a qualitative approach, this study will use the conventions of journalism as articulated in

Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson's 1986 collection of essays that provide in-depth analysis of most fundamental construction of news — *the five W's and an H*: who, what, when, where, why and how? While much of journalism has changed in the 21st century, this seemingly simple convention remains an anchor of what makes news the news. If native advertising does follow these conventions, what may be implied ethically from this practice?

II - Literature Review

Today's Digital Media Landscape

Newspapers are still reeling from stumbling into the information age. Those who aggregate knowledge and sift through the noise, seemingly, should be champions of distributing information. However, a desire to transport business-as-usual practices from past to future led to disastrous policies regarding expansion to online spaces. Few outlets have been able to reverse the regrettable internet strategies from the days of dial-up and find a workable financial model. In his essay "When Journalism Met the Internet," Dillon illustrates the journey of old and new news media on the web: "even news organizations that managed to reach the end of the digital rainbow found that there was no pot of gold waiting for them" (Dillon). Dillon observes new media outlets born on the internet have risen to the prominence, supplanting some of the United States oldest news sources, only to succumb to similar fates.

The early 21st century, by and large, has been a regrettable point in history for the news. Financial struggles have led to countless newspapers either closing down shop or selling out to a multinational media conglomerate. When it came to incorporating the internet into the business model of journalism, mismanagement nearly drove the industry into the ground (Campbell, 83). A major force that kept newspapers away from a shallow grave is advertisers. In 2014,

advertisers accounted for almost seventy percent of the total newspaper revenue stream (Pew 2014).

However, like newspapers, the advertising industry has had its fair share of troubles with the internet. In the past, online advertising has been limited to ineffective banner ads or invasive pop-ups or click-through pages. Despite becoming the norm for publishers of online content and their advertisers. Banner advertisements on websites are so ineffective that users only intentionally click on them less than two-tenths of one percent of the time. (Rich Media Gallery).

As advertisers have adapted and grown their practices beyond static banner ads, consumers have rejected these attempts to commercialize online spaces and, as a result, recently, ad-blocker software has surged in popularity (“The Cost of Ad Blocking”). Those left at the gateway of the Internet are taking notice.

In Facebook’s 2015 10-K filing, an annual financial report to the SEC, ad blocking technology was named as a threat in the company’s future financial performance. The form reads: “These technologies have had an adverse effect on our financial results and, if such technologies continue to proliferate, in particular with respect to mobile platforms, our future financial results may be harmed.” In the 2014 report, Facebook did mention ad blocking technology. However, ad blocking warranted an entire section in the 2015 report.

While Facebook described ad blocking as a threat, other Silicon Valley household names have taken alternate stances on the emergent tech. Alphabet —formerly Google— CEO Larry Page, when asked about the challenges ad blockers pose to a company like Google, responded: “the industry needs to do better at producing ads that are less annoying ... we need to do a better job of that as an industry” (O’Reilly).

When Apple released iOS 9 in September 2015, the update allowed applications that operated as an ad blocking extension for their Safari to be sold in the App Store. The move was speculated to be an attack at their aforementioned competitor, Google (Hern). Weeks following the release of iOS 9, Purity, an ad blocking app, was the top selling application across all categories. In January 2016, Global Web Index reported that 36% of mobile users had ad blocking technology in Q4 2015 — a 10% increase from Q3 2015, which is when Apple introduced ad blocking extensions to its mobile Safari browser.

Research from PageFair has found that users reject advertisements online because they feel that they exploit personal data to personalize ads. For example, if someone on the web visits Amazon to look at FitBits, later, that same person on will then be exposed to FitBit advertisements on places like Facebook and Twitter. The consequence of this perceived breach in privacy threatens to be severe — ad-blockers are projected to result in an estimated \$41.4 billion in lost revenue, which is up from estimated \$21.8 billion in 2015 (“The Cost of Ad Blocking”).

Native Advertising

The term native advertising is not in the public lexicon yet. However, to those working in marketing and public relations, the practice has gone from a buzzword to a gold rush. Native advertising revenue surged to nearly \$3 billion in 2013 after being too far under the radar to measure a year earlier. In 2015, marketers spent \$7.5 billion on native advertising and analysts project that spending on native advertising will eclipse nearly \$21 billion by 2018 (Hoelzel).

Today, native advertisements are present in some of the United States’ most trusted old-media powerhouses. *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the Wall Street Journal*, to only name a few, have all ventured into this new revenue stream. While media critics decried the

blending of journalism and advertising, the institutions that monitor these practices watched and judged (Carr).

The Federal Trade Commission recently defined native advertising as “advertising and promotional messages integrated into and presented as non-commercial content” (“Commission Enforcement Policy Statement on Deceptively Formatted Advertisements”). Native advertisements have been defined in similar language in the private sector — an advertisement that is designed so that it is experienced in a way that follows the form and function of the publisher’s own content (“Getting In-Feed Sponsored Content Right”). The phrasing may be slightly different, but it’s ultimately the same object in practice. It’s an article that is labeled with “sponsored content” or “branded post” or some variant of that disclaimer.

In June 2014, *Contently*, a digital platform that connects brands and writers for the purpose of generating content marketing material and native advertisements, conducted a survey that focused on how readers felt about branded or sponsored content. *Contently* found that consumers did not respond well to native advertising. They were confused about the blending of editorial and marketing content. They expressed a high level of distrust of any publisher willing to run a native ad. The results were so unfriendly that Joe Lazaukas, Editor-in-Chief of *Contently*, finished the report with: “None of this means that sponsored content is dead in the water. It just means that it’s time to get it right” (Lazaukas, “Sponsored Content Has a Trust Problem”).

Contently continues to do market research on the native advertising model. In September 2015, they sought to answer the question: do readers interpret native advertising as an advertisement or an article? The results were straight-forward. Most readers will view native advertising as an article as opposed to an advertisement. In all but one of their six tests did more

than 35% of participants identify a native advertising as an advertisement (Lazaukas, "Article or Ad?").

Beyond research from the private-sector, a recent study from Grady College found that the largest objection to native advertising— that a reader is unlikely to be able to identify native advertising as being an advertisement— to be a legitimate concern. They found that placement of a disclosure, and the language used in the disclosure, had a significant impact on whether or not a person could recognize native advertising as an ad. They found that native ads placed at the top of a page were far more likely to be overlooked than a disclosure placed in the middle of a page. Even disclosures placed at the bottom of a page were viewed more than those placed at the top where a byline or dateline might be placed.

The Conventions of Journalism

In *Reading the News*, Robert Manoff says this of news and reality: “For we read the news our papers deliver each day believing that it is an index to the real, and indeed, judgements about reality do give us the news. For this reason, judgments about the news are always to some extent judgments about reality” (Manoff 197). Journalism does not have centralized rules, however, certain conventions have developed out of the rhythmic nature of the news cycle (Manoff 97). Namely, the commandment that news should answer the questions of *who? what? when? where? why? how?* Answering these questions is both the “first commandment” and “second nature” of journalism (Manoff 3).

Reading the News is comprised of discourses on how each of those questions manifests in American news reporting. These interpretations of those fundamental questions will provide the qualitative framework for which ‘conventions of journalism’ is defined in this study.

Who?

News is primarily about people. Stories about abstractions, objects, and animals make up a much smaller portion of news stories (Manoff 13). Human-interest stories, which were spawned from a need for newspapers to have mass-appeal to readers for the sake of advertisers, became a vehicle for “people to become surrogates for institutions” for newspapers (Manoff 13-14). Further, the aspect of who is not only defined by subjects, but from whom the information comes. Journalists do not convey what they themselves witness, but what others have witnessed. Authoritative sources given journalism credibility as reporters and not as commentators on events.

“Objective reporting means avoiding as much as possible the overt intrusion of the reporter's personal values into a news story and minimizing the explicit interpretation in writing up the story” (Manoff 15).

What?

There are no strict guidelines for what the press covers. Certain subjects are not verboten and trends with news covers often reflect what consumers will read. The idea of press operation as a “mirror” on society persists (Manoff 39). However, there are certainly tropes. News is limited by covering what it is possible for it to cover and is often found covering what is easy. Despite striving for objectivity, news often does not cover people or organizations in its good graces. Regardless of what it covers the press has a proclivity for fact-sounding language.

When?

News exists in the continuous present. For news to be news, there usually has to be something new about it. It has to be relevant to right now. It has to have a news peg. News

makes an attempt to anticipate public debate. Trends are tied to current events and sometimes result in coverage of a semiotic event, or an event that has an unclear or potentially unimportant meaning at present, but could have future importance (Manoff 79). However, news features may cover a topic that is “timeless” or “evergreen.” Alternatively, they may be written “subjectively,” a device that used to “give the reader a sense of how he or she may live” (Manoff 106-107).

Where?

The place, the setting, as in other forms of writing or storytelling, is an invaluable element of narration (Manoff 125). *Where* is not explicitly a specific location. Journalism often casts location as an actor or character. Alternatively, where can be, of course, a geographic spot and that use, beyond being informative can be actionable (Manoff 115).

“Journalists not only tell us where a particular event took place, they also tell us where we are in a more general and much more important sense. They communicate to us images of our neighborhoods and cities, of the nation and the world around it, and even of the universe, images which for many of may constitutes most of what we know about the world beyond our immediate circle of experience” (Manoff 110).

Why and how?

In journalism, the *how* is merged into the *why*. If a method is posed, a reason is insinuated (Manoff 149). Why and how stand out from the other fundamental aspects of journalistic writing. While there can be deeper meaning to the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, they all could also be answered empirically. Why is an abstract concept, often the result of incomplete information or interpretation. Nonetheless, this “soft ground” allows a reader to gain a deeper understanding

from what might otherwise be an empirical index of people of a place at a certain time (Manoff 195).

Ethical Implications

The Society of Professional Journalists has not issued a direct statement on native advertisements to date. The SPJ code of ethics was last updated in 2014, and, in the breakneck pace at which the Internet moves, it's outdated. The latest revision comes from the SPJ's Ethics Code Revision Project. Published on their website, they highlight over 150 responses to the question: "Do you think the SPJ Code of Ethics needs to be updated?" Most of the respondents answered yes, and several specifically cited as a lack of clarity on guidelines for native advertising or similar web advertising content as a reason ("SPJ Code of Ethics").

The new SPJ Code of Ethics resulting from that draft does address the blending of editorial and advertising content. The provision reads: "Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content." However, that clause, could be interpreted to disallow and to permit native advertising. Native advertisements are often referred to as sponsored content and, in December 2015, the Federal Trade Commission released regulations to ensure that native advertisements had disclaimers in a manner that the organization deemed to minimize risk of readers confusing native advertising with editorial content ("Commission Enforcement Policy").

In the December 2015 guidelines for native advertising, the FTC borrowed language from a deceptive advertising case. "A disclosure must be in 'simple, unequivocal' language so that consumers comprehend what it means" ("Thompson Medical Co. v FTC"; "Commission Enforcement Policy"). In a follow up on their website, the FTC published a guide that explained the enforcement policy. When a native advertisement is placed, disclosures must be prominently

placed, stand out, and must contain simple language like “advertisement.” Terms like “Promoted by” or “Presented by” are ambiguous and could easily lead to confusion with underwriting (“Commission Enforcement Policy”).

The study from Grady College supports the FTC’s action. Despite the growth of native advertising, the subjects in the Grady College study were still unlikely to identify native advertising as an ad. However, the language and style of disclosure did have a major impact. Their subjects were much more likely to identify a native advertisement that was disclosed with the word “advertising” or “sponsored content.” Further, and away from supporting the FTC study, a disclosure, regardless of language, is likely to be ignored if placed at the top of a page. When placed at the top of a page, only 40 percent of their participants looked at the disclosure. 60 percent of participants looked at a disclaimer at the bottom of a page, and 90 percent looked at a disclaimer when placed in the middle of the page. The FTC recommendations suggest that disclosures at the top of the page.

A 2014 study in the *International Symposium on Online Journalism* grappled with the problems of credibility and the use of native advertising, zeroing in on the differences between the reactions of different age groups. They found that the appearance of in-feed native advertisements do not adversely affect how subjects felt about the news site’s credibility. However, their findings do not cleanly *translate* to this study. Their method was to present a subject with a static image of a mock news site’s home page with and without an in-feed native advertisement. Their definition of native advertisement was limited to the appearance of in-feed native advertisements. This definition differs significantly from that of this study. Also, as they express in their findings, the use of a static image limited the ability of subjects to actually notice that in-feed native advertisements are in fact advertisements.

Borrowed Conventions: Historical Example

On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles, in the form of a news broadcast, announced to listening Americans that an invasion force from Mars had begun an assault on major cities in the United States. The event was not a news broadcast, but a radio play adaptation of H.G. Wells's *the War of the Worlds*. Nonetheless, the otherwise outlandish announcements made by the players in the drama were taken very seriously by a number of Americans. Not all listeners believed that the world was coming to an end. However, there was enough panic to place the broadcast as an infamous mistake in the media mythos.

Following the broadcast, celebrated journalist Dorothy Thompson, then a writer for the New York Herald Tribune, wrote an editorial in response to the events. Incredulously, she credits Welles for stumbling into the most important social discovery of the century. She opens her article with:

"All unwittingly, Mr. Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater of the Air have made one of the most fascinating and important demonstrations of all time. They have proved that a few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create a nation-wide panic."

She does not directly credit Welles with inspiration of panic. By her observation, the only verisimilitude comes from Welles using the names of real major US cities. Other than that, it is completely implausible that a person should believe the broadcast, regardless of whether they caught the disclaimer or not. The accidental genius of the broadcast was not how it was crafted, but in its logic-defying reception: "the report became second hand, third hand, fourth hand, and

became more and more credible, so that nurses and doctors and National Guardsmen rushed to defense.”

Thompson wrote her editorial when the world was on the eve of war with Hitler and the axis powers. She likened the power of Welles’s broadcasts, and, by extension, all mass media to the influence of Nazi and Communist propaganda, fearing that people were far too susceptible to messages delivered over mass media. It appeared as if people blindly followed the messages from media.

Thompson’s message is that even the most ill-disguised wolf in sheep’s clothing can do an extraordinary amount of damage when it comes in a trusted source of authority. While no formal action was taken against CBS or Welles, news media were left with an informal agreement going forward that something like this needs to be avoided. News needs to believe to be effective. With believability comes trust. With trust comes responsibility.

The accidental genius of *the War of the Worlds* broadcast was the result, not the preparation. People received the broadcast as news because it was portrayed as such. Those that believed in broadcast suspended basic logic and accepted broadcast as news because it was portrayed as such. The dissemination of information does not travel in one direction. It is a chain reaction.

Not everyone believed the broadcast to be true. These listeners were either able to recognize that the work was unlikely to be as it was presented. Even if a listener didn’t recognize that the work was fiction *prima facie*, they were able to use a logical method to determine the falsity of the broadcast. A painfully obvious way to verify the veracity would have been to check another a news outlet. While there were false reports given to other news media, the claims were unverifiable and no one was able to corroborate the story.

The listeners that were able to discern the truth possessed a higher media literacy than those who were unable to see the falsity of the broadcast. Those with the lowest media literacy, those who shared the false information, while uncommon, lent a degree of verisimilitude to the broadcast's fictional claims. Things snowballed uphill until the momentum of the ridiculous claims reached the point where the suspension of belief would be too steep for the uninfluenced person.

III - Methods

Do native advertisements follow the conventions of journalism? This study takes an applied interpretative approach to the research question. This study applies hermeneutical analysis, or studying a text with reference to interpreting the context and intentions of the author, to the sampled native advertisements. While predominately used in theological research, this theoretical approach can be applied other forms of text. "To make sense of and interpret a text, it is important to know what the author wanted to communicate, to understand intended meanings and to place documents in a historical and cultural context" (Patton 114). In the case of native advertising, the historical context is media today with reference to the journalism's position in the 20th century and how financial struggles have left the news industry in dire straits. The author is not an individual person, but often a journalist or team or journalists that have converted from the editorial side to these native advertisement studios. This study investigates what ideas these native advertisements may want to communicate using the conventions of journalism as a guide.

Sampling

Using a combination of critical case sampling and stratified purposeful sampling, this study will examine samples of native advertising published online by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Slate*. The publications were selected as the critical examples. This approach is explained by the determination “if it happens there, it will happen anywhere” (Patton 236).

Procedure

As the execution of native advertisements vary greatly within each publication, the analysis will be sub-divided to focus on three samples of native advertising per publication, bringing the sample size to 12 examples of native advertising across four publications. Purposeful convenience sampling will be used to extrapolate more meaningful cases. These samples will be limited to examples published online between January 2014 and March 2016. The selection will be made with empathic neutrality and mindfulness. As outlined in the Patton text (Patton 239), confirming examples are selected because they fit an emergent pattern from the exploratory phases of the research. In this study, disconfirming examples are used for “placing boundaries around confirmed findings” (Patton 239).

Analysis

This study will use Manoff’s “Reading the News” as a framework for defining the conventions of journalism. This text was selected because it provides interpretive explanation of the “first commandment and second nature of news” — to answer the 5 W’s: *Who? What? When? Where? Why and how?* Manoff’s collection of essays provides depth to this fundamental

element of journalism as opposed to leaving those questions to be answered by empirical measures.

Below are the elements, as borrowed from the Manoff text, that distinguish narrative elements as “conventions of journalism” as opposed to other forms of narrative.

Who?

- News is primarily about people
- People being used as surrogates for institutions
- Use authoritative sources to illustrate objectivity

What?

- Covers what its readership might like to read
- Coverage of trends
- Covers what is easy (via press release or readily available material)
- Covers what is possible for it to cover (no unsourced ‘inside’ knowledge)

When?

- Continuous present language
- Contains a news peg or hook
- Coverage of trends
- Subjunctive reporting
- Feature stories may cover what is timeless

Where?

- Location cast as an actor
- Communication of images of relatable locations

Why and how?

- Insinuation of a reason for action
- Abstract, meaning meant to be extrapolated
- Usually not qualified empirically

Native advertising is designed to follow the form and function of the host’s content.

Research has shown that native advertisements do follow the form so closely that a majority of readers fail to identify native advertisements as advertisements (Grady College; Contently). They

are indeed designed to look like a news story and their purpose is to provide readers with relevant information without disrupting content. Replicating the very specific, traditional conventions of journalism is not implicit in that design.

IV - Results

The New York Times

In 2013, *the New York Times* opened T Brand Studio to produce a, in the word of publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr., “controversial” new product. Within its first year, the studio produced the critically-acclaimed *Women Inmates* piece. Even the aforementioned critic David Carr tweeted out “All brand-sponsored journalism does not suck. Witness this peach.”

“Women Inmates: Why the Male Model Doesn’t Work”
Paid Post (Netflix) by Melanie Deziel

This piece is part investigative, part trend, part human-interest. Complete with video interviews, the story provides a snapshot of the modern day female prisoner and the challenges she may face in the system. The story uses outside sources and data to create an objective distance from the story (despite referencing the Netflix series in the body of the text). In an interview the writer of the piece said that writing the Netflix piece “was a lot like it would be in a newsroom, to be honest. The difference, of course, being that it was submitted for review by the clients before it went live” (Deziel, Melanie. Interview).

Who? The piece is about people (women in prison). Individual women are used as surrogates for an institution (female inmates). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? This piece covers a subject that *the New York Times* readership may want to read (It provides deep coverage that is similar to other Times long-form content). The piece covers a trend (women in prison are treated without regard to their gender).

When? This piece contains subjunctive purpose (it gives the reader a sense of what it would be to be a female inmate).

Where? The location is cast as an actor (prison, the prison system). The location is generalized, relatable (prisons).

Why and How? How is communicated directly: “funneling women through an infrastructure whose amenities, treatment options, job-training programs were designed for male inmates ...” However, as a whole, the *Why* can be determined as a national culture of sexism and ignorance of on gender-related issues with particular reference to the challenges of incarcerated women.

“Grit & Grace: The intense practice and inexorable passion it takes to master ballet”
Paid Post (Cole Haan) by T Brand Studio (Note: *While the byline says ‘T Brand Studio,’ Melanie Deziel is writer of this piece*)

This long-form features story details the behind-the-scenes process of being a ballerina. Interviews from New York City Ballet dancers to add faces and authority to the story. While there is no pressing news peg or trend significance, this human-interest story is nonetheless a worthy features piece. The piece explores transitive themes of determination and passion. While Cole Haan is never mentioned directly, there is a section, appropriately so, dedicated to pointe shoes.

Who? The piece is about people (ballerinas). People are used as surrogates for an institution (the specific ballerinas sourced represent professional dancing and aspiring dancers). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? This piece covers a subject that *the New York Times* readership may want to read (It provides deep coverage that is similar to other Times long-form content).

When? This features piece covers a something timeless (there is no specific news peg). This piece contains subjunctive purpose (it gives the reader a sense of what it would be to be a ballerina).

Where? The location is generalized, relatable (dance studios)

Why and How? How and why are best extrapolated from the piece's title: "Grit and Grace."

Further, it can be extrapolated that the *why* is answered with determination, drive.

"Sensing the Next Wave"

Paid Post (AIG) *no byline*

The piece is based on then recent research from AIG, which provides the news peg and could do one of two things: 1) shatter the perception of objectivity because AIG is the sponsor 2) provide an objective distance if the disclaimer isn't seen or read. The story contains authoritative, outside sources and from the AIG study — the story features journalism's proclivity for fact-sounding language. The story's content is unlike something that news would conventionally cover. While the press would cover something that is "easy" (from a press release about this study), the depth of this coverage disqualifies that category.

Who? Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? There is no discernable *What* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

When? The piece contains a new peg (release of the study).

Where? There is no discernable *Where* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism

Why and How? There is no discernable *Why and How* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism

The Washington Post

The Washington Post hosts its native advertisements under the WP BrandConnect portal. The content is created using *the Washington Post*'s full-service tools, often appearing to look similar to *the Post*'s long-form feature stories. On the 'Best Client Practices' section of the WP BrandConnect section of the website, this advice is given for posts: " You can still post informative and educational content, but less formal, conversational tone is easier for people to understand and digest – especially in a newsfeed format." Unlike the other news organizations used in this study, a significant portion of *the Post*'s native advertising content appears in the form of guest posts (or posts authored by the sponsor). However, some are produced by the WP BrandStudio staff.

"Past Sins, Present, Dangers: The American mob's enduring saga"

Content from Esquire Network, Content created by WP BrandStudio

WP BrandStudio's story on modern day organized crime has a strong lede: "While the storied Italian Mafia has lost its stronghold in the United States, its progeny remain alive and active with an estimated 3,000 members and affiliates." This lede sets you up for a human-interest story, which also seems to promise a bit of investigative journalism. The sources are ex-mobsters and FBI agents, the height of authority on the subject. It's the type of story that is certain to draw in a young-to-middle-aged male demographic, which, in line with the Manoff text is press 'covering what wants to be read.' Its temporal importance is that, despite what you may think, Mafiosi still operate around the United States.

At the bottom of the story is the call to action: "Watch how organized crime comes between two brothers on 'Sportless,' premiering Nov. 14 on Esquire Network."

Who? The piece is about people (Mafiosi, Law Enforcement). People are used as surrogates for an institution (specifically, the institutions that those featured belong to). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? This piece covers a subject that *the Washington Post* readership may want to read (It provides deep coverage that is similar to other long-form content in *the Post*).

When? Story has semiotic tense (the mafia continues to operate in the United States).

Where? The location is generalized, relatable (the location is generalized to the United States)

Why and How? *How* is directly stated: Organized criminals “engage in everything from wire fraud to computer hacking and human trafficking.” The *Why* to be extrapolated is that there is still profit in organized crime despite losing some of the tropes of being engaged in organized crime in the 20th Century. *Why* is also explained directly in a quote from Eric Schneider “The ongoing attraction to organized crime is still probably a byproduct of the past two decade of people growing up with ‘Goodfellas’ and aspiring to that life, which I don’t understand now.”

“Technology in the Middles Market: Nice-to-Have vs. Need-to-Have”

Content from CIT, no byline (guest post)

The story’s lede introduces Eric Anderson, the owner of an amusement park in Connecticut. In form with the Manoff text, the story uses human-interest to use a person as a “surrogate for an institution.” In this instance the institution is middle market business owners. The story has a couple of authoritative sources, however, the story’s primary source of data is from a study jointly conducted by CIT and Capital Insight, *the Post*’s research group. While the study provides a news peg — somewhat — this story has semiotic significance. This is a trend story, focusing on the adoption of current technology in smaller businesses. The story uses the amusement park as a snapshot of small businesses in America.

(Not disclosed in the story, CIT, the sponsor and company involved with the survey, provides lending, leasing, and advisory services to small and middle market businesses)

Who? The piece is about people (Eric Anderson, Middle-Market business leaders). Individuals are used as surrogates for an institution (Middle-Market business). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? The piece covers a trend (Middle-Market business owners embracing new technology).

When? This piece contains subjunctive tense (it gives the reader a sense of what it may be like to be a Middle-Market business owner adopting new technology).

Where? The location is generalized, relatable (the amusement park represents any middle-market business).

Why and How? The *Why* is the implication that the adoption of technology at the small-to-middle business level improves the business, even if it is not perceived as needed.

“Helping farmers, one acre at a time”

Content from Airbnb, Content Created by WP Brand Studio

This story profiles Matthew Forti, a founding member of the One Acre Fund, an organization aimed at helping farmers succeed to end poverty and benefit neighborhoods. Forti is the embodiment of “the idea that business principles could be applied to major social problems.” The story has a proclivity for fact-sounding language and any statistics are attributed to an outside source. At one point in the story the illusion of a journalist author is disrupted with an unattributed claim that says “We have ...”

Who? The piece is about people (Matt Forti). Individuals are used as surrogates for an institution (Business solving social problems). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? There is no discernable *What* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism. An argument can be made for the piece “covering what its readership might like to read.” However, a quick glance at *the Washington Post’s* business coverage shows that this is unlikely to be the case.

When? This piece contains subjunctive tense (it gives the reader a sense of how thinking in business terms may solve societal problems).

Where? The location is generalized, relatable (impoverished farms).

Why and How? The piece is an insinuation that business practices can solve societal problems.

Slate

Slate, through *SlateCustom*, “creates innovative ad programs that are as original as our site. Count on *Slate* to help you do something that's new, different, and exciting, from crowdsourced edit programs to *SlateCustom*-branded content solutions” (*Slate*). *SlateCustom* offers ad partnership under the following categories: Editorial, Videos, Podcast, Mobile, Events , and Units. Native advertisements, or Editorial content from *SlateCustom*, will occasionally appear on the site with an in-feed unit. Those units are highlighted by an electric blue stroke and a box that reads “Sponsored Content.”

“Beatboxing Transforms Education at Lavelle School for the Blind”

Brought to you by Wells Fargo, by Mikaela Conley

This human-interest story is on the Lavelle School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in the Bronx. The sources are those who are part of the organization, ergo, the most authoritative on the program. The story is presented as an objective telling of events. The language is not opinionated, but everything is fact-sounding. While there isn’t a specific news hook, its

relevance is nonetheless important. The setting is vividly portrayed to the reader. It is a story about specific people in a specific place, the imagery of setting is transitive. There is an altruistic mission here. It gives you the sense that there are forces of good in the world. (While not directly disclosed in the story, this piece is part of the Wells Fargo Bank's Small is Huge campaign. A content series that is designed "to show how even the tiniest moments and decisions in our lives can have a massive impact.")

Who? The piece is about people (those at the Lavelle School). Individuals are used as surrogates for an institution (The Lavelle School and, in a broader sense, Altruism). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? This piece covers a subject that *Slate* readers may want to read (It provides deep coverage that is similar to other *Slate* long-form content).

When? This piece contains subjunctive purpose (it gives the reader a sense of what it would be to be at the Lavelle School, or, in a broader sense, working in some form of altruistic program).

Where? The location is cast as an actor (the school). The location is generalized, relatable (the setting is described in a way that it could be in any urban setting).

Why and How? The piece is a feel-good story that insinuates that the actors are acting altruistically.

"How Tall is Your Family Tree? Longevity is playing a role in remaking the face of a family"
Brought to you by Prudential, by Sonia Arrison

This piece is a trend story with a focus on how people are living longer and doing things, like having children, later in life. This story, while full of citations of authoritative research, lacks direct sources. Instead, quotes are supplied through secondary sources via *the UK Daily Mail* and *the New York Times*. The language is embellished, however, the proclivity for fact-

sounding language is present. However, this story is an example of ‘reporting on what people would want to read.’ It’s a trend piece that affects all living people. (While not disclosed in the story, Prudential’s stake in this story is evident: people living longer need to invest more into retirement planning)

Who? The piece is about people (the general population).

What? The piece covers a trend (people are started to live longer and do things later in life).

When? There is no discernable *When*— at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Where? There is no discernable *Where* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Why and How? The *How* is explained in the body of the text: Thanks to amazing advances in regenerative medicine and other technologies, both women and men will be healthier for longer periods of time.” The *Why* is explained in the *How*.

“Can Language Influence Our Perception of Reality? New research suggest that subtle linguistic difference can frame our approaches to difficult problems — and even affect our views on space and time”

Brought to you by the University of California, by Mitch Moxley

This story reports on new research of the University of California, San Diego. The story’s main source of information is the study itself and one of the authors of the study. This type of news story, according to the Manoff text, is a prime example of the press covering ‘what is easy.’ It reads like a news story that is adapted from a press release. However, unlike journalism, there is a tendency to use hyperbolic language and stronger adjectives.

Who? Arguably, the story is about Lera Boroditsky, the researcher. However, the story is more focused on the findings.

What? The piece covers something that would be easy to cover

When? The piece contains a new peg (release of the study).

Where? There is no discernable *Where*— at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Why and How? The *How* would be the research methods in this case. It seems unlikely there would be a discernable *Why* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

The Wall Street Journal

The Journal approaches native advertising somewhat differently than the other publishers in this study. Native advertisements are hosted on *the Journal's* CMO Today, their blog site for brand partners. As the native ads exist on this platform, they generally appear to be very different from *the Journal's* editorial content.

“Cocainomics”

Sponsor Generated Content (Netflix), by Peter S. Green, Fara Warner and Christine Sanders

The piece is a five-part, long-form historical piece. While it lacks a news peg, it's a human-interest story that profiles the Medellin cartel, the organization headed by infamous kingpin Pablo Escobar. The story uses outside authoritative sources like professors from Harvard and SUNY, DEA agents and others that would be acceptable as experts on the matter. The story is thoroughly sourced, bringing it much closer to journalism than a history essay. It's a strong features story.

Who? The piece is about people (Pablo Escobar, the Cartel, Law Enforcement). People are used as surrogates for an institution (specifically, the institutions that those featured belong to). Authoritative sources are used to illustrate objectivity.

What? This piece covers a subject that *the Wall Street Journal* readership may want to read (It provides deep coverage that is similar to other long-form content in *the Journal*. However, it should be noted that the *Journal* saw a dramatic drop in its long-form content from 2007 to 2009 according to an report from the Columbia Journalism Review).

When? The piece is a feature on a timeless or evergreen topic.

Where? The locations in this piece are geographical, empirical. While these exist in journalism, the usage of geographic locations would not distinguish this piece from any other form of narrative.

Why and How? The piece is a historical recount. While these exist in journalism, particularly in feature stories, this element does not distinguish this piece from any other form of narrative.

“Managing in an Era of Upheaval”

By WSJ. Custom Studios for GE Capital

Like a significant portion of the *Journal*’s native advertising content, this native ad serves as more of a blog-style piece than a news story. However, some basic elements of journalism are present. The blog has a single source in a professor from Ohio State. University. While the source is authoritative and creates an objective distance for the writer(s), it did not frame the story so it was about the source. This post lacks the markings of a news story. It reads like a blog.

Who? There is no discernable *Who* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

What? Arguably, this piece is something business-oriented readers of the *WSJ* would want to read. However, in general, there is no discernable *What* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

When? There is no discernable *When* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Where? There is no discernable *Where* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Why and How? There is no discernable *Why* or *How* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

“Turning Back the Hands of Time: America’s Handmade-Watch Revivalist”

Sponsor Generated Content (Mercedes-Benz), no byline (header reads: WSJ Custom Studios Viewfinders)

The story profiles Cameron Weiss, a watchmaker. The story gives a brief background on Weiss and then shares his business philosophy. Once again, this reads more like a blog than a news story. While the human-interest story casts Weiss as a sort-of embodiment of chasing the dream of a small business — it lacks a news peg, outside sources and most of the elements of a news story proper.

Who? The story is about a person (Cameron Weiss)

What? There is no discernable *What* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

When? There is no discernable *When* – at least with regards to the conventions of journalism.

Where? The locations in this piece are geographical, empirical. While these exist in journalism, the usage of geographic locations would not distinguish this piece from any other form of narrative.

Why and How? The piece is a historical recount. While these exist in journalism, particularly in feature stories, this element does not distinguish this piece from any other form of narrative.

Findings

Native advertising is a form of advertising that borrows conventions. It is untethered to its own conventions, and thus, it can borrow the conventions that will best allow it to fulfill its definitional purpose “to follow the form and function of the host’s content.” It will sometimes

appear as multimedia, sometimes as a blog, and sometimes as journalism. This study found that native advertisements can look dramatically different based on who produced the content and what the content was designed to look like. However, when a native advertisement is designed to look like a piece of journalism, from the samples analyzed, it does not only take on the appearance of journalism, but it so closely follows the conventions of journalism that it would be entirely accurate to refer to it as journalism.

Native advertising *is* journalism when it is designed to be. These pieces of content are stories that usually come packed answering *who, what, when, where, why* and have a tight lede at the precipice of the inverted pyramid. There is an important caveat, native advertising has its own conventions for *what* it will cover. There is no way to generalize this as there is with newspapers. From the Manoff text, journalism has traditions that self-regulate content. For example, the press doesn't cover the press, or organization or people that in its good graces (Manoff 50-51). Native advertising's restrictions are different — they vary piece by piece depending on who is paying to place or produce the content.

By any reasonable definition, native advertising is a “hybrid” of advertising and journalism when a native advertisement is designed to look like a piece of journalism. The pieces designed to look like long-form features stories often tell stories of peoples who provide an element of human-interest while serving as a surrogate for an institution or concept. The use of outside, authoritative sources create a sense of objectivity, to the same effect of a news piece. These pieces often covered human-interests or something that would be of interest to a reader. The pieces that covered material that would “be covering the easy” a la regurgitation a press release, often contained a depth and effort that disqualifies it from that category. These stories often lacked specific news pegs, however they were often about trends or had some semiotic

significance. The stories often were not specific to a geographic location, but created transitive images of places so that the reader may comprehend them. The motivations that were designed to be extrapolated varied, but were nonetheless present — for example, the *Beatbox* piece from *Slate* answered *why* with altruism.

Native advertising may have continued to grow because it is seen as a grey area. While improving disclosure practice may increase the number of people who realize that these are advertisements, the reality that native advertisements share the conventions of news remains. The SPJ Code of Ethics, as it reads today, offers two choices for publishers: shun the hybrid, or prominently label sponsored content. Native advertising is a hybrid, regardless of disclosures. When journalism met the internet, it had to sacrifice on so many areas, but it refused to relinquish its ethics. It will be to publishers of news to decide whether or not journalism can continue its fight for survival while maintaining the very traditions that carried it through the past century.

V - Conclusions

Implications

Considering the polysemous message from the SPJ Code of Ethics, it is understandable why this can be a divisive issue for those in the media industry. On one hand, if native advertisements were properly disclosed, they may absolve publishers of the condemnation of breaking down the conventional firewall between advertising and editorial content. On the other, it is very clear that those who create native advertising have gone to craft a product that is seemingly more news than advertisement. In a sense, they have created an offshoot of

journalism. The term Brand Journalism is already out there, in the same marketing blogs and webinars that you may have found native advertising on 2012.

By any reasonable definition, native advertising is a “hybrid” of advertising and journalism. You can replicate the look of a thing without actually capturing the essence of what makes that thing distinct. Native advertising does capture the essence of journalism, when it means to do so. While improving disclosure practice may increase the number of people who realize that these are advertisements, the reality that native advertisements share the conventions of news remains. The SPJ Code of Ethics, as it reads today, offers two choices for publishers: shun the hybrid, or prominently label sponsored content. Native advertising is a hybrid, regardless of disclosures.

The question becomes: as journalism, as it was come to be recognized over the past century, fights to survive the transition to a digital world, will it shed the foundational ethics that set it apart from previous iterations of journalism? As David Carr initially observed native advertising in 2014, those trying to save journalism were in danger of destroying it. If native advertising continues to exist in spaces reserved for news, can those spaces still be considered news? Publishers are left with the decision to preserve the ethics 20th century model of journalism, but potentially risk leading it to its demise or lead journalism into its next chapter of existence with a new set of ethics that permit the blending of editorial and advertising content. This is an extreme, but necessary way to examine the problem because the decision is binary. The routes are mutually exclusive.

Future Directions

Native advertising, despite ethical objections, appears to be on track to grow at a rapid pace. However, one of the unexpected findings brushed upon in this study was that native

advertising is not just advertising that looks like news, but it is capable of being whatever content it is supposed to blend into. Through the lens of journalism ethics, one could reasonably call native advertising as a lapse in ethical judgement. However, native advertising does not only exist in spaces known for news. The native advertising model has applications in all forms of conceivable media by design. Native advertising becomes the platform on which it exists. It is not a poster, a distinct other entity, placed on a platform. It can exist in blogs, like this study encountered in *the Wall Street Journal* section; it can exist in video games or even music, wherever.

Future researchers will have opportunities to see how other ethical models grapple with native advertising. For example, is *The Scarecrow*, an iOS “advergame” (advertisement + game), qualify as a native advertisement? Is it ethical to make an advertisement-game hybrid? Further, some media companies, like *the New York Times*, are investing in Virtual Reality. What are the ethical implications of advertisements that are Virtual Reality experiences? As native advertising is able to be adapted to any medium, there are endless avenues for exploring native advertising in its different forms. We could be at the verge of a redefinition of advertising as a whole as consumer rejection of conventional advertising methods enhanced by the internet continues to rise.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is very limited in scope and only addresses a very small sample of a small portion of native advertisements — native advertisements that are meant to look like journalism. It seems unlikely that a larger sample size would have altered the analysis, it nonetheless presents an opportunity for rebuttal.

Further, there is no definitive way to measure the conventions of journalism, as the conventions are a convergence of traditions and adaptations to market demands. While this study did look for specific elements to measure the conventions of journalism, it is difficult to define something that is mostly based on feeling. Narrower coding could alter the results of the study.

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