

Position paper 5 – **Branded content** or **branded journalism**

The National Newsmedia Council is of the view that branded content is within its mandate. Advertising standards may be sufficient for traditional ads, but branded content underlines the fact that accuracy is at risk when journalism skills are used for commerce and to drive reader engagement in products or services.

We are of this view because branded content uses the skills of a journalist to create public interest, or to present information that may have the appearance of objective rapportage with its attendant values of news gathering and reporting. The NNC is aware that the intent of branded content lies with the interests of the sponsor, while the intent of news and opinion writing lies with the interest of public good. The NNC believes it has a role in reminding the industry and the public of that distinction.

Branded content or branded journalism uses journalism skills in the service of promoting a product, service or brand. It is sometimes known as native content, and, in earlier versions was sometimes labelled as “advertorial” content.

Branded content can appear as a feature story, interview, or video. It can look like a news story with details of a technical development or innovation, or comprise an entire section on a topic such as nuclear energy or nursing careers. It can be upfront about the sponsoring agency, or the clues could be subtle. Its goal is to use words, images and audio to influence target audiences, gain new customers, build customer loyalty, increase sales, or make the consumer more positively disposed toward the values, role or other attributes of a brand or service.

Real estate, travel, automobile and entertainment are traditional subjects of branded content, which may have been easier to identify when news was delivered by a handful of national television networks or newspapers. Today, lines more easily blur in a world of content opportunities offered by blogs, endless social media platforms and online magazines.

The NNC is concerned that while journalists are expected to bear in mind legal and ethical considerations of their writing, courses on branded content may or may not teach those components. Facebook states that its “journalism certificates,” for example, are designed to promote use of Facebook tools, but specifically states the courses will not focus on the practical, legal or ethical aspects of news reporting or broadcasting.

There is concern that branded content pushes journalist to place high concern on page-view numbers rather than on being accurate, fair, or ethical. Journalists will be asked to use their skills, but in an atmosphere where journalism ethics are not highlighted. The NNC will provide a forum for readers and a service to members if that ethics gap becomes a source of complaints.

Best journalism practice insists that branded content or native advertising be clearly identified as advertising by using a border, label, or other recognizable identification. However, as branded content tends increasingly to a news-style storytelling format, the NNC expects confusion and complaints from a public that is unsure about where boundaries lie.

NNC responsibility to members and the public requires that complaints be addressed. In considering a complaint about branded content, the NNC would determine the nature of the complaint. Possibilities include misunderstanding of humour, error of fact, hurtful or offensive language. If the complaint appears to have some prima facie validity, the NNC would hear the complainant, consider the response from the news media organization, and make a recommendation on the validity and resolution of the complaint. Resolution could also include referral to the Advertising Standards Council of Canada - as is currently the case with complaints about advertising.

Where the NNC refers a complaint to a member's editor or publisher, they would be expected to consult with the content provider. Similar procedure is used in the case of complaints about wire, syndicated or other third-party editorial content.

The NNC takes the view that member news media organizations are responsible for all content they publish, and that they must be willing to investigate complaints and work toward a remedy. The NNC also recognizes the wide latitude of opinion writers to use strong language and express a viewpoint, and generally only considers complaints about factual errors, poor taste, unethical or unnecessarily offensive opinion writing. The same standards, while allowing for point of view, would be expected in considering branded content.

References: University of Toronto

Yusur Al Bahrani, Ryerson Review of Journalism

Paul Benedetti, The Big Sellout: A Critical Snapshot of the Rise of "Entrepreneurial Journalism"

Facebook

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001)

Somaiya and Kaufman (2013)

Poynter