

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 and perhaps reader trust is at risk when journalism skills are used to sell or promote products or services.

The NNC is of this view because today's branded content is sometimes difficult to distinguish from news or feature articles. Branded content, also referred to as sponsored content or native advertising, uses a journalist's ability to capture interest and tell a story. The information may indeed be of interest to the public, but instead of presenting an objective point of view or serving the public good, branded content steers the reader toward a product or the goal of the advertiser. The NNC believes it has a role in reminding the industry and the public of that distinction.

The NNC defines branded content or branded journalism as writing that uses story-telling and reporting skills to promote a product, service or brand. It is sometimes labelled "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 gain new customers, increase sales, or build customer loyalty by presenting a brand in a positive light.

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 are more easily blurred as readers face a deluge of content from blogs, social media platforms and online magazines.

The NNC is concerned that while journalists are expected to consider legal and ethical aspects of their writing, courses that train writers to produce 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.

Branded content is aimed at garnering page-view numbers, and with that comes the potential that it may be achieved at the expense of the primary concern journalism gives to standards of accuracy, fairness, or ethical standards. There is likewise concern about loss of trust and perceived balance when journalists are tasked to write promotional stories or sponsored content, and how to make the distinction between news and branded content in those cases. The NNC will provide a forum for readers and a service to members if such circumstances become 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 for response, 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

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Facebook

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001)

Somaiya and Kaufman (2013)

Poynter