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# No, Virginia, It's Not True What They Say About Publicity's "Implied Third-Party Endorsement" Effect

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay re-examines "implied third-party endorsement" as an explanation of publicity's effectiveness. Instead of the traditional explanation that publicity's superiority can be attributed to an implied recommendation found in media content, the author argues that any effect involves *inferences* by audience members who use biased processing that favors news and disfavors advertising. This article reviews relevant research, including 11 experiments, which provide only qualified support for claims about the superiority of news. Original findings from an assessment of audience perceptions provide support for the biased processing hypothesis and suggest that the presentation of information as news is not necessarily perceived by audiences as an endorsement of a topic by news workers.

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For more than a half century, public relations practitioners have ascribed the superiority of news over advertising to an implied third-party endorsement by the media.[1] Despite widespread acceptance among practitioners,[2]

and general acknowledgement by academicians,[3] little empirical research has been conducted to test claims about third-party endorsements or the superiority of news versus advertising, more generally. In 1974, Detwiler observed,

> After about 50 years of currency in public relations, the concept of third-party endorsement is still *terra incognita*. It is devoid of research support and devoid of literature. This keystone of public relations is still for the most part an article of faith.[4]

Twenty years later, Hunt and Grunig also were wary:

> We know of little research evidence that people actually believe journalists have endorsed a product when they run a news story or that editorial copy has greater credibility than advertising copy . . . the evidence is so scanty that we recommend caution in assuming and claiming third-party effects.[5]

## 'IMPLIED THIRD-PARTY ENDORSEMENT' EFFECTS

### The Traditional Perspective

The notion that media provide an endorsement of the topics they cover is rooted in early theories about the roles media play in society, in particular the ability of media to create *awareness* (including agenda-setting)[6] and to confer *status*.[7] Indeed, the media can invest obscure, nonentities with an importance that is out of proportion to real life, so that audiences pay attention to these people; organizations or causes.[8] Media also can bestow on newsmakers the authority of being an object of public interest.[9]

#### *Endorsement Defined*

To *endorse* a product, person, or cause is "to express approval of publicly and definitely."[10] Thus an endorsement is different from a recommendation. To *recommend* means "to present as worthy of acceptance or trial."[11] Although the terms are often used interchangeably, endorsement involves an indication of approval, not necessarily a call to action.

Several problems plague the traditional explanation of a third-party endorsement as the implicit and unpaid for expression of approval of a product, service, candidate, or cause by the news media. The first is the often-stated claim that news workers, consciously or unconsciously, make news selections with the deliberate *intent* of endorsing particular topics as anything more than merely topical or interesting. In fact, news selection is a complex process that reflects various factors: the conventions and routines of news work, audience demands and interests, pressures from sources, organizational policies and cultures, adequacy of staffing, and the availability of news material. The argument that news workers purposefully

endorse particular ideas also runs counter to professional journalistic standards, which emphasize objectivity and impartiality.

Second, beyond agenda setting, there is only very limited evidence that even *explicit* endorsements in the news portions of the media have an effect on behavior. In the political arena, for example, studies generally have found only modest effects for editorial page endorsements.[12] In the case of product promotion, only scattered studies have attempted to examine the effects of editorial content in buying decisions, with only fragmentary findings.[13]

## Redefining 'Third Party Endorsement' from an Audience Processing Perspective

The traditional explanation discussed previously suggests that implied editorial endorsements are characteristics inherent in messages found in newspapers or magazines or on radio or television and are the result of actions by media workers. An alternative approach suggests that endorsements are not *implied* by media workers at all, but rather involve *inferences* by media audiences. This conceptualization avoids the conceptual problems related to the intent of media and shifts the focus of analysis to how audiences process information. Such an approach is consistent with research that examines concepts such as credibility and media bias from audience perspectives.[14]

Elsewhere, I have suggested that audiences use the *content class* in which information appears as a *contextual cue* that biases the processing of mediated messages.[15] During the pre-attention phrases of processing messages, it is hypothesized that audiences categorize messages into familiar content classes and invoke different rules for processing, or cognitive schemas, that are deemed appropriate in a given situation. Under this scenario, the presentation of information in the form of news (versus advertising or entertainment)[16] serves as a source cue wherein knowledge about news (versus these other content classes) is taken into account by audiences when processing messages. As a result, the effects commonly attributed to third-party endorsements by media can be explained in terms of *biased processing*. Such bias can be measured in the cognitive, attitudinal, and conative responses elicited within audiences.

A critical question that remains is whether any advantage enjoyed by publicity is a function of characteristics *inherent* in news. Or is publicity's advantage equally rooted in the less desirable characteristics associated with other content classes, such as advertising? Impassioned claims about the credibility of news are difficult to reconcile with the fact that as many as three quarters of all Americans have some complaint about the performance of the news media.[17] Indeed, strong evidence suggests purported third-party endorsement effects can be attributed to processing biases that both favor news and disfavor advertising.

### *Bias Favoring News*

A review of the literature suggests four key characteristics that might make news particularly acceptable to audiences as a source of information:

***Expertness.*** One of the traditional components of credibility is expertness.[18] Reeves, Chaffee, and Tims observe "an understandable tendency to place more faith in information from media, which are professionally organized to validate and edit their content . . . . "[19]

***Independence.*** The absence of a vested interest or the prospect of organizational or personal gain from a particular news story carried by the media is called independence. It is a necessary condition for trustworthiness, the other major component (along with expertness) of credibility.[20]

***Unclear intention to persuade.*** Because the perceived purpose of news is to *tell*, not *sell*, audiences are believed to be open to a greater variety of messages presented as news. News, unlike advertising, thus lacks *forewarning* about persuasive intent, a factor that can reduce persuasion effectiveness.[21]

***Ambiguity of language.*** News practices that stress balanced reporting, the lack of effusive language, and the matter-of-fact way in which news is delivered makes it similarly difficult for sources to discern persuasion attempts in news. Correspondence theory suggests that such ambiguity might actually increase attention.[22]

### *Bias Disfavoring Advertising*

Consumer dislike of advertising has been recognized for nearly a century. One of the earliest trade books in public relations explained, in 1921, that publicity "disseminates a general idea, opinion or point of view, which, if labelled as advertising, would lose much of its effect."[23] Overall, explanations of the unfavorable response to advertising by audiences fall into three broad categories:

***Avoidance.*** Drawing upon cognitive balance and cognitive dissonance theories, some theorists emphasize that people wish to maintain cognitive equilibrium and avoid discrepant promotional information about products or services they don't want or cannot afford to buy. Audiences are believed to avoid potentially dissonant information by skipping over ads in print media, leaving the room during commercials, or otherwise "tuning out" advertising.[24]

***Resistance.*** Other arguments suggest that audiences *react negatively* to advertising messages. Psychological reactance theory contends that individuals will resist messages or actions whenever personal freedom is threatened.[25] Cognitive response theory suggests that the positive elaboration of a message (the self-generation of support arguments and source bolstering) is a necessary condition for persuasion to occur, but consumers often respond to advertising messages with counterarguments and source derogations.[26]

***Discounting.*** Finally, attribution theory-based explanations suggest that people purposefully dismiss advertising as a effort to influence them, and thus they are less

likely to consider the arguments presented in the message. Kelley's general discounting principle suggested that when individuals are presented with two causal explanations for why an event occurs, people will tend to disbelieve the most obvious explanation in favor of others.[27]

## RESEARCH ON PUBLICITY VERSUS ADVERTISING

If news outperforms advertising as a result of implied third-party endorsements, valuable insights can be gleaned from examining the research conducted to date on the comparative effectiveness of these formats for presenting promotional messages. In general, studies support the strength of publicity, but little support can be found for the notion that news is uniformly better than advertising.

### Studies Involving General Comparisons

#### *Ability to Distinguish*

No empirical studies have focused solely on whether audiences are able to differentiate between advertisements and publicity. The lack of research in this arena reflects the assumption that the difference is obvious. Levitt cites one early study that he says concluded "deep down inside the consumer understands . . . that an advertisement is an ad, not a factual news story."[28] Larkin dismisses the question as being irrelevant because he argues that advertising and news (which together are mediated sources) are indistinguishable as sources of information when compared to interpersonal sources.[29] Research concerned about the vulnerability of children to advertising suggests children as old as the fourth grade are unable to discern the purpose of advertising from entertainment, but most children develop a distrust of advertising by the time they reach ages 9 to 12 years.[30]

#### *Differences in Processing*

McLeod, Pan, and Rucinski contend that audiences do not process news and advertising in the same way. In a 1987 telephone survey that was intended to study media use, respondents were: less likely to recall and later think and talk about ads they said they had seen, less likely to attempt to interpret their meaning (i.e., "read between the lines" for deeper understanding), and less likely to engage in the same form of selective scanning that the researchers had detected for news audiences. Moreover, attention to ads was negatively related to recall of news content, leading the researchers to conclude that different people scan news versus ads and these different groups integrate information differently.[31]

#### *Comprehension*

Jacoby and Hoyer compared rates of miscomprehension of TV messages and found nonadvertising messages (TV programs and news) were misunderstood

more than advertising messages.[32] Preston and Scharbach also examined the ability of individuals to discern logically invalid statements in 12 advertisements versus the same message reconstructed in the forms of news stories, business memoranda, and letters. They found that advertisements were significantly higher in acceptance of logically invalid statements than any of the other forms and that individuals were least likely to describe as accurate an illogical statement when it was presented in a news story. The authors concluded that individuals often impute information that is not a part of advertising's manifest content. More important, the researchers suggested, "The reader of other [non-advertising] message forms does not perceive the source as being necessarily partial to the outcome; therefore [he or she] does not tend so strongly to see the message as making positive claims"[33]

### Experimental Research Comparing Effectiveness

Eleven studies have reported experimental findings comparing the effectiveness of news versus that of advertising. These studies were conducted in the United States, Canada, and Germany, and involved 1,557 subjects, mostly college students (Figure 1).

Overall, the studies were consistent in demonstrating the strength of news. Among the 11 studies, however, only two provided results that support the third-party endorsement notion, three were difficult to interpret because of potential confounds in manipulations or measurements, and six studies produced only qualified support for claims about the superiority of news, i.e., these studies suggested that advertising performed equally well with news under certain conditions. Most important, no study found that advertising outperformed news. A useful way to synthesize the results involves differentiating between the cognitive, attitudinal, and conative effects that were examined in these studies.

### *Cognitive Effects*

Cognitive effects involve whether news leads to more thorough learning of information, which can be measured in higher levels of recall and message elaboration. Such a conclusion would be expected if audiences pay more attention to news messages than to advertising. Anderson and Abbott,[34] Salmon, Reid, Pokrysczynski, and Willett,[35] and Cameron[36] all found evidence that news or news-like presentations outperformed advertising on measures related to extensiveness of processing. However, d'Astous and Hébert[37] found support for high levels of recall for only one of two products in their study. Hallahan[38] found no main effects for either recall or the number of cognitive thoughts generated. However, in this study content class interacted with product involvement. Reading about high-involvement products in the form of news led to lower recall and cognitive response scores, possibly because readers felt confident and saw no need to process the information more thoroughly. However, for low-involvement products, the presentation of the same information as news prompted readers to process infor-

**Experimental Findings on Effects of**

**Publicity Versus Advertising**

| **Study**<br>Authors (Year)<br>N=subjects<br>Design<br>Message Topic | **Independent Variables Manipulated** | **Dependent Variables Measured** | **Support for Third-Party Endorsement** | **Comments** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Schwarz, Kumpf & Bussman** (1983)<br>N=54 female German undergraduates<br>2x2 factorial<br>New textbook | Journal review v. text for ad<br>Explicit v. implicit call for action | Behavioral intent:<br>-Read the book<br>-Buy the book | Yes | Less explicit review book review created greatest behavioral intent; explicit ad was least effective. |
| **Anderson & Abbott** (1985)<br>N=30 households<br>Split field experiment<br>New bacon product | Two-minute infomercial v. 30-second TV spot | Recall<br>Attitudes<br>Purchase intent | Possible confound | Infomercial watchers remembered more facts, had more positive beliefs and greater purchase intent. Results confounded by different lengths of stimuli |
| **Salmon, Reid, Pokryszcznski & Willett** (1985)<br>N=203 undergraduates<br>2x2 factorial<br>Advocacy message imbedded in *Atlanta Constitution* | News v. ad<br>Commercial (Pepsi) v. non-commercial (American Cancer Society) source | Learning<br>Attitude toward message/perceptions of bias<br>Behavioral intent | Qualified | Advocacy message from American Cancer Society was perceived as less biased in news format and thus "legitimized by third-party credibility." But ads were more interesting and informative, thus more persuasive in terms of behavioral intent |
| **Hausknecht, Wilkinson & Prough (1989)**<br>N=120 students<br>Diet pill | Ads v. 3 formats of advertorials (no label, low stimulus label: "ad"; high stimulus label: "advertisement")<br>Demographic variables | Message truthfulness<br>Message believability<br>Product evaluation (affect, preferences, intention to buy) | Qualified | Unlabeled advertorial judged more truth and believable, but only by individuals with poor product knowledge. Ss with positive attitudes toward diet pills assessed all treatments equally. Ss with unfavorable attitudes responded most negatively to advertorials with the high stimulus label (underscored possibly deceptive nature of advertorials). |
| **d'Astous & Hébert** (1991)<br>N=29 students (10 females, 19 males)<br>2x2 factorial<br>Condominiums and automobiles | Ads v. *publi-reportage* (Canadian advertorials)<br>Products (condominiums v. automobiles) | Recall<br>Product attitudes<br>Source credibility | Partial support (possible confound) | For condominiums only the editorial message resulted in higher recall and more positive attitudes. No format-based differences found for automobiles. Failure to find source credibility differences might be accounted for by measure's low reliability (alpha=.63). |
| **Hennessey & Anderson** (1990)<br>N=165 students<br>2x2x2x2 factorial<br>Announcement of a new graduation requirement | Endorsement by expert (university dean) v. no endorsement<br>Argument strength: high v. low<br>Involvement: high (immediate) v. low (delayed implementation)<br>Commercial source (university news bulletin) v. commercial source (ad from fictitious company) | Attitudes<br>Behavioral intent | Possible confound | Found support for elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) wherein the source (news bulletin v. ad) had no effect among students with high involvement (needed the course in order to graduate). For individuals with low involvement, news bulletin from the university was more persuasive. However, relevance is unclear because news story never actually appeared in a newspaper or other medium. |

Figure 1. Experimental Findings on Effects of Publicity versus Advertising.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cameron** (1994)<br>N=42 (26 undergraduates, 16 non-students)<br>2x2 factorial | Advertorial ads v. news stories with same content and format.<br>Labelled ("advertisement") v. no label | Information gain immediately after exposure<br><br>Information gain two weeks after exposure | Yes | Found highest recognition immediately following exposure to the editorial treatment, lowest scores in case of labeled advertisements in the delayed condition. Qualified the results based on limitations of the labelling approach and use of long-copy, all-type advertorial messages versus conventional approaches. |
| **Straughan, Bleske & Zhao** (1994)<br>N=196 university students<br>2x2 factorial | News story v. ad<br>Commercial spokesperson (CEO of pharmaceutical company) v. noncommercial spokesperson (president of mental health association) | Message Assessments (trustworthiness, interest, informativeness)<br>Source Assessments (expertise, believability, power, persuasiveness)<br>Behavioral intent of contacting organization as requested in message | Qualified | Use of news and the CEO had indirect effects on attitudes and behavioral intent because news is more credible than ads, and CEO was perceived as more interesting and persuasive. Concluded news format had a strong positive relationship with perceptions of source's expertise, knowledge and believability. |
| **Chaiken & Maheswaran** (1994)<br>N=369 undergraduates<br>2x2x2 factorial<br>XT-100 telephone answering machine | News (*Consumer Reports*) v. ad (pamphlet from KMart)<br>Personal importance: high v. low<br>Message quality: unambiguous v. ambiguous | Attitudes | Qualified | Found support for Chaiken's Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1987). The reading a excerpt from *Consumer Reports* positively impacted attitudes when a) involvement was low and messages were unambiguous and b) message was ambiguous regardless of involvement levels. When task importance was high, only argument quality was significant, but source also had a positive influence in the ambiguous message condition. |
| **Chew, Slater & Kelley** (1995)<br>N=20<br>2x2 within subjects<br>Messages for four products | News v. ad<br>Product involvement: high v. low<br>Brand familiarity: familiar v. not familiar | Credibility<br>Purchase intent | Qualified | No main effects based on message type. Type and brand familiarity interacted with involvement to affect credibility of message. As involvement increased, credibility of ads for familiar products decreased, while credibility of article remained constant. As involvement with product increases, the credibility of article about an unfamiliar brand decreases and credibility of an ad for unfamiliar brand stays constant. No effects found on purchase intent. |
| **Hallahan** (1995)<br>N=329 undergraduates<br>2x2x2 mixed factorial<br><br>Messages for four fictitious products in prototype magazine for college students. | Content class: news v. ads<br>Argument strength: strong v. weak<br>Product involvement (within subjects): high (2 products) v. low (2 products) | Recall<br>Number of cognitive thoughts<br>Valence of cognitive thoughts<br>Believability<br>Attitude toward message<br>Attitude toward brand<br>Purchase intent | Qualified | Content class interacted with product involvement so that people reading about high involvement products shut down processing, but were prompted to learn more about low involvement products. Scores for ads hovered in between within a vary narrow range. For attitudinal and conative measures, content class interacted with argument strength, so that there was no difference between news and ads with strong arguments. News presented with weak arguments scored equally as well, but weak ads scored lower. |

mation more thoroughly than the same message presented as advertising, which was evident in the statistically higher recall and more cognitive responses being generated. Advertising had no such moderating effect; the scores for recall and cognitive responses hovered in between, within a very narrow range, suggesting

readers might have shut down processing of those messages, summarily dismissing them as advertising.

### *Attitudinal Effects*

Of the seven studies that examined attitudinal assessments of either the message or the subject matter of the message, one early study (Anderson and Abbott) found unqualified support for news, i.e., that an infomercial for a bacon product generated more positive attitudes than did a commercial. The other studies detected significant interactions that suggested other factors moderated effects.

***Sources/Spokesperson Interactions.*** Two studies found that news enhanced the assessments of a spokesperson in certain, but not all, situations. Salmon et al. found that an advocacy message from the American Cancer Society was perceived as less biased in a news format, but such was not the case for a story featuring a commercial soft drink. Straughan, Bleske, and Zhao[39] report that the appearance of commercial spokesperson (a pharmaceutical company president) in the news had indirect effects on attitudes because the news was believed to be more credible and because the CEO was perceived as more interesting and persuasive. Such was not the case, however, for a noncommercial spokesman (a mental health association executive).

***Involvement, Attitude, and Knowledge Interactions.*** Four studies that manipulated levels of involvement found that the influence of news versus advertising was moderated by the degree of personal relevance and familiarity with the topic. Anderson and Abbott (despite a possible manipulation confound) found support for Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model (ELM),[40] which suggests that source credibility effects only apply to individuals for which a topic has low personal relevance. Chaiken and Maheswaran[41] detected similar results that were consistent with Chaiken's heuristic-systematic model, which closely parallels the ELM by arguing that high involvement individuals disregard source credibility (such as whether a message appears in news or ads). Hausknecht, Wilkinson, and Prough[42] found that messages for a diet pill were judged more truthful and believable when presented as news, but only by individuals with poor product knowledge. Individuals with positive, prior attitudes toward diet pills judged messages as equal whether presented in ads or advertorial formats. Finally, Chew, Slater, and Kelly[43] found that message type (news versus advertising) interacted with both product involvement and brand familiarity to affect assessments of credibility, which is a specific type of attitudinal measure.

***Argument Quality Interactions.*** Three of the studies also found that content class interacted with argument quality, i.e., the messages were manipulated to be either strong or weak, or ambiguous or unambiguous. Anderson and Abbott's ELM-based study found that strong arguments were necessary in news for individuals with high involvement in a topic, whereas individuals with low involvement disre-

garded argument strength. Chaiken and Maheswaran found that in conditions of high involvement, argument quality was significant, but that the presentation of information as news increased the *confidence* levels of subjects when the message contained a high level of ambiguity. Finally, Hallahan found no significant difference between news and advertising messages presented with strong messages or with news when the message was presented with comparatively weaker messages. However, argument quality interacted with content class in the case of weak messages presented as advertising and led to significantly lower assessments of believability, attitude toward the message, and attitude toward the brand. These findings suggest the importance of the presence of strong arguments consistent with audience expectations about advertising.

### *Conative Measures*

Of the six studies that measured behavior intent, i.e., respondents' self-reported statement about the probability that they would engage in a particular action related to the message, such as purchasing the product featured, Schwarz, Kumpf, and Bussman,[44] found unqualified support in favor of news. One other study (Chew, Slater, and Kelly) found no main effects on purchase intent, i.e., purchase intent levels were the same for news and advertising. The other studies found that behavioral intent largely coincided with attitudinal assessments, with the same kinds of interactions reported based on featured spokesperson (Straughan, Blesko, and Zhao), level of involvement (Chaiken and Maheswaran), product type (d'Astous and Hébert), product attitude (Hausknecht, Wilkinson, and Prough), and argument quality (Chaiken and Maheswaran; Hallahan). In one study (Salmon et al.) audiences found ad messages to be more interesting and informative, resulting in higher behavioral intent.

## ASSESSMENT OF AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS

Although the 11 experiments summarized above reported significant and theoretically important findings, only the Hallahan study (Figure 1) attempted to examine the underlying processes by asking respondents about their perceptions of news versus advertising and about their reactions to the claims put forth by practitioners and others in support of third-party endorsement arguments. Those previously unpublished results are reported here for the first time.

### Method

Near the conclusion of the Hallahan study, 329 subjects were first asked to complete a 8-item, semantic differential scale for each of two concepts: *News in General* and *Advertising in General* (Table 1). The eight items were composed of bipolar, antonym pairs, which were randomly reversed in direc-

**TABLE 1**

**Semantic Differential Items Comparing *Advertising in General*, and *News in General***

| *Means (SD) Item* | *News* | *Advertising* | *Difference* | *t Value* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Credibility Factor | | | | |
| Trustworthy/not trustworthy | 5.35 (1.32) | 3.60 (1.44) | −1.75 | 18.39 |
| Believable/not believable | 5.51 (1.24) | 4.33 (1.34) | −1.18 | 13.53 |
| Accurate/not accurate | 5.38 (1.27) | 4.23 (1.31) | −1.15 | 13.08 |
| Utility Factor | | | | |
| Relevant/not relevant | 5.73 (1.30) | 4.76 (1.14) | −.96 | 12.01 |
| Useful/not useful | 5.89 (1.11) | 5.05 (1.12) | −.83 | 11.46 |
| Informative/not informative | 6.06 (1.22) | 5.24 (1.12) | −.82 | 11.43 |
| Involving/not involving | 5.48 (1.33) | 4.78 (1.26) | −.69 | 8.67 |
| Interesting/not interesting | 5.80 (1.30) | 5.24 (1.51) | −.66 | 6.94 |
| Index of 8 items | 5.65 (.90) | 4.64 (.90) | −1.01 | 18.41 |

*Notes:* All matched-pairs t values significant at $p \leq .000$, based on 326–328 df. Based on 7-point semantic differential scale, when 7 = *positive valence*, 1 = *negative valence*.

tion. Subjects were asked to indicate their perceptions of these concepts for each pair on a 7-point scale. The paired items included: *informative/not informative, useful/not useful, interesting/not interesting, relevant/not relevant, believable/not believable, involving/not involving, accurate/inaccurate,* and *trustworthy/ untrustworthy.*

Participants also were asked to respond to a series of statements about contemporary media practices that focused on specific aspects of claims made about the effectiveness of news vis-à-vis advertising. Participants could agree or disagree with each of the 15 statements by using a 7-point Likert-type scale in which 7 = *strongly agree* and 1 = *strongly disagree*. Statements were randomly varied in valence; thus low scores on negatively stated items actually reflected agreement.

### Perceived Differences Between News and Advertising

Table 1 represents the results of the semantic differential scale comparison and shows that respondents uniformly rated news more favorably

than they did advertising (paired *t* tests, all $p \leq .001$). When a index combining the scores on the eight items was computed for each content class (Cronbach $\alpha = .87$ for news and $\alpha = .86$ for advertising), the mean score was 5.65 for news compared to 4.64 for advertising (paired *t* test: $t_{328} = -18.11$, $p \leq .001$). Although the overall difference scores are important, the more interesting results emerged from comparing the size of the differences across items. When factor analyzes (varimax rotations) were conducted on the separate scales for news and advertising, two separate but parallel factors emerged for each scale. These included a *credibility* factor that included *trustworthy, believable,* and *accurate* (eigenvalue = 4.31 for news, accounting for 53.9% of variance; eigenvalue = 4.14 for advertising, accounting for 51.8% of variance). The second smaller factor was labeled the *utility factor* and included *relevant, useful, informative, involving*, and *interesting* (eigenvalue = 1.01 for news, accounting for 12.7% of variance; eigenvalue = 1.05 for advertising, accounting for 13.6% of variance). The differences scores found in Table 1 suggest that the biggest discrepancies between news and advertising are among the items that loaded on the credibility factor. In particular, respondents indicated a large gulf in *trustworthiness* between news and advertising. Although still significant, the differences were smaller overall for the utility items. These results suggest that these two content classes elicit sharp differences in how they are perceived.

## Publicity and Advertising Practices

Table 2 shows the results of the 15 media practices statements, grouped into five categorizes based upon a factor analysis of the items. One factor loaded with statements related to *use and preference*. The other four groups, as expected, correspond to the four aforementioned distinguishing characteristics of news. These factors delt with *trustworthiness*, *intent to persuade*, *ambiguity/forewarning,* and *expertise*.

Overall, the findings suggest respondents discern clear differences between news and advertising. Whereas some of the premises underlying the implied third-party endorsement concept are supported, the data suggest that others are not. The greatest support for third-party endorsement claims is seen within the trustworthy and ambiguity/forewarning factors. Based on the 7-point Likert scale (7 = *strongly agree*), participants expressed agreement with the statement, "News isn't written the same way as advertising" ($M = 5.07$) and with, "I can be confident that the news media aren't trying to sell me some product or service" ($M = 5.02$). They also tended to agree with the statement, "Seeing positive information about a product in the news gives it stature and importance in my mind" ($M = 4.95$). However, they agreed somewhat less with the other statements, "A positive story about a product or service is essentially a recommendation to purchase it" ($M = 4.68$) and "When I read a news story, I feel confident that the reporter has researched the story fully" ($M = 4.61$).

By contrast, people did not (or were unwilling to) admit that they were any less skeptical about news versus advertising. The acceptance of news is not auto-

**TABLE 2**

**Mean Responses and Factor Analysis of Media Practices Beliefs Items**

*Factor Loadings Based on Varimax Rotation*

| *Item* | *Mean (SD)* | *Factors* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *I* | *II* | *III* | *IV* | *V* |
| **Use/Preference** | | | | | | |
| I pay less attention to news than to advertising. | 5.01 (1.55) | .779 | | | | |
| Ads are more reliable than news as a source of product information. | 5.26 (1.74) | .664 | | | | |
| I would prefer to obtain product information in ads rather than news. | 4.30 (1.57) | .542 | −.453 | | | |
| When I watch television, I pay the same attention to commercials as I do programs. | 2.90 (1.55) | −.614 | | | | |
| **Trustworthiness** | | | | | | |
| A positive news story about a product or service is essentially a recommendation to purchase it. | 4.68 (1.35) | | .729 | .309 | | |
| I let down my defenses when I see product information in form of news. | 3.79 (1.43) | | .688 | | | |
| When I read a news story, I feel confident that the reporter has researched the story fully. | 4.61 (1.33) | | .576 | | | |
| **Intent to Persuade** | | | | | | |
| The media often act as spokespersons for special interests. | 4.88 (1.23) | | | .821 | | |
| When I see an ad, I know that someone is trying to sell me something. | 5.69 (1.34) | | | .641 | | |
| **News Ambiguity/ Forewarning** | | | | | | |
| News isn't written the same way as advertising. | 5.07 (1.30) | | | | .710 | |
| I can be confident that the news media aren't trying to sell me some product or service. | 5.02 (1.54) | | | −.321 | .681 | |

**TABLE 2**

**Mean Responses and Factor Analysis of Media Practices Beliefs Items**

*Factor Loadings Based on Varimax Rotation*

| *Item* | *Mean (SD)* | *Factors* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *I* | *II* | *III* | *IV* | *V* |
| Seeing positive information about a product in the news gives it stature and importance in my mind. | 4.95 (1.22) | | .359 | | .583 | |
| The news media are independent institutions that are not beholden to other organizations in society. | 3.59 (1.47) | | | | .401 | |
| **Expertise** | | | | | | |
| Stories about products aren't always going to be positive, but can be. | 4.99 (1.31) | | | | | .678 |
| Most news reporters and editors are more knowledgeable about products and services than advertising people. | 3.52 (1.48) | | | | | −.751 |
| Eigenvalue | | 2.54 | 2.32 | 1.46 | 1.14 | 1.00 |
| Variance Explained—Percent | | 16.9 | 15.5 | 9.8 | 7.6 | 6.7 |

*Notes:* Only factor loadings >.30 are included in the analysis. Five factors explain 56.5% of total variance.

matic, evidenced by the fewer positive responses to the statement, "I let down my defenses when I see product information in the form of news" ($M = 3.79$). Indeed, respondents expressed a considerable level of skepticism about media, which extended to both news and advertising. Respondents expressed the greatest overall agreement with the statement, "When I see an ad, I know someone is trying to sell me something" ($M = 5.69$). However, they also did not appear to think that news media were necessarily independent, which was reflected by their agreement with the statement, "The media often act of spokespersons for special interests" ($M = 4.88$) and their disagreement with the statement that "The news media are independent institutions that are not beholden to other organizations in society" ($M = 3.59$). Moreover, respondents confuted the argument that news media workers are experts. They disagreed with the statement, "Most news reporters and editors are more knowledgeable about products and services than advertising people" ($M = 3.52$).

Although participants were distrustful of advertising, it is interesting to note that the respondents agreed slightly with the statement, "I would prefer to obtain product information in ads rather than news" ($M = 4.30$) and found advertising a more convenient or accessible form of product information: "Ads are more reliable

than news as a source of product information" ($M = 5.26$). In part, this might reflect the ubiquitous nature of advertising compared to news, particularly when viewed in the context of daily television watching. This might explain the response to the statement, "I pay less attention to news than advertising" ($M = 5.01$).

## DISCUSSION

This review has examined the claims made about implied third-party endorsement effects and suggested an alternative audience-oriented conceptualization that more adequately explains the process involved. It also reviewed the experimental research conducted to date comparing the effectiveness of news versus advertising, and presented original findings of research intended to probe the underlying perceptions of these two classes of media content.

Two key conclusions emerge. First, based upon the several approaches examined here, there is little evidence to support unqualified claims made by professionals and perpetuated by some researchers that implied third-party endorsement is a viable explanation for any advantage enjoyed by news versus advertising in the processing of mediated information. The notion can be challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds. The evidence suggests news does *not* uniformly outperform advertising. Although a few early, simple experiments found main effects consistent with third-party endorsement claims, at least five variables have been identified that appear to moderate content class effects that favor news over advertising: the featured spokesperson, topic/product involvement, prior product attitude, product knowledge/familiarity, and argument quality. Still other, yet-to-be-identified factors could moderate content class effects in a similar way. The underlying assumptions behind implied third-party endorsement claims also are directly confuted when audience members are asked questions about news versus advertising. Evidence reported here for the first time suggests that respondents (who, admittedly, were students, and whose views might not reflect the entire population), preferred advertising to news, found advertising more reliable, and questioned the independence of media institutions as well as the expertise of media workers. Such disaffirming findings make it difficult to accept the basic premise that news is superior to advertising.

Second, despite these disaffirming results, there is strong evidence suggesting that audiences are more positively predisposed to processing information in the form of news compared to advertising. Stated another way, audiences might be *less negatively predisposed* toward news than advertising. This lends support to the contention that the effects previously attributed to third-party endorsements are actually the result of biased processing by audiences. The perceptual differences evident in the semantic differential scales comparing *News in General* and *Advertising in General* are consistent with this conclusion. More important, the experimental evidence suggests that this advantage might be sufficient to give news an edge in certain cases. For example, Hallahan found that news presented with weak arguments performed as well as both news with strong arguments and advertising

presented with strong arguments. This would suggest that the content class of the message might tend to drive up attitudinal and conative assessments when information is presented as news. Similarly, Chaiken and Maheswaran (Figure 1) found that, in situations where the meaning of a message was ambiguous, the presentation of information as news had a positive effect on persuasion by enhancing the audience's confidence in making judgments. However, except in these conditions, it would appear that the bias favoring news is not strong enough for news to outperform advertising when audiences process both types of messages with equal effort.

The time has come for public relations practitioners to abandon implied third-party endorsement claims. Although the idea appears to be supported by people's predisposition to favor news over advertising, this advantage can be explained as much by people's dislike of advertising, and by their resistance to persuasion attempts, as by any characteristic inherent in news. Moreover, the lack of uniform experimental results and disaffirming audience responses makes it difficult to justify third-party endorsement claims. Public relations practitioners should be guarded in making claims about the power of publicity, and at the same time, they should not rule out the strategic use of paid advertising. In this regard, public relations pioneer Ivy Lee advised in 1925:

> Use all the advertising space you can afford to pay for. The people are interested in so many other things that you have to make special efforts to get their attention. Many things will be published as news in the news columns of the papers, but the people will not always read the news columns.
>
> The great value of advertising space is not merely to get the thing into the paper—you can often get something in as news—but it is to be able to command your location in the paper, to be able to write your own headlines, and to be able to lay out your own typographical display. In this way, you can command the attention of people at least for a fleeting moment.
>
> And unless you can get the attention of people away from the great mass of things which are claiming their notice nowadays, there is really not much object in having the thing printed at all.[45]

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## NOTES

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