

# Publicity Under Siege: Content Marketing, Brand Journalism, Native Advertising and Promoted User Endorsements As Challenges to Professional Practice

Kirk Hallahan | Colorado State University  
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kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu

Traditional publicity, the component of public relations communications devoted to creating public visibility, awareness and understanding, is being challenged today with the advent of four Internet- and mobile-based communications strategies that empower marketers and others to assume roles traditionally within the province of public relations. These four trends raise issues that should concern public relations scholars and practitioners alike. (Draft—not for citation)

## A comparison of the four emerging publicity practices

| Strategy   | Content Marketing   | Brand Journalism   | Native Advertising  | Promoted User Endorsements  |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| <i>Description</i>                                 | Creating or curating useful information or entertainment fare to engage users, promote online click-throughs and return visits. | Hiring professional journalists and experienced media producers to craft brand stories (on staff, through agencies or through media) | Paying to embed sponsored messages within editorial or entertainment content of online publishers                             | Enticing users and other third parties (who appear to independent) to promote an idea to contacts via online or mobile posts or other actions |
| <i>Ostensible source</i>                           | Message sponsor   | Message sponsor  | Publication or media outlet   | Primarily users but also paid confederates  |
| <i>Key roles played by benefiting organization</i> | Produce, distribute message   | Produce, distribute message  | Pay for inclusion; Produce or approve messages  | Facilitate, prompt user feedback  |
| <i>Message Mode</i>                                | Feature stories, images or video  | Feature stories, images or video   | Mix of feature and entertainment content, usually indistinguishable from publisher-produced content but labeled as ad content | Brief narratives; user-produced images or videos; and system-computed counts of user endorsements   |
| <i>Related terms</i>                               | In-bound marketing; Search marketing  | Corporate journalism   | Hybrid messages Advertorials  | Shares, comments, ratings, likes, favorites, recommendations  |
| <i>Useful citations</i>                            | Lieb (2012)<br>Content Marketing Institute (2013)<br>Pulizzi (2014)   | Bull (2013)<br>Brito (2013)  | Interactive Advertising Bureau (2013)<br>Cision (2013)  | Karpen (2011,2012)  |

### Reasons for Concern:

#### **Encroachment and Marginalization**

All four trends represent 21st century forms of encroachment on public relations by marketers – an issue first identified in the early 1990s (Lauzen, 1991). Content marketers engage in providing feature material, information and entertainment fare using tools and techniques essentially no different from classic product publicity. But this activity masquerades as *marketing*, not *publicity*. Similarly, marketers have seized the idea of creating in-house “newsrooms” that churn out brand stories. These units often operate independently of public

relations departments (and/or without PR's expertise) and produce material no different from content that could be produced by experienced product publicists. Meanwhile, with native advertising, advertisers are now *paying* to insert editorial matter created by brand journalists, which previously was provided *free* (although without any guarantee of use or treatment). Finally, promoted endorsements in the form of short, pitchy comments and software-generated counts of likes, shares, favorites, and followers are now used by audiences as *heuristics* to make judgments about the popularity of various ideas. Previously audiences talked directly with friends or read or saw endorsements in the media and drew their own conclusions based on often more in-depth *explicit recommendations* or *implicit third-party endorsements* made possible by traditional publicity efforts.

### **Undermining professionalism in journalism and public relations**

An unintended consequence of these trends is an undermining of professional values and standards, and of the stature of professionals trained in both journalism and public relations. Fueled by the loss of newsroom jobs stemming from declining ad revenues, a growing number of journalists have embraced brand journalism -- either by going to work for marketers or joining the branded content divisions of online publishers. Some journalists take comfort in the fact that they continue to be referred to as "journalists," even though their task is no different from an advertising copywriter -- to produce catchy, shareable or clickable content, often curated (repurposed) from other sources. The scale of the trend has led to calls to redefine what it means to be a "journalist" and undoubtedly will result in a diminution of the common professional standards upon which all journalists can agree. In a similar fashion, the professional stature, credibility, and professional self-identity of PR practitioners, are undermined whenever organizations think that trained PR people lack the talent required to produce media-quality content. This stands as a possible indictment of PR education, as well as of the PR professional itself for failing to promote understanding of practice and to demonstrate its value.

### **Devaluation of relationship building**

If public relations involves creating and maintaining mutually beneficial organizational-public relations, the focus found in content marketing (and indirectly in brand journalism and native advertising) on engaging visitors simply so they can click through to a website (where they can be sold a product or service) suggests a lack of understanding (and/or disregard) of the potential value of online communications for public relations purposes. Native advertising similarly transforms the symbiotic relationships that previously existed between editors and PR sources into one defined by a financial transaction where negotiations focus on price, minimum standards and the particulars of the placement. Finally, promoted user endorsements trivialize the entire notion of relationships by reducing them to terse, superficial expressions of support that are easily manipulated (and bought) and are too frequently characterized and analyzed using superficial statistics, at best.

### **Challenges to transparency in public communication**

Content marketers and brand journalists emphasize the importance of quality content, but the motive behind many content marketing and brand journalism practices remains mostly veiled from the public (Plaisance, 2009). Helpful information or entertainment fare is not provided to serve audience needs or interests, but all too often is carefully crafted to encourage click-throughs and then sell products. Native ads are *hybrid messages* (Balasubramanian, 1994) and yet another form of *stealth marketing* (Goodman, 2006-2007). Although the FTC and trade groups implore publishers to vigilantly disclose that native ads are editorial placements paid for by sponsors, examples have already emerged where labeling guidelines have failed. Many members of the public still remain unaware of the workings of *advertorials* and *product placements*, and most people are entirely ignorant of this new form of paid content and thus can be easily deceived. Similarly, social media users might not fully comprehend how sponsored stories on Facebook work, nor how their friends are being manipulated through incentives to engage in simple actions such as "liking" a Facebook Page -- and how they themselves are being manipulated. A failure to provide transparency can only lead to public distrust.

### **Confounding of measurement and evaluation**

As an aside, these new practices pose new challenges for communications assessment. The rise of native advertising, for example, adds an entirely new angle to the continuing debate about *advertising value equivalency* (AVE) by suggesting the need to compare results obtained through *paid* editorial versus *unpaid* editorial placements (and, in turn, how paid text stories might compare in their effectiveness to paid image and video placements). In a similar vein, the value of comments, likes, favorites, forwards and shares needs to be better understood. The mere fact that these can be counted programmatically does not necessarily mean they are appropriate or useful, and represent potentially false (or potentially fraudulent) measures of success.