

Mktg 340: Advertising Practices and Procedures

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Written Assignment: Ethics

Online Media Raises Ethical Questions

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Rapid change is what the media industry has experienced since 1993 when the Internet became public. Rapid change on a national scale is impossible to manage. By the time the policies are in place, technology has morphed into something else, like a mutant virus, it's taking over the US economy. The online medium keeps up with the exponential change because technology is what drives it and a lot of losers are left behind like journalists, direct mail and catalog designers, and print media.

As an advertising professional, I know I've spent the last fifteen years chasing change full time. In the last five years I added a college education to the mix, and I still feel lost in the dust. This writing assignment intrigued me to explore how others are coping and sadly, rapid change is negatively impacting many media workers in society: leaving a wasteland of displaced professionals and raising ethical concerns.

Using journalism as an example, there are numerous ethical questions being raised as newspapers compete online to stay in business and journalists are replaced by blogs. Among the questions are: Is news really news? Is it backed by the two source rule? Is it fact or opinion? Does it cover both sides of the issue unbiasedly? Or is it advertising? Can society tell the

difference between advertorial and editorial within a news site? These are some of the issues covered in this paper.

Newspaper is declining as an advertising vehicle to online media

The newspaper is one of the media pioneers that has shaped communication and provided a vehicle for advertising in America since 1833. The Internet became a public medium in 1993 and has quickly been embraced in America as the premier communication source. According to “Mass Media in a Rapidly Changing World” 68.8% of Americans are online as of August 2006.

The newspaper is declining as a print medium and so are the advertising dollars that keep them in business. Ad dollars are shifting away from print and into online media. In an article published in Editor & Publisher and written by Joe Strupp “Another Chip in the Wall?” provides sobering statistics; comparing newspaper online ad revenue to newspaper print ad revenue during the third quarter of 2007, online ad revenue rose 21.1% while print ad revenue dropped 9%.

This is putting pressure on the future livelihood of newspapers and many compromising trends are blurring ethical lines. One of the largest lines being blurred is the one between editorial and advertising.

Is it Editorial or Advertising?

The lines are growing more and more fuzzy between editorial and advertising: in-line text ads, editorial content backgrounds that change to match the advertisements, advertorial blogs, advertiser sponsored editorial content, editorial content linking to advertiser’s Web sites, just to name a few. These examples are covered in Joe Strupp’s article. Examples like these make “it more difficult for consumers to distinguish what is content and what is advertising,” says Amy Webb, an online ad consultant and a former reporter for Newsweek and The Wall Street Journal” (Strupp).

Another example is found in an article “Transparency under attack” published in Communication World and written by Angelo Fernando. The article states that “Time Inc., owner of the magazine Business 2.0, is planning to compensate its writers for traffic generated to their blogs. The media company will sell advertising that will be placed on the journalists’ blogs.” This extreme example erases “the line between editorial content and advertising” and may as well coin the phrase “the Monetized Newsroom Initiative” (Fernando).

From an article written by Alex Ben Block entitled “Season’s Warning: Legatus Non Violatur [Don’t Shoot The Messenger]” was published in Television Week. In it describes more examples where ethical lines are being crossed, mainly from corporate pressure, agenda setting, and the ease of anyone without credentials to use blogging as a global platform. These pressures include Wall Street putting “profits ahead of serving the public interest”; the blurring of lines between “news, entertainment and advertising”; deceptive forms of advertising such as “infomercials disguised as talk shows”; “deceptive paid product placement”; and “competing news organizations that compromise their integrity for short-term gain” (Block).

All of these examples raise ethical concerns. Are newspapers as a medium, selling out to online business practices just to stay in business? Are news conglomerates lowering the standards of excellence and ethics that made them reputable just to get news out faster and cheaper even it is biased, opinionated and lacking credible sources?

Stakeholders in Digital Media

From this, four primary stakeholders stand out in my mind: News media conglomerates, advertisers, media professionals (such as journalists), and society. Sure, corporations and advertisers love that online media is cost-effective, measurable, and immediate compared to the

length of time and cost needed to produce and distribute the newspaper; these processes are virtually eliminated with digital media. It's cheaper and faster with less media workers needed to get information to society with online media. Media workers can work from home and save the expense of a corporate office.

In addition, advertisers like how close their online advertisements ride alongside editorial content, some online sources even provide links within the editorial back to the advertiser's Web site. Online advertising is cost-effective, instantaneous, and measurable.

But the digital demand for information fast is cutting into the journalist's timeline needed to do a thorough job checking sources and facts and getting both sides to a story. This is both time consuming and costly.

Sure, online media is fast and cheap, but does society notice what's missing? Online media is "now" and is responsive to an online society who seems to expect "now". Neither online media timelines nor instantaneous expectations have time to wait for a true and unbiased news story. Has society noticed that what they are reading may not even be news at all? Or are we too busy to notice that there is a change? Is society too busy to read critically? Maybe the fast food mentality what a busy society wants. "Just give me the headlines." That's really all the time writers have in an instantaneous society.

Journalists: losing their stake as holders

Online demand for immediacy is eroding away the time needed for the journalistic process. The Columbia Journalism Review published an article, "Who Will Tell Us?" that describes how the art of journalism is eroding away. Since the year 2000, corporate downsizing and the shrinking newspaper market have claimed as many as "four thousand newsroom jobs in

print alone” according to the “State of the News Media report released in March by the Project for Excellence in Journalism”.

An article written by Alissa Quart entitled, “Lost Media, Found Media” and published in the Columbia Journalism Review reported that “journalism is more or less divided into two camps, which [she calls] Lost Media and Found Media”. She defines “Lost Media” as the traditional journalistic practices and processes that led the industry up until “Found Media”. “Found Media” is this new digital era of bloggers and social media.

Quart speaks from the heart of a journalist -- one of the stakeholders who are negatively impacted by digital media. She writes:

I went to the Nieman conference partially because I wanted to see how the forces creating this new division are affecting and afflicting the Lost Media world that I love best, not on the institutional level, but for reporters and writers themselves. This world includes people who write for all the newspapers and magazines that are currently struggling with layoffs, speedups, hiring freezes, buyouts, the death or shrinkage of film- and book-review sections, limits on expensive investigative work, the erasure of foreign bureaus, and the general narrowing of institutional ambition. It includes freelance writers competing with hordes of ever-younger competitors willing to write and publish online for free, the fade-out of established journalistic career paths, and, perhaps most crucially, a muddled sense of the meritorious, as blogs level and scramble the value and status of print publications, and of professional writers.

Quart is left with the question, “Should I go to business school because everyone's a writer now?” All you have to do is replace “writer” with “graphic artist” and that’s been my experience as a media worker. In fact, it is what made me decide to return to college.

Blogging is not Journalism

Quart continues in her writing to describe this new journalism of “Found Media”:
blogging.

Found Media-ites, meanwhile, are the bloggers... Stylistically, Found Media tends to feel spontaneous, almost accidental. It's a domain dominated by the young, where writers get points not for following traditions or burnishing them but for amateur and hybrid vigor, for creating their own venues and their own genres. It is about public expression and community. ...To be a Found Media journalist or pundit, one need not be elite, expert, or trained; one must simply produce punchy intellectual property that is in conversation with groups of other citizens. Found Media-ites don't tend to go to editors for approval, but rather to their readers and to their blog community. They disdain the old models, particularly newspapers (Quart).

Is blogging on its way to replace journalism? I sure hope not. Blogging has a place in society, but it isn't journalism. Without the sound business practices of journalism, more ethical questions are raised: What is truth? Where or who are the sources this information is derived? What are the facts?

Unethical use of Blogging

In an article published in Communication World and written by Angelo Fernando, entitled, “Transparency under attack” illustrates the unethical use of blogging in the form of deception. Fernando writes that “Wal-Marting Across America ... was fronted by [what misled you to believe were] two ordinary people, Laura and Jim, [who blogged] their way through a 2,800-mile road trip in an RV, parking in Wal-Mart parking lots. It made a great folksy tale, until Business Week exposed Jim as a professional.”

We need accountability and regulations in digital media that are based on the sound practices of journalism. If we don't, what can we trust as the truth? I just wonder if society has lost respect for journalism or if we are so busy chasing change that we haven't even noticed what is happening? Maybe the baby-boomer and generation x generations who grew up with sound journalistic practices assumes that the news they read online follows these practices and the younger generation y who grew up with myspace and facebook haven't learned the value of sound journalism.

What should be done by whom and why

Writer Ben Block had several ideas that can be used in regulating ethics in online media. He writes,

We need legal, business and social recognition that journalists play a central role in keeping a democracy healthy and strong safeguards within news organizations themselves that separate the functions of the editorial and the advertising departments. The focus of editorial should be news gathering, not satisfying vested interests or promoting the products of affiliated entities. It is the editorial integrity of that process which must be kept intact even as the news distribution platforms

shift. It involves the way information is collected, the way archives are aggregated, the way facts are checked and the way the end result is presented. It is most of all about individuals and companies that are willing to risk their reputations and fortunes to stand behind what is broadcast. It is that process that separates the MSM from the growing number of voices on the Internet. In addition to more open government, we need national, state and local shield laws that make it possible for journalists to question official sources and conduct investigative reporting on business and social issues. That is the strongest defense against faux demigods who use Madison Avenue's tools of manipulation to blatantly push their business and political agendas. Only when we create an environment where all points of view can be heard will the truth rise to the top. Television news--dependent on advertising, under a corporate yoke, facing threats to its government license and challenged by the need for higher ratings--is particularly susceptible to compromise. At this time of great change, that is a real danger. It is those compromises that may ultimately undermine the integrity of broadcast news.

Angelo Fernando outlines additional guidelines to help protect society from misleading communication and squelch unethical practices of advertisers and media sources with an agenda. He writes:

WOMMA, the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, [as it] outlines its ethical guidelines as falling into three buckets: honesty of relationship, honesty of opinion and honesty of identity. These guidelines are designed to protect consumers. In the honesty of relationship section, marketers must agree to

“practice openness about the relationship between consumers, advocates and marketers” and “to disclose their relationship with marketers in their communications with other consumers.” According to the honesty of opinion section, marketers must make sure that endorsements “always reflect the honest opinions, findings, beliefs or experience of the endorser.” And the honesty of identity section says that they must agree to never “blur identification in a manner that might confuse or mislead consumers as to the true identity of the individual with whom they are communicating.”

Final Thoughts and Suggestions

In light of this research, I realize that I have only skimmed the top of these ethical issues. I think our busy lifestyle chasing exponential change has distracted Americans from being critical readers. We're so behind schedule chasing time and change that we just want quick news, “just the headlines”.

I also think that those of use in the Baby Boomer and Generation X generations have grown accustomed to trusting what is reported by professional journalists, and in our busyness, we've made assumptions that all news meets these standards. We trust news is news and what we read is accurate. This is not always the case. More awareness needs to be made surrounding this at a national level.

While I love the immediacy of online media, how interactive it can be, and the spontaneity of blogs, I would be very disappointed to lose the standards of fine journalism. We need both blogs and journalism but we need regulations to protect what we read in either case.

Foremost, we need accountability for all published media: blogs, Web content, YouTube videos, etc. We might have free access to a global platform, but just because we do, doesn't mean we should without counting the costs to society and own the damage it costs others.

Communication needs to be honest. If a person wants to publish their opinion, they need to disclose their true identity and take the heat for any repercussions. All facts need to be supported by credible sources that are published with the fact. Advertising needs to be identified as advertising to make it very clear to everyone the lines between advertising and editorial. Authors of deceptive communication should be fined.

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