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Making (Branded) News: The Corporate Co-optation of Online Journalism Production

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ABSTRACT
As traditional news outlets decline and corporations cultivate publisher ambitions, brand journalism (i.e., native advertising and content marketing) has grown robustly. This paper examines and critiques the various ways in which those corporations have adopted and mirror news production practices, given the "techno-logics" of convergence culture and the political economy pressures of our media era. The research draws upon 28 in-depth interviews with brand journalism professionals who operate in the United States along with years of trade press coverage of the phenomenon. Findings illustrate how brand journalism is informed by traditional reporting fundamentals and techniques, the affordances and demands of online environments, and industrial shifts in media labor allocation.

KEYWORDS
Media production; branding; native advertising; journalism; in-depth interviews

Over the past decade, as the American news industry has weathered a calamitous collapse in its business model, brand journalism has grown simultaneously briskly. Advertorials are, of course, not a novel genre, but their ascendance and proliferation in an online form does represent a consequential development. New media news outlets (e.g., *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *Slate*, etc.) have experimented with this format especially aggressively and legacy venues like *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Guardian* have followed suit; one widely cited estimate had pegged category growth to $21 billion by late decade (Wojdynski and Golan 2016, 1403). Brand journalism thus inherits the spirit of print advertorials long common to newspapers and magazines as well as the ambition of public relations influencing news content; however, the label is specifically used here to subsume journalistic techniques found in both native advertising (i.e., branded content co-created by traditional publishers and embedded in news formats) and content marketing practices (i.e., branded content produced by corporations for their own news platforms).

Although experimental research has begun to plumb whether or not brand journalism "works" (in the sense of impacting audiences), scholarship has not yet much explored *how* it works (i.e., from a cultural production studies lens) both in terms of micro-level professional operations and macro-level civic consequence. Thus, drawing upon extensive industrial discourse, including in-depth interviews and trade press coverage, this paper examines and critiques the various ways in which brands and corporations have adopted and mirror news production practices, given the "techno-logics" of convergence culture and the political economy pressures of our media era. It offers a unique backstage

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sketch, through insider accounts, of these quasi-advertizer, quasi-reporter activities, accompanied by a critical analysis of their strategic upshot for the American media industries. The systems of delivering news content (an enduring public necessity) are being institutionally restructured under more direct purview of private commercial interests who, ultimately, have little reason to care about the fate of that agora.

Literature Review

Broadly speaking, this inquiry can be theoretically contextualized within—and thus borrows from—two strains of mass communication research: the media ecology and critical political economy traditions.

Media ecology, which gained renewed scholarly interest alongside the internet's ubiquitous spread, emphasizes studying the interactions between and impact of communication environments on human behavior—how they "structure what we can see, say, and do" and thus define roles and experiences (Scolari 2012, 205). Within that frame, David Altheide and Robert Snow's (1979) notion of "media logic" furnishes a vital concept for this production studies-oriented endeavor: how "events, action, and actors' performances reflect information technologies, specific media, and formats that govern communication," particularly in the selection, organization, presentation, and distribution of the content's features, style, and grammar (Altheide 2013, 225–226).

As Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2008) summarizes of the contributions of "media logic" as both a scholarly term and approach to empirical analysis: "The production processes of media raw materials normally imply a certain extent of standardization, reflecting the goals, traditions, and routines of a given media organization" (2930). That standardization—and those goals and routines—of brand journalism are under investigation here, as informed by the techno-logics or "mediatization" (i.e., the "process of change wherein individuals adapt to a changing media environment … [and the] constraints imposed") of the present era (Asp 2014, 256–257). Henry Jenkins (2006), among others, has celebrated the participatory convergence culture blossoming online for its empowering, democratic potential, as everyday amateurs can now co-create and share content widely just as creative professionals and media industries had once monopolized. However, the reality remains that the "persuasion architecture" of today's internet experience (and social media in particular) is optimized not necessarily for community and civic ideals, as optimists might hope, but rather commercial ends (Tufecki 2017). Thus, the media logic of guerrilla marketing (i.e., advertising that tries not to seem like advertising) is endemic to a persuasion architecture that defines and shapes today's brand journalism (Serazio 2013).

This offers an apt segue into the second main school of thought informing this investigation: the critical theory of political economy, which broadly concerns itself with "how resources are produced, distributed and consumed, and which power relations shape these resources" and, more specifically, here interrogates the interplay of media economics, corporate power, journalistic practice, and democratic institutions (Fuchs 2017, 19; Mosco 2009). John McManus's (2009) critique of market-driven journalism remains relevant, as he diagnoses the misguided commercial logic driving American news production—less a "public trust" that enlightens and endows citizenry with the prerequisites for democratic participation and more as a "profit-maximizing business," "a commodity, simply a product for sale" (218, 219).

Historically, advertizers have cared little about the "meaning or consequence of the mass communication" they've sponsored, except for whether or not that contextual environment puts audiences in a "buying mood" for their adjacent commercial messages—which makes their full usurpation of news content, in brand journalism formats, intrinsically suspicious (McManus 1994, 31, 61). Notably here, a related project documented how brand journalism retains many such press ideals about the public interest, including objectivity aspirations and principles of social responsibility, though no research has yet confirmed whether audiences *themselves* seek out sponsored news formats to fulfill needs traditionally gratified by more independent outlets—an assumption nonetheless underpinning the underwriting of brand journalism (Serazio 2019).

The sponsored content genre, moreover, economically reflects a confluence of two media industry crises worth contextualizing: advertising inefficacy and sputtering news vehicles. As to the former, banner blindness plagues online advertising—resulting in microscopic click-through rates and adblockers being widely deployed; mobile screens are, in particular, infelicitous for traditional display formats, even as more internet users consume content at that visual scale (Laursen and Stone 2016, 7). Intertwined with these sponsor frustrations has been a U.S. news industry business model decimated by digitalization (McChesney and Pickard 2011): Craigslist eviscerated classified revenues; geographic monopolies over local audiences withered; AdWords mocked the guesswork of analog-era ROI; subscriptions waned to readers weaned on the expectation of free content; and all of which depressed online ad rates relative to print precedence (Kaye and Quinn 2010). Google and Facebook, meanwhile, hoover up an ever greater share of advertising revenue with each passing year, bolstered not just by massive reach and data-targeting precision but equally ad-blocking immunity (Neff 2016).

The brand journalism format is therefore sometimes proposed as a possible panacea for content producers who need funding and sponsors who need a reliable vessel—an accommodating "solution" to media industry financial imperatives that, political economy critique would argue, forebodes inevitable structural problems in terms of its civic allegiance (or lack thereof) (von Rimscha 2015). Moreover, brand journalism also fits within a widespread pattern of digital environments destabilizing already precarious labor, especially in the news industry (Fuchs 2017); following others' work on journalists' occupational ideologies and self-regard (Aldridge 1998), this project seeks to complement our understanding of generational differences among veteran reporters transitioning to the sponsored side versus younger scribes coming up directly into a profession defined by uncertain integrity and encroaching commercialism (Serazio 2019). Emblematically, as U.S. journalism weathered a 40% labor decline over the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, public relations was tripling its revenues and now outnumbers journalists by almost 5-to-1 (Jansen 2017, 14; Soules 2015, 65). With journalism in freefall and PR often rushing to fill the void, brand journalism best represents the breakdown of now-"indistinguishable" distinctions between paid advertising, earned public relations, and traditional news—a kind of mutant "hybrid" genre endemic of an era of promotional ubiquity and online persuasion architecture, given distrust and avoidance of traditional commercial forms and digital platforms that allow for direct messaging to audiences (Balasubramanian 1994; Jansen 2017, 82).

Recent research has begun examining brand journalism, usually in its "native advertising" guise and usually through social scientific methodologies and effects-oriented inquiries; findings from this approach have confirmed critics' suspicions that audiences often don't recognize the content *as* advertising (Wojdynski 2016; Wojdynski and Evans 2016). Yet a host of other production-side questions and issues accompany brand journalism's rise, including "advertiser and ad-financed influences on media content, creative control, aesthetic agendas, editorial agendas, and corporate decision making" (Hardy 2017, 20–21). This project seeks to address those angles through a focus on the cultural production of brand journalism (a vantage that combines attentiveness to both aforementioned technological and economic contexts).

Specifically, the critical media industry studies tradition offers a "helicopter" level perspective on professional workings; this accommodates more granular detail examining "the relationships between strategies (here read as the larger economic goals and logics of large-scale cultural industries) and tactics (the ways in which cultural workers seek to negotiate … the constraints imposed by institutional interests to their own purposes)" (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009, 239, 247). Some have, indeed, called to tackle brand journalism from this lens and through this method; as one such experimental researcher notes, "there is a need for how production-side practices influence native advertising content" (Wojdynski 2016, 221). The project thus takes up the "task" of exploring brand journalism within "the particular dynamics of changing practices and the conjunction of forces that drive and resist such shifts" (Hardy 2017, 21). Given the aforementioned literature strands, three primary research questions informed this inquiry:

> RQ1: How does brand journalism seek to mirror "real" (i.e., traditional) news production fundamentals including the routines and techniques of reporting?
>
> RQ2: What techno-logics (i.e., medium-oriented factors) influence the motivations for and implementation of brand journalism?
>
> RQ3: How are corporations absorbing and redeploying journalistic labor and skills toward commercial ends?

Method

Following Thomas Lindlof's (1995) textbook training, this approach utilized purposive sampling to identify prominent interviewee participants, posed open-ended questions during conversations, and then open-coded the transcript data. Specifically, in fall 2017, I reached out (through e-mail addresses, company websites, and social media profiles) to 78 potential contacts involved in the production of brand journalism and ultimately secured 28 semi-structured interviews by phone lasting 25 h total (and ranging from 41 to 67 min each). These interviewees came from three basic categories of affiliation: content marketing "newsrooms" at multinational corporations like Nissan, Visa, Coca-Cola, and Raytheon; in-house native advertising publishing studios at journalistic outlets both new (e.g., *Vice*, *Huffington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Gawker*) and legacy (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *Time*); and those at firms brokering within the brand journalism space (e.g., Codeword, Edelman, NewsCred, Contently, Content Marketing Institute). Conversations were guided by adaptable questions about organizational structures and production routines, focused particularly on similarities and contrasts between traditional and brand journalism.[1] I complemented these interviews with a variety of industry discourse related to brand journalism as tracked in *Advertising Age* (since subscribing in 2010), *AdWeek* (since 2015), and the American Press Institute daily e-mail listserv (since 2013); in recent trade books like *Content: The Atomic Particle of Marketing*, *Epic Content Marketing*, *Brand Journalism*, *Native Advertising: The Essential Guide*, *The Native Advertising Advantage*, and *The End of Advertising*; at a one-day "master class" seminar held by the Content Marketing Institute; and in an assortment of online coverage of the work of my interviewee participants in preparation for our conversations.

The subsequent data—from these assorted interview transcripts and trade texts—was inductively synthesized and analyzed for how it could inform the aforementioned research questions about journalistic parallels, media logics, and corporate economic pressures. Different respondents obviously hailed from different professional domains and could be seen as competitors in many regards, but the focus of analysis here (given space limitations) was on their similarities rather than differences in producing brand journalism. Additionally, because insights often arrived from either an interviewee quote or an example lifted from the trade press, those different "data" sources will be blended together (but identified in text) for the sake of maintaining a holistic narrative rather than segmenting and treating their originating context discretely. The extensiveness of those quotations and examples that ensue is meant to offer the reader richly detailed evidence for these thematic findings from across a diverse swath of interviewee sources; that is, many such patterns emerged in common—with exceptions and nuances noted where relevant—whether the respondent was situated at a native advertising shop, a consulting agency, or a Fortune 500 newsroom.

Findings

Diagram 1

Borrowing Journalistic Fundamentals: Routines and Techniques

An inquiry into the news production routines and techniques of brand journalism reveals working enterprises that seem, outwardly at least, little different from their editorial counterparts; this section will introduce how those practical aspirations have been

Diagram 1. Influences on brand journalism production.

explicitly borrowed and implemented. Interviewees report organizing internal structures and systems as similar as possible to "real" mini-newsrooms: daily story meetings to brainstorm ideas, identify subject angles, and scheme against news cycles; bureaus and beats assigned by topics and issued original reporting assignments; and teams conducting interviews, shooting or securing visuals, writing up stories, editing and fact-checking copy, and conceptualizing layout format and distribution.

For those working at in-house native advertising studios or go-between content brokerages, such processes usually kick-in simultaneous or subsequent to an RFP (request for proposal), which involves coordinating all that reportorial creativity with the sales team, not that dissimilarly to typical ad agency protocol; this overlaid commercial pressure is also felt and negotiated by those in corporate newsrooms, though as this investigation will later demonstrate, selling cannot be the obvious goal. For example, Raytheon's brand journalism coordinator, Chris Hawley, knows they have inventory to push—and that selling those weapons and electronics is the ultimate *raison d'etre* for his reporting unit—but he nonetheless tries to run the operation "just like an AP beat." This includes searching for interesting stories that can serve as the vehicles for that effort and rewriting the corporate style book, distributed to some 60,000 employees there, to include a new chapter on news writing with templates for a hard lead, a soft lead, a nut graph, a kicker quote, and "where to drop in details and color—all those tools that journalists use," as he told a marketing industry newsletter (Scott 2013).

What, then, should be the focus of coverage when corporate entities seek to transform themselves into news providers? As one brand journalism textbook advises, half-echoing the public service mandate of any *traditional* publisher, "You must cultivate a beat that covers the issues that are of concern to your brand … and which matter to the community you seek to inform" (Bull 2013, 65). Another key consideration—here, too, as a "real" editor might prioritize—is whether a particular brand journalism news space is already cluttered with competitors or if there's enough of an opening vis-à-vis content rivals. In that, whether a story has been "done before" becomes a rejoinder that matters not just at, say, CNN or *The New York Times*, but also at Coca-Cola and Nissan; brand journalism thus looks for "holes" to fill within the existing information architecture, even as the substitutions are, inextricably, persuasion-inclined.

Looking more granularly at some of the processes detailed by interviewees: At Contently, a matchmaking firm that brokers a network of journalistic freelancers with corporate suitors, an online platform accepts pitch requests from clients (for example, "we want to cover the way that AI will affect the workforce through 2025"—a story that, frankly, wouldn't look out of place in the pages of *The Economist*, *Wired*, or *The Wall Street Journal*) and, through a "talent recommendation algorithm," marries that content strategy and topical opportunity to their flock of writers, videographers, and designers, who have uploaded portfolios (establishing subject expertize and medium forte) and can submit angles and ideas that the editors then assess. Elsewhere, those assignment protocols tend to be less automated, but similarly structured: For example, *The Washington Post*'s studio has editors and team-leads who are category-aligned (e.g., B2B, consumer-facing clients, and thought leadership pieces) as does *The Boston Globe*'s regional economy specialization of branded coverage (e.g., higher education, health care, and technology), while *The Atlantic*'s sponsored content editor delegates to talent depending on respective journalistic strengths (i.e., "brain-crunching technical stories or more poetic, lyrical subjects or whether they required a lot of street reporting").

That subsequent reporting approach is equally critical to illustrate, with its pretense of adhering to "real" journalistic norms. Often times, stories might derive from "insider" sources—successful customers, active employees, or company history—and occasionally clients will provide or require those voices to be featured. In other cases, however, the ideals of balance and objectivity reigned; for example, Melanie Deziel, who edited at *The New York Times* T Brand Studio, says,

> We would really sit down and talk … about which perspectives we should be taking, you know: Are we relying too much on the brand's sources? Should we find a third-party study that confirms what they're saying? … To make sure that it was abiding by [*New York Times*] standards.

Further to that end, the T Brand Studio adopts much of the "visual DNA of a *Times* article," which helps the copy blend with its editorial counterpart, like using the paper's decorous "Mr. and Mrs." honorifics when quoting said sources (Benton 2014). Interviewees at Nissan and Edelman also confirmed a preference for using external experts who could embed and imply impartiality of authority in the copy produced; likewise, though another interviewee segued from PBS to Cisco, he still calls upon his three decades of contacts within the tech industries.

Unlike ideal editorial practice, however, a range of brand newsroom units—many being "owned media," both literally and metaphorically—do transmit quotes back to sources for approval before publication even if, as Raytheon's Hawley suggests, that often diminishes the journalistic sheen of the content:

> We constantly had people trying to change their quotes … The minute you start tweaking them, changing them, they turn into these wooden, clunky things … We'll often go to an executive and say, "Hey, I know you want to change this, but here's the deal: We really need your authentic voice coming across or we're going to lose the reader."

All of which tends to make reporting a somewhat "harder sell" to sources, in terms of securing cooperation, as compared to the ease of interviewees' past experience in non-brand journalism for a variety of reasons cited: needing to reassure that the copy is "not going to be product-related;" clients being "sensitive, for competitive reasons, about who we would talk to" (e.g., avoiding attribution to competitors); sources wanting to get paid for their contributions; and not calling from a traditional "premium publishing brand" they're familiar with.

Having thus illustrated in this section a thick description of brand journalism's newsroom organization and creative routines from story ideation to interview sourcing to write-up—some of which adhere to the ambitions of traditional journalism, while others succumb to the pressures of being a commercial instrument for corporations—the paper will now query the convergence culture context for this work produced.

The Techno-Logics of Brand Journalism

The introduction of new technologies and platforms have dramatically reformatted the media landscape in the twenty-first century; from blogs to YouTube to social networking sites, amateurs now regularly participate in the creation and sharing of content online

(Jenkins 2006). In turn, brand journalism logic holds that, because of these digital affordances and convergence culture, corporate entities also can and, indeed, *should* populate contemporary media environments with information content previously furnished by traditional (i.e., comparatively independent) journalistic arbiters.

Brand journalism therefore offers a set of disintermediating tools and tactics to organizations wanting to relate their stories directly to the public; it asks historically non-media corporations to now "think" journalistically, commit to becoming publishers themselves, and even craft editorial policies. Fittingly to this end, Robert Rose, the chief strategy officer at the Content Marketing Institute, proclaims, "there's no difference from what you're doing and what the main media company is doing in your industry" and "fast forward to ten years from now and the majority of media properties are going to be owned by brands." Whether or not that futurism comes to pass, this mandate to create and distribute news-like content seems nonetheless reflective of a "media logic" premise already widespread and influential among industry leadership—some of whom, to be certain, stand to gain from the revenue streams redirected to such new formats and initiatives.

Brand journalism seems further motivated by other related communication environment factors and concerns: diminishing trust in traditional news providers; the rise of social network influencers heralding alternative conduits of persuasion; but, above all, those falling technological barriers to reaching audiences directly online drives most of the momentum here. The genre is thus symbolic of the corporate co-optation of convergence culture within the American media industries: "We're all in the business of storytelling, so you might as well cut out the middleman," shrugs Doug Busk, Coca-Cola's global group director for digital communications. "What difference does it make if the initial story came from a brand-associated outlet like [Coke] *Journey* or … *The New York Times*?" Indeed, that democratization of online publishing, with "each of us becoming our own channel," as the Coke leader further alleges—piqued the interest of multinational firms just as it did citizen journalists. Examples of this corporate self-regard—and the implementations subsequently informed by it—are rife throughout the trade press coverage: Red Bull flips its business model and conceptualizes itself instead as a "media company that [sells] energy drinks;" Raytheon calls its homepage "very much a news operation;" Purina becomes, by some measures, the largest media company in St. Louis; and GE scales back TV advertising, "hopes to never send another press release," and funnels more money into branded content than any other aspect of marketing communications (Einstein 2016, 126; Lieb 2017, 78; Meyer 2014; Scott 2013).

In keeping with media logic's focus on how technological environments structure (i.e., empower or constrain) behavior and content, the format and purpose of the brand journalism news product varies widely, from long-form to "snackable," given the parameters (or lack thereof) that digital ecology affords. Unknowingly echoing media ecology pioneer Harold Innis (1951), one consultant likes to dichotomize between brand journalism "bricks" (i.e., heavier white papers) and "feathers" (i.e., simpler text and visuals); the former being longer-lasting and thus effective for SEO purposes, the latter lighter and biased toward social media virality (Bull 2013, 66). Interviewees from Codeword to Casper to *The Washington Post* to *BuzzFeed* outline the range of possibilities for sponsored output that's as rich and diverse as today's editorial alternatives online that it competes against and situates itself subtly within: an aggregated blog post; a GIF tweeted; a statistical infographic; a photo essay slideshow; a 90-second explainer video on YouTube; a punchy listicle; a Q & A interview; a deep-dive narrative feature; a thought leadership report.

The medium chosen often depends on content intent and brand category: that is, "considered purchase" products from finance, insurance, healthcare, the service industries, and B2B tend to opt for strictly educational written content and utility-oriented resource guides (i.e., "service journalism" in traditional editorial terms); while consumer-packaged goods, fashion, and other retail can be more playfully visual and "emotionally driven or identity driven" (Basen 2012). *BuzzFeed*, in particular, famously specialized in the latter: "Like, 'I can see myself or my friends in that piece of [branded] content and I'm going to share it with them because of that,'" their vice president of creative services, Melissa Rosenthal, explains of the production logic ideal. This, too, though, is news you can use: to help define yourself through corporate inflections. It is also a microcosm of democracy's willingness to define its public agenda through the (comparatively restrictive) parameters that brand journalism now affords.

In addition to the above discussion of optimal formatting for online spaces, timing represents another critical dimension when mapping the systemic practices of brand journalism. The media logics emerging here are, overall, not that dissimilar from traditional press practices; many corporate news organizations utilize the same kind of editorial calendar one might find at *The New Yorker* or *Entertainment Weekly*, albeit distributing content optimized for the audience's assumed proximity to making a purchase or if there's some corporate initiative, event, or season to tack against. Frequency and consistency of output are especially fetishized so as to, hopefully, entice and engineer audience dependencies (e.g., "pumping out like a factory," complained one interviewee); for example, *Van Winkle's*, the sleep journalism-focused "independent" media property owned by mattress company Casper, aimed to publish between eight and twelve original pieces every day. Such intense productivity is, partly, techno-logically driven: that is, the infinite spectrum of content that the internet affords (relative to anlogue ecologies where time and space were more constrained by column inches or broadcast airtime) concurrently demands a relentless churn of news material (see Serazio 2015, for an expanded discussion). As one brand journalism consultant summarizes in a trade text: "Like news or entertainment enterprises, [historically non-media] companies are challenged to 'feed the beast' on a daily basis" (Lieb 2017, 74). Ideally, for interviewees, because of that predictable output, readers might become reliant on this corporate framework for information delivery, just as they did legacy news providers.

That techno-logically driven ambition toward volume lends itself to reactive content just as much as proactive planning—another quality that brand journalism shares with its traditional editorial cousin. This also squares with increasing advertizer interest in and emphasis on real-time marketing, which is the corporate effort to respond to notable or pertinent events, usually through social media feeds, thus supposedly "humanizing" the brand. Such opportunities can encompass anticipated events (be they brand-specific or culture-wide like the Super Bowl and Oscars), be location-based (geotargeting customers at optimal moments), driven by predictive analytics and social media-listening, or even responsive to breaking news (the most journalistic, and frankly challenging, of sorts). Software augments these practices (i.e., Big Data tools that can sort through the cacophony of globally networked conversations), but journalism and advertising alike have long striven for such relevance.

Moreover, these objectives necessitate leveraging a fundamental "newsroom" mentality more than that of an ad agency, "merg[ing] the zeitgeist with the brand ethos all day," latching onto trends as they bubble up, and being agile enough and "always on" to "tap into the moment." At *BuzzFeed*, Melissa Rosenthal, vice president of creative services, would often approach clients—or be asked by them—about ways to riff off of cascading topics in the social space. The insight here is that the media environment —both in terms of news cycle and networked flows—conditions the logic of sponsored journalism production. Doug Most, director of content marketing at *The Boston Globe*, explains

> I have tried very hard to encourage brands that we work with to think about [that] and that the more we can come up with ideas and content and subjects that relate to current events, relate to what's happening in the world, the more likely they are to see their story get pick-up … Readers are going to be seeing headlines about [a] particular subject all the time, so you can think of it as a rushing stream—if you can jump into that stream, then there's a good chance that you're going to go with the flow.

Following through with the metaphor, this, however, pollutes the "stream" of public news and issues with brand-inflected information, often of murky origin and inherently dubious intent; the persuasion architecture of today's internet communication makes such pollution ever more possible.

Concrete, evocative examples of this abound: Casper's *Van Winkle's* used Donald Trump's revelation of being a short sleeper as the lead hook for a deeper dive into the subject; Raytheon's newsroom maintains a stable of "evergreen" content ready for topical moments, like weather satellite stories during hurricane season and cybersecurity articles during data breach scandals; and a Canadian bank that Contently works with likes to actually send on-the-ground reporters out to do political coverage of new government budgets within hours of their release. In other cases, that news cycle is more social and digital-driven: According to one trade publication, *Van Winkle*'s reportedly relied on Chartbeat metrics just as much as an online newspaper and Edelman developed a proprietary "trendspotting" capacity featuring real-time analytics within its creative newsroom to foster more timely content (Uniatowski 2014). Although, again, reporters and editors (not to mention marketing and PR professionals) have always sought to position fresh content against the roiling news agenda, as a notable point of contrast, media ecology would emphasize how these digital tools enable and, indeed, somewhat compel *brand* journalists to think much more empirically, granularly, and psychographically about the constructed audience demographic that they write for compared to the scribe of yesteryear conjuring readership through imagination alone.

Along with these technological "inputs," data is equally critical when it comes to thinking about formatting brand journalism output. Just as search engine optimization has become fundamental to traditional editorial news operations—using keywords for headlines and producing content that is more Google-friendly—so, too, has it impacted its commercial manifestation. "Content marketing is a search war, so this approach was affirmed when Google listed us [at Dell's *Tech Page One*] as a news site and, in several cases, our stories came up ahead of *The New York Times*," Stephanie Losee, that site's first managing editor, boasted to a PR newsletter (Shah 2015). This strategy entails examining keywords as the "proxy" for questions that the customer community might be contemplating, then making those terms "look like a natural part of what you're writing," one influential consultant explained in his textbook (Pulizzi 2014, 256).

Again, given the aforementioned bias toward digital volume, constant output on a consistent "beat" proves victorious: SAP, for example, knew most of its traffic was from users typing the brand name into their browser, but it wanted to win for (the much more voluminous) queries around cloud computing so it flooded the online zone with news-like content laser-focused on that subject. "If you write a thousand words 20 times a day on a certain [topic], you're gonna eventually rank for it and that raking provides value that's economically defensible," embellishes Michael Brenner, who served as marketing VP for the firm. Other examples of success in this regard have ranged from highly indexed articles from *The New York Times*' native advertising studio on women's prisons (on behalf of Netflix and arguably the most famous single piece of brand journalism to date) to, more modestly, AGCO's *FarmLife* magazine having landed an article in the top spot for "how to store commercial bales of hay outside." Similarly, when Casper's *Van Winkle*'s launched, they allocated the entirety of their marketing budget toward building out a sleep-related article resource library, which successfully spiked inbound traffic within months: "We were indexed like journalism. We were journalism to Google and that was the point," beams Jeff Koyen, editor-in-chief at the site. "We also managed to get indexed by or categorized by Facebook and not as advertising. That was huge for us."

This section of findings has thus illustrated the techno-logics of production that motivate and influence brand journalism. Above all, the internet, broadly, and various digital ecology subsystems specifically (i.e., self-publishing tools, social network feeds, search engine biases) both enable and constrain the mentality and work of brand journalism professionals. In the migration of media material from print to online spaces, convergence, by definition, obliterated the norms and formats for content partition: Everything—news, ads, the news-like ads that make up brand journalism—blurs together there, which makes for a more "receptive" architecture to persuasion ambitions. Some of the logics of goals and routines documented thus far are not novel (e.g., staying timely and topical has always been journalism and marketing's ambition), while other logics do seem more unique to the emerging moment (e.g., the scale of production by brands that have not historically done journalism). The lens of media ecology, however, only offers half of the story for understanding brand journalism; critical political economy concerns furnish the other half.

Political Economy Context and Pressures

An examination of brand journalism through this lens reveals two final primary themes: an effort by corporations to absorb and redeploy journalistic labor and, simultaneously, to ensure that that labor does not come across as commercially obvious in terms of the appearance of its aims. As foreshadowed in the literature review, the breakdown of advertizer-subsidized journalism has hastened this impetus, as newsroom thinning vexes corporate communication strategies and motivates brand journalism endeavors to augment, if not outright supplant, former information sources for the public. Hawley of Raytheon explains:

> It was getting harder to get Raytheon into the news through the traditional public relations methods … The news industry [was …] shrinking, where you had more journalists trying to

> hold down various beats and fewer specialists. That meant fewer people covering defense. … There was a realization that [Raytheon] … was gonna have to tell [its story] itself and it was gonna have to start thinking like a media company and producing content that actually entertained and gained traction on its own merits.

If corporations accept this alleged business mandate, they generally explore two avenues to underwrite their brand journalism efforts to attract audiences: purchasing or co-opting an extant media outlet or constructing capacities within the organization to begin to act like one. This is often operationalized by buying up some of the very labor that used to produce news independently but has since been institutionally displaced. Indeed, that push to manufacture brand journalism has meant hiring and staffing "former" journalists, an aspiration all the more plausible given economic context and worker supply.

As one news publisher emblematically lamented to an industry conference audience in a trade text:

> We simply do not have the resources that our advertisers have. We cannot hire the quality journalists and do the amount of research necessary for the amount of funding (advertising) we get. But at least all my journalist friends who were terminated for budget reasons are finding homes on the brand side. (Pulizzi 2014, 25)

As one particularly striking example, Stephanie Losee, who went from getting $2.50 per word as a *Fortune* staffer to being asked to write for free, now works as head of content for Visa and describes herself and her mission on LinkedIn as a "journalist re-jobinator," advocating to every laid-off colleague to stop grieving about that professional collapse and get with the (corporate) program: "Why wouldn't you follow the news about where the money moved in your industry when you're trying, theoretically, to keep getting paid for what you do?"

Broadly, then, the labor pool for brand journalism can be mapped as stemming from three significant tributaries: former journalists hired full-time; third-party freelancers utilized ad hoc; and repurposed employees (i.e., non-journalists) already in-house. If companies opt for the third, this can range, structurally, from a "lone wolf" producing content on behalf of the entire organization; every employee self-deputized to dabble journalistically as desired on their "beat" of choice (i.e., specific job or business unit); or a highly controlled newsroom center aiming for consistency and volume of output to broader audiences. The smaller the brand newsroom, the more agile, jack-of-all-trades must be the full-timer, but at more deep-pocketed institutions like *The New York Times*, Nissan, and Coke, brand journalism units can field regional bureaus and content hubs worldwide with sometimes triple-digit staff sizes. Some—perhaps many—in-house native advertising studios also seem to be repurposing newsroom employees in much the same fashion; according to one survey, 42% of news media and 68% of magazine industry respondents report "letting brands use the editorial team … to produce commercial content-driven campaigns" (Laursen and Stone 2016, 42). The consequences for the traditional "church-and-state" division of editorial autonomy are not insignificant here (Serazio 2019).

To be historically certain, commercial dependency on journalistic labor has not changed all that dramatically; before, brands needed reporters at more independent outlets to spread the word on their behalf, via PR and marketing campaigns, and now they're simply importing those capacities in-house. From *The Washington Post* WP Brand

Studio to Edelman to Qualcomm, reports confirm organizations are specifically seeking out those with journalistic experience and sensibilities to generate branded content and native advertising; Cisco, for instance, plucked broadcast veteran Scott Gurvey to work on the same technology news beat he'd covered for two decades (at PBS, no less) before being laid off. Yet all that portends a troubling theoretical migration of labor within the mass communication industries, as content labs and native departments are now, apparently, brimming with reporters who have "reapplied their talent." "This is allowing [reporters] to supplement their income and do the things that they love," says Joe Lazauskas, an agency director of content strategy, adopting chipper, Uber-esque neoliberal labor rhetoric. "They can take a brand piece for $800 that might allow them to write that $200 front-of-the-book piece for *Wired* that's going to take them a lot more hours."

This economically driven shift from traditional to brand news could necessitate an alternate future for journalism training as well. Maria Marron (2014), then-dean of Nebraska's j-school, advocates journalism programs' acknowledging students matriculation into such positions rather than traditional outlets, reframing disdain from "us" versus "them" dichotomizations of news and PR, and giving content marketing "equal footing" with investigative reporting; likewise, the first textbook on *Brand Journalism* laments that fact that most journalism manuals were written with newspaper and broadcaster destinations of yesteryear in mind (where "jobs … are nose-diving, while this large [brand] market is … developing") (Bull 2013, 3). According to interviewees from *BuzzFeed* to NewsCred to Coca-Cola, the talent recruited is, thus, often young and hungry. This substitution of occupational ambition, however, means that cub reporters (not to mention laid-off veterans) are no longer plowing their energy toward democratic ends, but rather contributing to the consolidation of corporate power: "selling out," both literally and metaphorically. Fittingly, among *New York Times* T Brand Studio staffers, "journalism is the new marketing degree" has become a wry motto, according to one trade magazine (Sebastian 2015).

These are, moreover, sometimes professionals at the top of the news industry game who now ply their trade for brand backers. Contently likes to tout the apparent prestige of the "Pulitzer Prize winners" and "respected magazine writers" in its freelance stable; Hawley joined Raytheon to manage their sponsored news content just weeks after winning the Pulitzer for investigative journalism. According to interviewees at *The Huffington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, Codeword, and Visa, such brand journalism skills desired specifically include a "nose for news," a broad knowledge base, critical thinking, facile interviewing with wide-ranging sources, tight deadline-orientation, writing versatility, and, above all, storytelling chops (i.e., the ability to search, find, and tell them effectively).

Ironically, too, these former journalists come equipped with the apparently advantageous instinct *not to sell* through their branded news copy, for that copy is, above all, supposed to look like news—and never advertising (Serazio 2013). Indeed, the overriding mandate is one of commercial self-effacement and to delicately thread the communicative needle between marketing and journalism mandates and overlaps: "We would think about how to tell a story that would both serve the advertiser's purpose and be a legitimate editorial take on an interesting subject that would actually appeal to readers," explains Jim Gaines, who ran *The Atlantic*'s branded content studio. "I would say to [clients]: You want to be read and if we do anything that is crassly commercial, we'll lose our credibility and you'll lose readers." This entails riffing off product- or company-level specificity to whatever larger (brand) ideal that the corporation is hoping to "draft," both in the sense of "writing" and "attaching itself closely behind." Indeed, aiming for those higher journalistic ideals means not issuing standardized, repetitive, hard sell-oriented product pitches, but rather flexibly catering to reader curiosities; this might be understood as part of a larger rhetorical and organizational shift within the advertising industry that hypes and pursues dialogue and engagement as emblematic buzzwords and idealized structures (Serazio 2013).

For example: "If we just did a sponsored content series about insurance products, we've already lost—it's like snoozeville, we would just die of boredom," says Gene Yoon, creative director at the *Boston Globe*'s brand studio, so they framed story copy tangentially under the mantle of being "forward thinking" and profiled businesses and individuals, unrelated to the insurance client, "putting [their] best future forward"—and "kind of implicit with that notion is, well, if you're going to be planning for your future, you might want to have insurance, because you never know what might happen." (This attempt to efface commercial intent echoes earlier efforts and techno-logics specific to online output: Google won't, apparently, index sponsored news that's advertizer-obvious, so brand journalists try to make that patronage less recognizable so as to win at SEO.) This thus represents a convoluted path to persuasion—or a wide circle taken at the "top of the funnel," in marketing nomenclature—but when the short route seems broken (e.g., banner ads next to the article), the journalism itself offers an appealing alternative means of coaxing consumers. And, again, this reframes the news "product" as a gimmick for attention-grabbing, not in service of democratic principle but profit-oriented corporate ends.

All these machinations are indicative of a restructuring of roles and content within the American media industries—trends both shaped by and shaping technological and economic change, as highlighted in these findings. The ultimate purpose of the ensuing branded content, it should be noted, is not necessarily to secure profit directly itself—although occasionally an organization might luck out as with, say, Kraft's subscription-supported *Food & Family* brand magazine—but rather, circuitously, to maintain customer attention to eventually leverage toward the company's *traditional* industrial output (i.e., cars, soda, beds, etc.). This also means that, unlike the ideals that traditional news providers might espouse, brand journalism is, ultimately, but bait for larger commercial schemes rather than democratically enlightening ends.

Conclusions

If the media ecology tradition helped explain here how today's digital communication environment is structuring some of the behavior of brand journalists, then critical political economy framed how neoliberal market pressures equally impact the genre. Production logic—in the sense of the "how" and "why" that the "what" gets done—has been unpacked across those complimentary analytical dimensions. Taken in full, the professional activities and efforts tallied throughout this project herald nothing short of a news media company transformation of corporate brands. This transformation arrives, not coincidentally, at a precarious moment in the history of American journalism when the advertizer-backed business model is under deep strain and offers one possible "solution" going forward.

To express reservation about the potential for brand journalism to address civic needs and functions is not to naively, and mistakenly, long for a bygone yesteryear when U.S. news was produced somehow free of corporate influence; indeed, "market-driven" journalism has long been the norm as commercial logic undergirded newsroom orientation as much as democratic ideals (McManus 1994). But shown here is "market-driven" journalism of a very different stripe—and a trend that signals brands getting ever more "hands on" when it comes to their ambitions for and executions of the media performance they afford, literally and metaphorically. In creating and subsidizing sponsored "newsrooms," they seem to be operating them often in accordance with journalistic conventions and even ideals (Serazio 2019). And it begs a concluding provocation: If corporations increasingly appoint themselves to serve *directly* as news providers within the persuasion architecture of digital information environments, the marketplace for democratic discourse there will be even further hampered—for these multinationals have profit-oriented fiduciary responsibility fundamentally set against any such public aims. The news "hook" in this context is just that: simply a journalistic lure to subsequently push product.

As the economic foundations—and attendant professional assumptions—of the mass communication industries crumble, this is as much a new media story of how journalism is influencing advertising as the time-honored political economy critique of advertising corrupting journalism. Moreover, the economic models foretold here hint at a circular industrial irony: Even as sponsors are scaling back their subsidy of traditional media platforms, they are also the "ones who are helping to fill the void in newsgathering resources" via native advertising partnerships with those publishers or content marketing newsroom start-ups of their own (Franks 2016, 340). As corporations further trim that advertising outlay, and journalism jobs and news outlets disappear along with those revenues, corporations might feel compelled to become media providers themselves. Put differently, if sponsors don't compensate reporters (indirectly), they might have to compensate for their absence, as shown in these findings.

Techno-logically speaking, the flattened landscape of the twenty-first century—represented by supposedly democratized social media production and distribution platforms, as well as the infinitude of online content capacities—partly empowers and motivates multinational companies to present themselves as information authorities in this vein. But because that convergence space—as, essentially, persuasion architecture—has been designed toward commercial ends rather than public enlightenment (Fuchs 2017), the branded news output spreads across it easily without being formally quarantined as different from "editorial" content as advertising was once segmented in the analogue era.

Analogously, though former journalists may have long migrated to the "dark side" of public relations, the contexts and capacities of this kind of sponsored news herald a new frontier in that labor shift: a "rejobination," as one interviewee termed it, doing a surprisingly similar gig (with suspiciously similar ambitions) to what they might have done for their newspaper, magazine, or TV network employers before. Such are the critical media industry studies lessons about occupational flows and institutional structures that emerge here: Brand journalism seeks dependencies from both producers of news content (i.e., reporters displaced by virtue of job market tumult and then subsumed and "reassigned" by corporate power) and consumers of it (i.e., readers adrift in an online information ecology that no longer privileges traditional sources).

Indeed, some suggest, boldly, that most journalism jobs will eventually be on the brand side rather than with traditional media (Pulizzi 2012, 117). Those news media layoffs and closures are, however, hardly cause for celebration among former flak adversaries at Fortune 500 firms; the problem, as shown here, of fewer reporters being left to pitch is partly what triggered the development of native advertising and content marketing in the first place. The paper has thus demonstrated the latest absorption and co-optation of journalism by corporate means: both the professionals themselves and the fruit of their labor.

Large amounts of money are, however, already being plowed into brand journalism, perhaps hastening the failure of traditional news organizations that once operated (relatively, comparatively) independently—even as it remains true that advertizers are still not, ultimately, incentivized to care a whit about the nature of the journalism they sponsor, no matter the noble protestations heard in interviews. It is all just "content" to them, the widely adopted, generic descriptor for this quasi-journalistic output that bespeaks the fundamental corporate apathy about it as well as the convergence environment it fits within. Producers take pains to make sure that it doesn't look commercially obvious—and the internet's persuasion architecture accommodates that guerrilla marketing self-effacement—but it needs to (eventually) move product in some way to justify its own existence on c-suite spreadsheets.

Sponsors have therefore simply been "forced" to find—or found—new platforms and new ways of attracting eyeballs. As one interviewee earlier proposed: What *does* it matter if a news story comes from Coke or *The New York Times*? If that Dell *Tech Page One* story shows up in one's newsfeed or search listing indistinguishable from the *Times*' version on the same subject, why—the brand journalism premise holds and online persuasion architecture affords—would a reader know or care about the difference in its origins, especially in the absence of adequate media literacy? Both seek to shape reality and condition perception, but articles concocted by brands do so more subtly than the straightforward, interruption advertising that underpinned the media industries for much of the past century. The financing calculus and technological affordances for that business model have dramatically changed; this paper has shown how the underwriting expectations and professional deployments have as well. Those journalistic laborers impacted by that shift might have different pipers now more directly calling the (news) tune, but the song—those sponsors hope—should sound much the same to the audiences engaged.

NOTES

1. Questions specifically included, among others: How did your professional background (e.g., in journalism) prepare you to work in brand journalism and what adaptations were needed? In what ways does your brand newsroom mirror that of a traditional editorial organization (e.g., story ideas, interviewing, etc.)? How do you decide on the format (e.g., article, video, etc.) and substance (e.g., inform versus entertain) of your brand journalism output? How much does timing—either proactive or reactive—influence production? What data-driven factors inform your brand journalism (e.g., SEO strategy, audience analytics, etc.)?

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