

## NATIVE ADVERTISING AS RHETORICAL CAMOUFLAGE

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to identify the rhetorical strategies of the paid covert advertising that matches the aspect and function of the digital media environment in which it appears. With an expanding use of new formats on different platforms and devices, native advertising is a creative alternative to traditional digital ads. The disguised advertisements can effectively avoid both ad blockers and consumer resistance to persuasion, as they are less intrusive forms of commercial content. Native advertising is a hybrid genre, which tends to blur the boundaries between promotional and editorial content, digital news outlets and advertising agencies, publishers and marketers, because of its use of rhetorical camouflage.

**Keywords:** native advertising; rhetoric; digital media, news; stealth marketing; deception; persuasion knowledge.

### 1. Introduction

Native advertising is not a new phenomenon: in legacy, offline media its predecessors appeared in the form of advertorials and infomercials (Marks, Grimm & Campbell, 2019: 260), but in the digital age, it developed exponentially, both in terms of formats and platforms. It is paid digital marketing communication which matches almost perfectly with the media environment where it is published. Native advertising is a hybrid genre of chameleonic rhetoric (Gass & Seiter, 2022: 424). Unlike display ads, native advertisements do not look like promotional messages at all, avoiding ad blockers and disruption of the user's interaction with the page, thus downplaying their very nature as paid media content.

IAB defines native advertising as "paid ads that are so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behavior that the viewer feels the ads belong there" (Borst, 2019: 11). Native Advertising Institute offers a similar definition: "paid advertising that matches the form, feel and function of the content of the media on which it appears" (<https://www.nativeadvertisinginstitute.com/blog/what-is-definition-native-advertising>, accessed 15 March, 2023). A far less self-serving definition considers native content to be news-like promotional messages deceiving the public not as much by claiming to be true, but mainly by pretending to be authentic organic content (Glasser, Varma & Zou, 2019: 151; Abramson, 2019: 121).

### 2. Native Advertising and Consumer Response

Basically, media operates under the principle of clear separation between news or editorial content and promotional or sponsored content (Glasser, Varma & Zou, 2019: 150; Abramson, 2019: 7). The two types of content are not only distinct media genres, with different appearance and appeal, but they also are epistemologically incompatible modes of communication, with conflicting rhetorical purposes (Spence *et alii*, 2011: 100;

Kathalia, 2022: 41). Traditionally, advertising subsidized the media news and editorial content, but the difference between the communication formats was clear for everyone. Media functions on a dual market, selling interest to audiences and delivering audiences to advertisers, each market enabling different content genres, which addresses the audience members as either citizens or consumers. The ethical problem of native advertising is that it uses rhetorical camouflage to disguise consumer-oriented content to address citizens, as if it conveys information of public interest and not persuasion for private interest (Spence *et alii*, 2011: 100). Moreover, journalism is far more credible for audiences than advertising (Bivins, 2023: 158). The recent merging of the two markets engenders a dangerous practice: publishers sell their credibility to marketers.

Native advertising borrows the rhetorical *ethos* of the editorial content and, in this respect, can mislead the consumers. This once clear separation of editorial and promotional content is collapsing under the pressure of the disruptive digital media environment, redefining and transgressing the genres and integrating media and marketing. Nowadays, news and advertisements become more and more indistinguishable, as promotional content appears to be publisher material or at least publisher-endorsed message. This content confusion undermines the audience perception of news as accurate, balanced, and relevant information and erodes the role media as servant of the public interest.

Native advertising, also called brand journalism, blends in with the surrounding editorial content, and therefore, successfully (and often unethically) circumvents the consumer's avoidance or resistance since it is perceived less as a persuasion attempt (Fennis & Stroebe, 2021: 245). Most digital users usually cannot recognize the persuasive intent of the native content (Marks, Grimm & Campbell, 2019: 261-262; Amazeen, 2023: 251), because its inconsistent disclosure as commercial communication ("sponsored content", "promoted by", "paid post" or "partner content"), avoiding, though, the term advertising. The main reason for this oversight is the covert nature of the native advertising and its chameleonic appearance which emulates news or editorial content. The failure to recognize the commercial influence attempt of native advertising can be explained by several persuasion theories, mainly centered on communication targets.

Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how individuals decode, assess, and respond to the perceived influence attempts of advertising messages (Ham & Nelson, 2019: 124). The main assumption of PKM is that consumers often possess a tacit, intuitive persuasion knowledge. During their repeated exposure to advertisements, individuals progressively learn to recognize the persuasive tactics used in various episodes by marketers and to develop cognitive and emotional coping responses to these messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994: 3). Consumer knowledge structures consist of three elements: agent knowledge; topic knowledge; and persuasion knowledge (Ham & Nelson, 2019: 126).

Agent knowledge includes the target beliefs about the attributes and intentions of the persuasive agents (marketers), in terms of credibility (expertise, reliability, integrity, charisma, etc.). Advertisers' *persona* can usually be perceived as either persuader or helper (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009: 307). Topic knowledge refers to the target views on the matter of the persuasive message: functional features of the product, the state of the marketplace, brand and company reputation, industry situation, etc. Persuasion knowledge consists in the perception of the target individuals concerning the strategies and tactics employed by the persuasive agent in the attempt to influence their beliefs,

attitudes, and behaviors. The target individuals can engage in various resistance and coping tactics (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009: 307-308). Persuasion knowledge comprises various dimensions, such as: dispositional or situational, objective or subjective, conceptual or attitudinal, etc.

Resistance to persuasion attempts has three main forms: reactance (resistance to the influence attempt), skepticism (resistance to the proposal), and inertia (resistance to change) (Knowles & Riner, 2007: 85-89). Reactance focuses on the actions of the persuasive agent, and does not have a specific content. Skepticism is concerned with the persuasive content and activates careful evaluation and intensive scrutiny of the proposal. Inertia avoids the change advocated by the persuasive attempt, regardless the agent and the proposal. Each form of resistance can be addressed by various specific tactics.

When consumers are exposed to persuasive episodes (such as advertisements), they engage in inferences about the motives of the agent, trying to discern the tactics used by the marketers and to assess the informational content (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009: 300). Consumers' perceptions can be more or less accurate, adequate, or insightful. Individuals have their own motives, goals and tactics within the persuasive communication, seeking to maximize their benefits and maintain control of the outcome of the interaction (Ham & Nelson, 2019: 127). The deceptive form of native advertising consists in pretending to be authentic and hence independent publisher content and not promotional advertiser content, abusing the generic conventions of news. The agent identity is obscured and misleading, implying a different *persona* which can hoodwink media consumers. The topic of native advertisements usually includes the brand only in a tangential manner, making it difficult for the consumers to discern the persuasive intent and inducing a different type of processing of the message. Another, more subtle, approach, is to influence the topics covered by the media, raising awareness on certain issues convenient for the advertiser, without mentioning the brand. However, when targets are not able to perceive a persuasive attempt, either because they lack the cognitive capacity or they cannot identify an influence intention or tactic, there will be no activation of the persuasion knowledge. Moreover, the activation of the persuasion knowledge does not always result in resistance to the influence attempt: whether the target perceives the agent's intention as aligned with his/her own goal or the persuasive tactic as pertinent, the response will usually be acceptance (Ham & Nelson, 2019: 131).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposes two paths of processing persuasive content. Usually the targets process the persuasive messages either on the central or on the peripheral route, depending on their involvement and cognitive capacity (Gass & Seiter, 2022: 44-45). Individuals using the central route process the message systematically, by carefully considering the quality of information and argumentation contained in the proposal. Targets using the peripheral route process the message automatically, by employing various cues or heuristics. When individuals are motivated and capable to process a message systematically, they will engage on the central route of elaboration, whereas when they are apathetic and/or incapable to make cognitive effort they will engage on the peripheral route (Fennis & Stroebe, 2021: 196-197). The resistance to persuasion is more likely to be triggered via central processing, but sometimes the persuasion knowledge can be activated by peripheral cues.

### 3. Rhetorical Camouflage in Native Advertising

The main problem for advertisers, in the contemporary economy of attention, where the media clutter is almost unbearable, is that consumers avoid, ignore, or resist such persuasion attempts. Moreover, the contemporary advertising industry is disrupted by tech giants, especially Google, Facebook, and Amazon (Auletta, 2018: 33), forcing media publishers to find new income sources and new business models, amongst which native advertising.

According to IAB, there are three native advertising formats commonly deployed: in-feed/in-content, content recommendation, and native content (Borst, 2019: 12-14).

In-feed native ads are placed in article and content feeds matching their surrounding site form and function, mixing editorial with paid ad units in a continuous flow. In-content native ads are placed mainly on article pages, between paragraphs of content or below the story, and match the appearance and appeal of the surrounding editorial content. In-feed/in-content native ads can appear on home pages, section fronts, within content on article pages, on product pages and social platforms. (Hardy, 2022: 108)

Content recommendations are native ads (articles, videos, etc.) displayed next to editorial content, and/or paid content. Content recommendation ads are usually placed below or adjacent to publisher content. When consumers click on content recommendations, they will be redirected to an external page.

Native content is paid material from a brand, published in the same format as editorial articles on publisher's site. Native content is typically developed by a publisher on behalf of a brand or in collaboration with the brand or produced by an independent advertising agency. The native content can be promoted by in-feed or content recommendation ads, on the publisher editorial sections.

Native advertising formats and practices are constantly evolving (Hardy, 2022: 111), as a result of the ever-expanding tools and platforms of digital mediascape, using social media posts, paid search, mobile, in-app and various new covert formats, because as they begin to add to the clutter the targets develop and activate their persuasion knowledge.

There are three models of native advertising: underwriting, platform, and agency (Leiss *et alii*, 2018: 332). The underwriting model consists of content produced by the publisher on behalf of the advertiser. The platform model is the opposite: the news-like content is produced by advertisers and distributed by publishers. The agency model, which is the most common and successful, combines the previous types and involves content studios or special teams employed by the publishers for developing native ads in collaboration with advertisers.

Many online publishers have created dedicated in-house native advertising teams or units, becoming marketers, at the same time, as they shifted their business models towards covert promotional content. BuzzFeed, New York Times, Wall Street Journal and many other media outlets have established special content studios for native ads (Lovell, 2017: 185; Lynch, 2018: 34). This ongoing and rapidly growing practice is compromising the media integrity and credibility, by blurring the lines between owned and paid media, publishers and marketers, news and advertisements. But, as media outlets are struggling to find viable business models in online and offline environments, more and

more publishers are adopting native advertising, since it has significant commercial impact.

Native advertising is extremely controversial, because of its covert nature and because it blurs the lines between editorial and commercial content, seen as a “faustian pact” (Hyman *et alii*, 2017: 80), which is destructive for the media identity and integrity and misleading for the consumers. Also, native advertising can be considered as discursive fraud “built on a foundation of intentional deception” (Hyman *et alii*, 2017: 85; Einstein, 2016: 104), since it is clandestine promotional content that only mimics the real news. This rhetorical ambiguity makes native advertising to be seen as a form of fake news, producing confusion about “where news ends and advertising begins” (Glasser, Varma & Zou, 2019: 151), circumventing the activation of persuasion knowledge in the targets. In digital settings, it is more difficult for the individuals to recognize persuasion attempts and to use coping tactics, because the novel formats in which native content is delivered can be perceived as less persuasive than the customary online advertising. Native advertising is, then, a form of grey or even black propaganda, using covert rhetorical tactics.

Advertising rhetoric is centered on identifying the most effective persuasion options available to marketers in every specific case. From a rhetorical perspective, the three elements of PKM correspond to the main persuasive strategies: agent knowledge points to *ethos*, topic knowledge – to *logos*, and persuasion knowledge – to *pathos*. The main points, rhetorically speaking, are the surreptitiously transferred *ethos* from organic content to paid promotion (through association by proximity), the deceptive substitution of the rhetorical situation and the generic ambiguity of the digital content. The targets are deceived twice, by the manipulative advertisers and by the duplicitous media publishers, because consumers do not expect advertising to look like editorial content and editorial content to conceal advertising. The switching of *persona* from marketer to publisher increases significantly and deceitfully the credibility of the content. The rhetors deliberately misrepresent the fact that they are biased and not neutral persuasive agents in the hope that the targets will trust them.

The main rhetorical operation in developing covert advertising which invades editorial genres is permutation (*immutatio*) which consists in the combination of two other persuasive moves: addition (*adiectio*) and omission (*detractio*). There are certain facts or elements omitted (disagreeable or dubious details about the company or the brand etc.) and particular facts or elements included (lexical and thematic selections, brand framing in flattering or useful light). Native advertising avoids persuasion knowledge activation via rhetorical camouflage tactics, such as: *mimesis*, *heteroglossia*, intertextuality, ellipsis, etc.

The overall tactic used by native advertising is the argument from appearance, inducing targets to process the message via peripheral route, and wrongly perceive ads as news and marketers as publishers, by suppressing the activation of persuasive knowledge. It is intertextual appropriation of news and editorial content, allowing marketers to select the most effective options from various rhetorical resources (Kathpalia, 2022: 41).

Another major rhetorical tactic used by native advertising is focused on media genres (unified repertoires of recurrent and recognizable discursive practices). As media genres, news and advertisements have different structure, content, and purpose. The structural and stylistic integrity of media genres is eroding in digital spaces, as new formats emerge, integrating editorial and promotional content (Hardy, 2022: 21;

Kathpalia, 2022: 185). Every genre implies a certain definition of the situation (rhetorical *stasis*), shaping perceptions and inviting or eliciting an adequate response or action from the audience. Contemporary digital mediascape offers ample opportunities for genre fusion and distortion. Genre manipulation exploits rhetorical configurations in three forms: mixing, bending, and embedding (Kathpalia, 2022: 186-187). Genre mixing incorporates promotional and informational genres to create generic hybrids. Genre bending generates camouflaged genres that pretend to be other genres (ads pretending to be news). Genre embedding disguises promotional content within editorial messages (Kathpalia, 2022: 170). Native advertising employs all three types of generic manipulation, the most common being genre embedding.

The strategic use of rhetorical camouflage in native advertising stimulates a certain anticipation of specific outcomes in the targets but it violates this expectation. Digital rhetoric (netoric) challenges and changes both media and advertising, giving rise to various new genres and new combinations of existing genres. The persuasive manoeuvres of using the generic features of editorial and informational content for promoting products and services are at least questionable or even deceptive. The discursive cloning of informational genres with commercial persuasion across digital platforms essentially misleads the audiences and ultimately devalues news and journalism.

#### 4. Conclusions

Native advertising becomes a significant alternative for generating revenues to display ads in digital environments. As a major support industry for news, advertising can take various creative forms, including native content. Native content can be seen as a rescue method for publishers, but it destroys the already declining media credibility. Native advertising disrupts agencies, publishers, and marketers, as well. Native content prevents the activation of persuasive knowledge of consumers and thus can be considered a deceiving stratagem of advertising dissimulated as news. This rhetorical camouflage undermines and diminishes media standards and credibility. The news organizations using this practice fail to inform their publics, by breaching the separation between editorial and promotional content. The merging of editorial and promotional content produces hybrid genres that blur the distinctions between media and marketing. The solutions for reducing the harmful effects of covert advertising are still to be found. I would propose three ideas: more strict regulations on transparency of the commercial content, strengthening of consumers media literacy skills, and more effective ways of media support. Digital media enables various generic hybrids, including the merging of news and ads. But journalism still must be different from copywriting and news must remain a distinct genre from advertising.

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