

The Birth of Branded Journalism

As brands embrace quality journalism, craving attention and credibility, can we still trust our media? **Ebele Wybenga** investigates the bustling intersection of journalism and advertising at the dawning of the Editorial Age.



First issue of Colors magazine, founded by Benetton, 1991
Photo: Colors Magazine/Ph. Oliviero Toscani



Launch of the 'Manhattan' issue of Acne Paper at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York, 2012

The Hollywood special of *Vanity Fair* was a sad sight after I cut out all the ads, leaving half a kilo of glossy spreads by the likes of Gucci, Burberry and Lanvin scattered on the floor. Two thirds of the venerable magazine's total weight consisted of adverts. The editorial content was bundled in tiny print in the tail, almost as an afterthought. This little cutting operation exposed the attention crisis faced by brands and the fate of traditional journalism. Magazines, confronted with shrinking subscription rates and advertising revenue, smother the reader in ads to save their masthead from extinction. Ads lose their power and appeal, sinking away among too many competing messages. In newsrooms struck by lay-offs, the remaining staff are left with too little time to investigate stories properly and are ever more exposed to the influence of PR. If you're reading about an exotic location in any glossy magazine, chances are a perfume brand or some luxury resort paid for the trip.

Brands realise the age of intrusive advertising is over. Their messages can be skipped by a flick of the page, a click of the mouse, a swipe on a smartphone screen or by hitting the forward button on a DVR. Their first response was to hide their messages and products in the content that the public consumes without suspicion. They started making advertising

that doesn't look like advertising, driving a surge of product placement, PR and advertorials. The struggling print media were keen to help them out. A friend told me that part of his job as an intern at *Wallpaper* magazine was to count and check if the products of the advertisers were covered sufficiently in the editorial pages.

The control shifted from the broadcaster to the audience

Many newspapers have started a business unit that helps advertisers publish customized stories with them. *The Los Angeles Times* has a **custom publishing section** with sponsored stories about every subject from travel to healthcare. It has exactly the same layout as the rest of its website. Last year, the readership of Dutch broadsheet *NRC Handelsblad* was surprised by a glossy magazine that looked a lot like *National Geographic*. It was a special feature commissioned by oil company Shell, filled with spectacular photography and spin about our 'energy future'. The supplement touched on the safety issues of nuclear energy to cast doubt on the whole green energy segment, praised natural gas, downplayed the potential of solar energy and made a case for an 'energy mix' that would naturally include fossil fuels for a long time ahead. The Shell logo was

printed as small as that of 'NRC Media', the company that owns the newspaper.

There is a fundamental problem with this kind of hidden-persuasion advertising. Today's media savvy audience isn't just able to skip any ad and feel if something is fishy. It can respond to any message, instantly. The control has shifted from the broadcaster to the audience. In the age of social media, brands are forced to be more transparent and accountable than ever. BP, in its response to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, covered its recovery efforts in a factual and detailed way on a **dedicated website**. This helped the company to avoid further reputational damage while being under extreme public scrutiny. In contrast, the website to which Shell's newspaper supplement referred, allowed the public to 'like' and share, but not to comment.

The Editorial Age

Forged by these shifts in the media landscape, the blending of commercial and editorial content has reached new heights of sophistication. Instead of paying a publisher to get close to an audience, brands become publishers themselves. Forget any of the bland material that brands used to publish, like in-flight magazines, editorialized fashion catalogs and dressed up annual reports. The current revolution in branded content is about journalistic quality. New magazines and documentaries

produced by brands don't compete with other branded messages but challenge anything on the newsstand and on prime-time television. Brands have started hiring world-class journalists to tell their stories, paying for the credibility implied by their bylines. It is the dawning of a new era in advertising: **the Editorial Age**. This concept has one big promise for brands: to reclaim the scarce and scattered attention of the public. It's essence is sourcing and publishing stories that you and your audience profoundly care about. Stories that instill love for your brand, strengthen your reputation and ultimately improve sales. The digital revolution has given everyone, companies and individuals alike, the ability to become a publisher and to command a worldwide audience. At first, this led to the Age of the Amateur, with the explosion of blog culture, uploaded amateur video and self-publishing on social media. It has reached a point where everyone talks and nobody gets heard. This has made the playing field level again and ready for the next phase. Ready for an age where content of professional quality will be valued most. Full of exceptional stories that stretch instead of shorten our attention span.

The Editorial Age requires brands to replace advertising campaigns with a content strategy based on **branded journalism**. Taking a journalistic approach to producing

content benefits both audience and brand. It means finding real-life stories that couldn't have sprung from the imagination of brand managers, PR advisers and copywriters. Content of journalistic quality has the ability to excite and engage even the most critical and advertising-averse target audiences. One of the earliest examples of branded journalism done right is the magazine **Colors**, founded by fashion brand Benetton in 1991. This magazine has been around for over twenty years and is still much loved among a culturally influential crowd of artists and art directors. You won't find any pastel-coloured jumpers featured in Colors. Rather, it's about 'the rest of the world'. Branded journalism has the potential to surpass independent media in quality while serving the business objectives of the brands that fuel it. Among cash-strapped and commercialised independent titles brands shouldn't have trouble standing out. Brands have deeper pockets and no advertisers to please. What does branded journalism offer brands, publishers, journalists and the public?

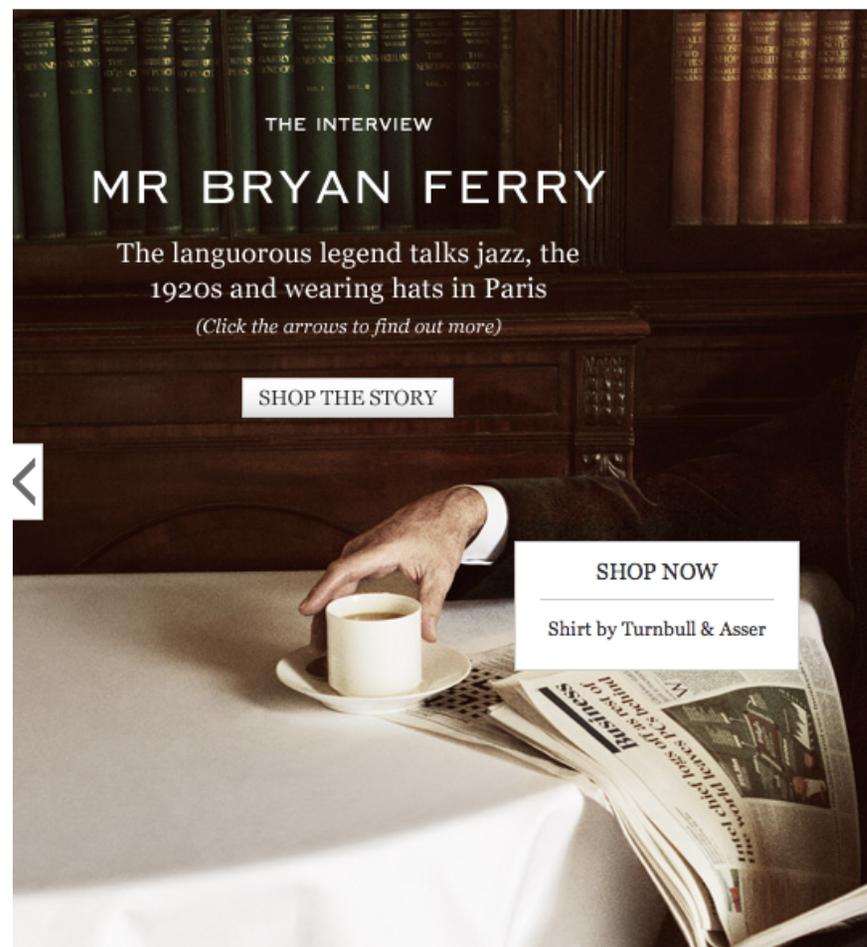
Great brand-owned magazines

One of the most inspiring branded magazines is the biannual **Acne Paper**, published by the Swedish fashion brand Acne since 2005. You can buy it for ten Euros at their boutiques. It will be gently wrapped in paper like an exclusive piece of

clothing. Its heavy pages contain contemporary art and photography, long-form writing and classic typography. It famously has no advertising, apart from a Givenchy ad on the back of the spring/summer issue, essentially a competitors' compliment. "There is a worrying increase in commercialisation of regular magazines," editor-in-chief Thomas Persson told me. "Money often controls what is interesting enough to present to the readers, and I don't necessarily think that this evolution leads to more fascinating magazines. Our way of communicating with the market is totally different than traditional advertising. Rather than saying 'buy this bag' we present wonderful stories and beautiful imagery – we produce something that inspires positive thoughts about Acne." I asked him to what extent *Acne Paper* upheld journalistic values. "*Acne Paper* was never about criticism in a journalistic sense," he replied. "We don't review things, we illuminate things that we find beautiful or fascinating and present this in a dignified and often quite serious way to our readers. Our journalistic principles would be to go in-depth in each story and to tell the truth." *Acne Paper* has 67,000 fans on Facebook, a number many brands and magazines would be jealous of.

A brand that links commerce and editorial content seamlessly is **Mr Porter**, a webshop for upmarket men's fashion blended

Screenshot of a story featured on Mr Porter, a clever combination of high-end magazine and webshop: www.mrporter.com, December 2012



with a weekly digital magazine about men's style. Jeremy Langmead, former editor-in-chief of *Esquire* magazine in the United Kingdom, leads the editorial team. Other contributors worked for media like *GQ* and *the International Herald Tribune*. A simple button accompanies a well-written

interview with film director Steve McQueen by Tom Shone, formerly the film critic of *the Sunday Times*: ‘shop this story’. If you like the film directors’ coat, you can purchase it with one click. Langmead explains the flow from reading the magazine to buying. “It’s a logical progression. We hope that if a customer sees a sweater or a boot they like from one of our features, they’re compelled enough to click through and buy it or add the item to their wish list.” He enjoys the freedom that working for a brand entails. “We have great independence at Mr Porter. Working for a print publication means that you are beholden to a myriad of advertisers, or a proprietor. We only feature the brands that we sell – and since we bought them, we obviously believe in and like them.” Developing the right tone of voice takes particular care. “The tone is meant to be gentlemanly, warm and friendly but not over familiar. Rather like a US newspaper, like *the New York Times*.” Mr Porter is subject to some mockery. Acclaimed fashion magazine

‘Nowness’ shows a world of cultural sophistication without pushing LVMH brands

Fantastic Man devoted a single sentence to Mr Porter under the heading ‘Copy cats’: ‘If *Fantastic Man* would throw itself of a cliff, would webshop Mr Porter follow?’

Two of the worlds most influential brands, luxury conglomerate LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy) and tech giant Google, have launched their own magazines. LVMH started **Nowness**, a daily online magazine that shows a world of cultural sophistication without explicitly pushing the brands in its portfolio. It commissions and showcases the work of emerging and established photographers, film directors, writers and designers. The understated character of *Nowness* might help to mute the flashy consumerist image that clings to brands like Louis Vuitton. To introduce a more subtle sense of luxury to the Asian luxury market, the site is also available in Chinese. *Nowness* prides itself on being editorially independent. “Unlike a commercial or advertising platform, *Nowness*’ primary objective is not to transform people into luxury consumers, but rather to enhance the cultural experience of our readers,” a spokesperson said. Last year, *Nowness* won a Webby award, the Oscar for the internet world. Google introduced a magazine called **Think Quarterly**, devoted to the digital future, in two flavours. A luxurious printed edition was sent to influential businesspeople, a remarkably analog move for an internet-based company. An online version offers access to the same articles for lesser souls.

Two-faced publishers

Publishers have rightfully sensed that they can extend their talent, network and expertise to service brands. Take **Vice**, one of today's media success stories. *Vice* started out as an underground countercultural magazine in Montreal and grew into an international media network lauded as 'the new MTV'. Its offerings succeed in resonating with the subculture commonly referred to as 'hipsters'. It appeals to the sensibilities of the young outsider and mixes 'news, nudity and nonsense'. In recent years, *Vice* pioneered a style earnestly called 'subjective journalism'. Courageous documentaries about North Korea, Gaza and Liberia proved *Vice's* journalistic merit. Its sister company Virtue helps brands like Intel to connect with its hard to reach audience. They succeeded in making the forgotten shoe brand Palladium Boots interesting again by sending the popular hip-hop producer Pharell Williams to Tokyo to shoot a documentary about post-Fukushima youth culture. This side of their business is not something they like to discuss. When asking to visit Virtue, the reply was simple. "We like to stay away from stories about blending journalism and advertising. It's a slippery slope."

Another company operating on the intersection of advertising and journalism reluctant to talk about its work is **Winkreative**.

This branding agency is owned by the same parent company as the influential lifestyle magazine *Monocle* and is housed in the same building. Winkreative's website, that proudly displays the cover of *Monocle's* latest issue, boasts about 'a quality journalistic approach', 'publishing heritage' and 'an international network of correspondents' that clients can benefit from. Without doubt, *Monocle* and Winkreative are tied-in in a very smart way, but neither is comfortable discussing how. Not many niche-magazines can sustain an international network of correspondents. *Monocle's* pages contain an undercurrent of branding that even its sophisticated readership will sometimes find hard to discern. The annual Quality of Life issue of *Monocle* contained a special supplement about Thailand, one of Winkreatives clients, with a layout and tone of voice strikingly similar to the rest of the magazine. The background colour and typeface were different and it showed a webaddress, but it had no disclaimer marking it as an advertorial. "The work has to speak for itself," Emily Smith, PR representative for *Monocle* and Winkreative, stated on behalf of *Monocle's* editor-in-chief Tyler Brûlé. Apparently, for companies with a publishing

Monocle has an undercurrent of branding that can be hard to discern

pedigree, being in the business of advertising is still considered somewhat shameful.

Caring for credibility

The journalistic standards of conventional media have been diluted for a long time, leading to scandals inflicting even the most highly regarded news organizations. Outrage over illegal phone tapping, plagiarism and unsubstantiated accusations have become part of the ordinary news cycle. This makes the matter of journalistic values ever more pressing. Ironically, brands move into journalism because they believe it will build more trust with their audience. If they handle journalistic

This time brands can't afford to cut corners

values as sloppy as some independent media have done recently, it's unlikely that they will attain the level of respectability they are looking for. The marriage of commerce and content has always been an uneasy one. This time,

brands can't afford to cut corners. Their venture into journalism will only be credible if they hold themselves to higher standards than most traditional titles did in the last decade. Brands and journalists ought to be vigilant. "Our job in advertising is to change perceptions of brands. If pseudo-journalism changes the perception of a brand more than the real thing, I would do my clients a disservice not to

recommend that to them," a content marketing strategist admitted.

For many journalists, branded journalism can be an attractive business opportunity. According to [Contently](#), a New York based web start-up matching brands and journalists, brands like Ford will offer up to three dollars a word, while news networks like CBS would only offer ten cents. Selling their talent for higher pay is a good thing for journalists as long as they safeguard their professional integrity. NGO's have discovered the advantages of producing 'journalism' as well. "We're a non-profit and we're moving into the media business," Carroll Bogert of Human Right Watch recently told Justin Ellis in [an article on the Nieman Lab website](#). "We consciously ape the style of media in our communication in order that what we produce looks for like journalism." The controversial 30 minute film Kony 2012, created by activist organization Invisible Children, gathered over a hundred million views online. It was styled like a documentary. The massive succes of Kony proves that people don't have time for a thirty second commercial, but do have time for a thirty minute story. This general statement is often made at [Story Worldwide](#), one of the world's leading content marketing agencies. But it's hard for any member of the public to determine whether such a story, however compelling, is

truthful, especially when it suggests a journalistic approach. What journalistic values, or what's left of them, should brands respect?

Journalistic values for brands

In their book *'The Elements of Journalism'*, esteemed journalists and academics Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel outline nine timeless journalistic principles:

1. journalism's first obligation is to the truth,
2. its first loyalty is to citizens,
3. its essence is a discipline of verification,
4. its practitioners must maintain independence from those they cover,
5. it must serve as an independent monitor of power,
6. it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise,
7. it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant,
8. it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional,
9. its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

After reading this list, it's impossible not to conclude that branded journalism is a clipped form of journalism. Would its first loyalty be to the citizens or to the brand? Does true

editorial independence exist in this field? And consider the discipline of verification. Brands wouldn't like a journalist to be nosier than they pay him to be. But then again, flicking through any glossy magazine will tell you that regular media don't tick all the boxes all the time either. A lot of the tension is eased when the stories produced for brands are about phenomena and people in the outside world and not about the company that commissions them. 'Don't talk about yourself' would be a good rule of thumb to minimize conflict with journalistic ethics. It offers journalists greater freedom and companies more peace of mind about reputational risks. Branded journalism can be stylish, useful and entertaining but can't be a substitute for the real thing. It obviously isn't likely to serve as a monitor of power. To the extent that branded journalism retains an investigative character it won't unveil matters of grave public importance. It will always present the simplified version of the truth, the cross section of reality, that the brand behind it wants you to see.

The Journalists Creed, written in 1914 by Walter Williams, founder of the journalism school at the University of Missouri, contains a helpful paragraph. 'I believe that advertising, news and editorial columns should alike serve the best interests of readers; that a single standard of helpful truth and cleanness should prevail for all; that the supreme test of good

journalism is the measure of its public service.' Clearly, the blend of journalism and advertising was an issue almost hundred years ago. Can we appraise branded journalism by the measure of its public service too? I can't see why not. If the audience cares about your message you have given the public something valueable. If they don't care, in this age, your message hasn't come across at all and therefore it won't have done your company any good. As branded journalism is gaining momentum as a marketing movement, it's sensible to pinpoint a few principles that brands and journalists should hold dear. **First of all, be truthful.** As a journalist, don't suppress the critical attitude that gives you the skill to uncover great stories. **Secondly, use a byline.** Show the world who made it and take responsibility for your work. If it is rewritten by a PR person, it troubles your conscience and you feel you can't support it anymore, choose to have it published without your name. Or don't have it published at all, because at that point, your work has become advertising. **Thirdly, as a brand, don't hide yourself.** Make sure the audience can't ever forget you made the content it enjoyed. Use a clearly visible brand name, logo or disclaimer to show you're behind it. With pride. After all, brands were invented as a hallmark of quality.

About the author

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