

ADVERTISING IMPACT ON THE MEDIA CONTENT – CASE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

One of the challenges faced by the Albanian media today is maintaining its independence in an environment in which the governmental or corporate advertising attempt (and in many cases succeed) to impose rules. Cracking of the “Chinese Wall” distinguishing the commercial from the media is just another form of the influence of advertising influence not only in traditional media but also to new ones. Media specialists consider sharing of content of the advertisements one of the main mechanisms guaranteeing editorial freedom and independence, which is very important not only for the media but also the development of society as a whole. Another problem in Albania involves lack of transparency on the data for advertising media market. No concerted efforts are observed on the side of the media industry neither to measure the audience nor to publish data on the advertising market. Market advertising problems are unknown and unexplained, in a situation lacking basic information upon which the “advertising cake” is logically divided. However, the fact that for most of the Albanian governmental and large corporations media advertising are the main source of income, shows how easy it can influence the editorial policies. This study focuses on the relationship among advertising and journalism; characteristics and impacts of these reports on the quality of journalism. In order to conclude this research, we utilized empirical data, media content analysis and interviews conducted with journalists and the most influential media editors in chiefs of media in the country.

Keywords: Advertisement, PR, advertorial, corporate, news

Introduction

This study discusses the way advertisements influence on the media product and content, with special emphasis placed on news. By analyzing the relationships between advertisements, PR and journalism, we aim to answer the question of how these relationships influence on the quality of information. Having a better insight into these relationships enables us to understand how media, as a main information supplier, has a direct or indirect influence on the political, economic and social developments of the country. In addition, the growing trend, the boom of hidden advertisements and the more sophisticated ones of the advertorial type in the media, was another motivation for research into this topic.

Nowadays the borders between journalism, advertising and PR are becoming increasingly vague. Hidden advertisements, advertorial, infomercial and opinion infomercials articles are commonly found in the media. A study conducted by Pew Research Center showed that the category of sponsored advertisements in general and the advertorial in particular, are undergoing a considerable increase, coming third on the list of the six main trends of journalism for 2012.

The question normally arises of what makes these kinds of contents so successful? Defined as advertisement presented in the form of an editorial, the advertorial (advertising + editorial), unlike traditional advertisements (all promotional messages are made by an identified sponsor, Belch and Belch, 2004) looks like a common newspaper article and, as a result, the information presented draws greater attention and is better memorized than the other commercial messages (Cameron, G.T., and Curtin, P.A., 1995). Moreover, the advertorial is perceived by readers as more reliable than an ordinary advertisement.

Researchers have varying attitudes to the impact and importance of advertorials for the reader-consumer and the quality of journalism. Glen Cameron and Patricia Curtin consider the weakening of borders between the editorial and commercial content as pollution of information. This does not apply solely to press or traditional media. A number of experts believe that the border between content and publicity on the Web will diminish and its protection risks to be more difficult than before; a number of advertisement payers should co-produce with the media Web contents. The critics of advertorials claim that it has a negative effect on the objectivity of media; it is way of deceiving readers, it can bring about the unethical promotion of individuals, organizations and politicians in particular, it is used to harm the image of opponents, it makes media clearly oriented towards business, etc. On the other hand, Jim Busch argues that the advertorial is a win-win-win situation as it offers unique advantages to the reader (consumer), advertiser and the publisher. Readers (consumers) regard advertorials as ‘news you can

use” as they provide information useful to decision-making and they are also more interesting than typical advertisements. For advertisers the advertorial is a powerful tool; it gives business the chance to introduce itself and messages addressed to consumers become more memorable due to the narrative format. Since advertorials are considered more reliable by the reader-consumers, its utilization is more important for services businesses or newly started businesses which need to create their reputation in order to attract a great number of customers. The advertorial is profitable for the publisher as the definition itself means a paid advertisement.

For the advertorial to exert influence on the media and the consumer, it must be of high quality, i.e. it must be created by professionals. The same goes for the relationship between media and PR industry; the more powerful and professional the latter, the greater the influence. Media is the main channel for a great number of PR industry messages while this industry is one of the main suppliers of media with free of charge information. According to journalism professor S.Russ-Mohl, PR determines to a great extent the content of the media, more than media politicians, advertisement people and media owners themselves.

The interdependency and complexity of the relationships PR-Media-Advertisement is harder to understand by an ordinary reader or listener than experts of the field. Since media is the main supplier of information, the study of its influence on society would enable the audience to view the news, advertisement and PR from a new and critical perspective. This becomes necessary at a time when modern theories of information consider information a public asset (good). ‘There cannot be a real and meaningful participation in democratic processes without informed and knowledgeable participants’ - Nobel laureate J. Stiglitz says, while an independent media that reduces the natural asymmetry of information is a requirement for being well-informed.

The legal and ethical aspect

The division of media content from advertisements remains one of the main mechanisms of guaranteeing editorial freedom and independence, both being important not only for the development of media but also of the society as a whole. The existence and implementation of a legal framework directly affects the quality of media, which is closely related to other social phenomena.

The law (no. 97/2013) on audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania mentions the term hidden advertisement in addition to other forms of advertising, but it does not specify its significance. Article 43, point 1 states: Advertisements and direct sale must be distinct and different from other content under editorial responsibility and they must be differentiated

from the rest of program content, including cases when they can be broadcast simultaneously, either visually and/or audio and/or in terms of their screen space division. Article 45, point 4 stipulates that news and information programs connected with politics cannot be sponsored. The absence of a definition for hidden advertisements may bring about abuse in the media. On the other hand, the Code of Conduct for journalists, amended in 2006, first treated the issue of separating editorial content from advertisements and media marketing in general, as well as editorial independence. For example, the Code stipulates that the editorial staff shall prevent personal, political or financial motivation from influencing on their accurate and unbiased reporting. Neither media owners nor journalists are entitled to regard the news as their own property and use it for personal gain. Editorial content must be clearly distinguished from marketing, publicity or sponsored materials. However, the Albanian media reality offers a highly different picture. 'Private media owners determine the editorial content of their media and use it to their interests, which are frequently connected with politics. The majority of media owners have other business interests in addition to their media, while the latter acts as a tool to serve their other businesses. It has to be pointed out that there have been no cases when the relevant authorities have taken any measures in cases when media content and advertisements have merged into one.

The relationship between advertisements, pr and news in albanian media

From the legal point of view the reader or viewer must distinguish a paid content from an editorial, the simplest way being through the advertorial labeling.

In both foreign and Albanian media there are numerous cases when advertorials 'are sold' as ordinary newspaper articles. The sole difference is that in the foreign press advertorials are more refined and written in a more professional way, thus being more difficult for the reader to identify, whereas in the Albanian media advertorials are still of poor quality, which means that they do not produce the expected results. For example, in Shekulli newspaper (among others) the announcement on e-banking service provided by a bank is placed in the rubric Thellë besides other pieces of information, while in some other newspapers the same announcement is found on advertising pages. Similarly, if we analyze the content of the articles found in the rubric Breaking Views of Shqip newspaper, we observe that elements of advertisements are merged with them. According to the editor-in-chief of this newspaper, Kamber Velaj, Breaking views is ordered news, bearing more resemblance to advertisements, and this has been a marketing decision. For the readers, the articles of this rubric are the same as

those in other rubrics. This is one aspect of the advertisement-news relationship. Business journalists frequently find it difficult to make the difference between news and advertisements. The fear on the part of the journalist of making an ‘unintentional’ advertisement makes the journalist avoid business reporting, thus moving towards self-censorship.

The annual report of Freedom House published in October 2013 states that Albanian media generally operates on the financial support of media owners and very little from big advertisers. It has to be underlined that despite the relative diversity of private media funding, big advertisers are very import for the survival of these media and consequently they are able to influence on the editorial policy of the media. In Albania the advertising market is dominated by big telecommunication companies while governmental advertisements constitute only a small share of the market. Since telecommunication companies are among the major funders of the media, there is hardly any critical reporting on mobile communication companies. In an investigative article of BIRN, journalist Gjergj Erebara is reported saying that a few big companies, which enable the survival of televisions and newspapers, totally dominate the advertising market. According to Erebara, some of these companies are producing advertisements with the sole intention of silencing the media and they use the advertising budget as a mechanism of pressure on the media. Corporate pressure in editorial offices is so high that journalists hardly ever produce critical news of big business (i.e. big advertisers). Nevertheless, there are cases when the media initiates a number of attacks against various companies or businesses intended to attract advertisements.

Another factor which has affected media industry both in Albania and abroad, especially in the last decade, is the increase in internet advertising. The constant development of internet has had a considerable effect on the advertising market in the 21st century. To a certain degree, advertising companies have gained from digitalization and the possibility to have greater access to people as they are able to produce advertisements of a lower cost, more specialized and capable of addressing specific segments of the market. According to author Gillian Doyle (Doyle, 2013) the tendency to increase the number of internet advertisements and move from conventional to online media does not reflect only the need to adapt with the change of audience behavior, but it also reflects the fact that internet is regarded as a more effective media than the newspaper or radio. However, the author states that the decrease in advertising investment, with such an investment used to create media content by media industry, is not welcome from the news industry perspective. In addition, any contraction of sources used for media content production has an impact on society. Evans argues that because internet is so efficient at matching buyers and sellers, an economically

beneficial aspect of online advertising is that “society may not need to invest as much in magazines, newspapers, and other media whose main purpose is aggregating the right eyeballs for advertisers” (Evans, 2009: 43). In other words, it is to be welcomed if fewer resources are tied up unnecessarily in content production. However, author Doyle continues, it is highly questionable whether the function of media which society values most is, as quoted above, “aggregating the right eyeballs for advertisers”. As long as audiences and public at large value the presence of a rich range of professionally crafted media content, decrease in media content production will have harmful effects.

Moreover, the media financial crisis, accompanied at worst by redundancies of journalists in newsrooms and at best by not adding staff, as well as problems with timely payment of journalists, they have all have caused a greater dependence of journalists on source materials of PR. This has become evident by the increasing employment of such terms as publicity journalism or PR journalism. The great quantity of news derived from public relations is not an Albanian phenomenon but it has drawn considerable attention worldwide. The report on PR influence on media shows that a total of 86% of news in monitored newspapers and televisions (newspapers Panorama, Shekulli, Shqip; TVSH, Tv Klan, Top Channel) derive from PR activities. Political news show a greater presence of PR compared with economic or social news (see chart no.1). If we compare newspapers with televisions, the latter show a greater presence of PR. The great influence of PR on news is regarded as a serious threat by media managers themselves. ‘From news producers, televisions are transforming into broadcasters of ready-made television productions prepared in the offices of political parties or institutions...television journalism is being seriously threatened by reports prepared in political party headquarters and publicity journalism.

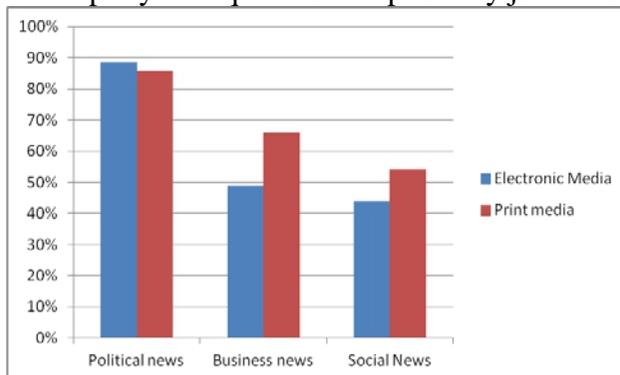


Chart 1: Presence of PR in political, economic and social sectors (print versus electronic media)

As shown in chart no. 2, the greatest part of news in the media is either based on PR sources or is a mere reproduction of press releases. The editor-in-chief of information department at Top Channel, M. Kikia, states that traditional press conferences have been replaced by monologues of MPs and spokespersons in front of cameras without journalists. We frequently broadcast a number of political declarations even when we are aware of the fact that they are not true but it has to be done for political balance. Another feature is the increase in the number of one-source news. Political news frequently originates from the postings of politicians on social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter.

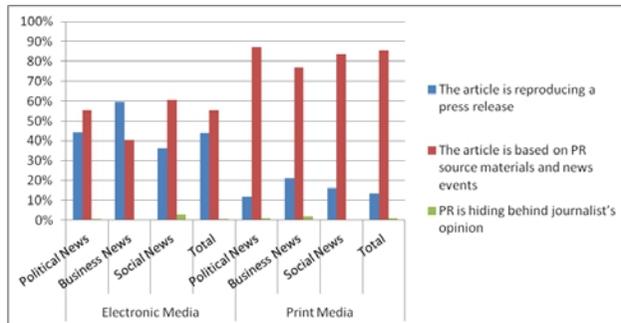


Chart 2: PR news according to type of PR

Meanwhile, the high presence of PR combined with developments in information technology has produced uniformity in the media. It is the same news and sources in each television channel or newspaper and the difference lies in the professionalism of the journalist, who, nevertheless, has to be in conformity with the editorial policy.

Conclusion

Advertisements are one of the main sources of income for the media. In Albania the advertising market is dominated by big telecommunication companies while governmental advertisements have a small share of the market. Media is also financially supported by the owners, who use a part of the income from their other businesses for the media they own. It has to be highlighted that despite the relative diversity of private media funding, big advertisers are very important for the survival of these media and they are consequently able to influence on the editorial policy of the media. This is shown by the absence of critical reporting on big corporations, also accompanied by a sort of self-censorship of journalists. Nevertheless, there may be cases when the media initiates a number of attacks against various companies or businesses intended to attract advertisements.

Corporate pressure through advertising, application of hidden advertisements, advertorials and the overwhelming presence of PR in the news speak of a deterioration of professionalism in Albanian journalism.

The growing trend of transferring advertisements from the traditional media to the internet, i.e. the decrease in investment which would be used to produce media content by the media industry, is not positive from the news industry perspective. In addition, any contraction of sources used for media content production has an impact on society.

Media financial crisis, accompanied by redundancies of journalists in editorial offices and the strengthening of PR industry have caused a greater dependence of journalists on source materials of PR, resulting in news uniformity. In the Albanian media the presence of PR is greater in the electronic media (TV) than in the print media (newspapers), while in terms of sectors the effect is greater on political sector news than economic or social news. Politics and numerous political institutions want to use media as a tool of advertising. In the state of the so-called info-obesity, there is a greater amount but lower quality of news.

News is a co-production of journalism and PR, constituting what can be called the fourth and fifth estates (Baistow 1985, cited from Zeith 2010), with the latter providing an extended contribution. This can be confirmed by the great quantity of news originating from public relations offices. This may spark dissatisfaction among journalists, who are losing their exclusive jurisdiction over their domain (Abbot, 1988), which they should endeavour to regain.

The relationships between advertisements, PR and media are mainly of an interdependent character and as such they affect the quality of media products.

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