Public Relations Review 42 (2016) 395–401

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

Discussion

Public relations and the practice of paid content: Practical, theoretical propositions and ethical implications

Tamar Lahav*, Dorit Zimand-Sheiner

Ariel University, School of Communication and the Institute for New Media, Society and politics, Kyriat Hamada, Ariel 40700, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 January 2016
Accepted 14 February 2016
Available online 4 March 2016

Keywords:
Content marketing
Public relations
Ethics
Israel
Paid digital content

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relatively new marketing phenomenon of embedded paid content. However, the reality is that Israeli public relations (PR) practitioners are engaged in promotion of paid digital content marketing (DCM) without full disclosure or transparency on various internet sites. Three major questions are therefore raised and discussed: (a) Does payment for content – which entails PR practitioners control over content – demand a review of PR practice definitions? (b) Does PR paid DCM makes "give-and-take relationships" with journalists and the "two-way symmetric model" redundant in digital channels? (c) What are the ethical implications of using paid DCM without full disclosure for PR practitioners and brand stakeholders? We suggest that definitions of PR should be reviewed in light of using undisclosed paid DCM. Moreover, we claim that the penetration of PR into buying digital media, and thus purchasing control in the same way as advertising, contributes to an ambiguous line between PR and advertising. From an ethical perspective, when paid DCM is embedded into our main digital information channels, often hiding commercial messages, readers may be confused between editorial and paid content generated by marketers. This confusion may well lead to a decline in the trustworthiness of media organizations and business organizations using this practice.

1. Introduction

In the second decade of the 21st century Israeli public relations (PR) practitioners are engaged in promotion of paid digital content marketing (i.e., paid DCM), without full disclosure, on major and niche Internet sites. Content marketing is relatively new to the internet, but the practice of paid brand promotion on commercial television programs (such as product/brand placement and presenting people as experts in various fields) is "old news.T̈he Israeli Second Authority for Television and Radio Law prohibits integration of paid content without endorser disclosure. Yet, in Israel in 2015, there is no regulation of undisclosed paid DCM.

Whether by brand choice or as a result of commercial media that enables and facilitates the practice of sponsored content, the practice of embedded paid content (i.e., marketing content embedded in media content without endorser disclosure) is spreading and expanding into digital media. Paid DCM is no longer under the exclusive control of advertising agencies, and is now exploited by PR practitioners. Thus far, there has been no academic discussion of the implications of this relatively new practice on PR definitions, theories, and ethics.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: tamarla@ariel.ac.il (T. Lahav).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.02.003
0363-8111/

The current article has four objectives:

1. Discussing the definitions of PR practice in light of the new embedded paid content phenomenon.
2. Confirming the change in media relations influenced by embedded DCM practice.
3. Deliberating on the two-way symmetric model as the new PR practice does not require fostering good relationships between organizations and its stakeholders.
4. Presenting the ethical implications of the relatively new practice of embedded DCM for PR practitioners and organization stakeholders.

In order to discuss the above issues, we will begin by providing an overview of digital paid content, as well as an abbreviated summary of the technological changes and digital media consumption changes that prompted this new PR practice. Secondly, we will present previous definitions of PR, marketing PR, and advertising, mainly focusing on the issues of control over content in order to raise the subject of the need for reviewing definitions of PR practice and theories. Finally, we will discuss the ethical implications of embedded paid DCM for PR.

2. Paid content profile

The origins of paid DCM, that is, the paid integration of commercial content regarding brands into digital media content, can be traced to non-digital media such as TV, movies, and print (Ford, 1993). Indeed, paid content has many names: Russell and Belch (2005) use the term *brand placement* for the integration of a brand into entertainment activities, mainly TV and movies, in order to achieve marketing goals. Hackley, Tiwsakul, and Preuss (2008) define *product placement* as a form of marketing communication integrated into entertainment content, where the identity of the marketer, his intentions, and brand message are hidden from the viewer.

PQ Media (2005) distinguishes between *product placement* and *product integration.* The former indicates the integration of a product into the media (mostly TV and movies) in a manner leading to the product's visibility and salience, although it is not the focus of the scene or story. The latter term indicates integration of a product into the media in a way that highlights the product as a major feature of the plot or even as an element moving the plot forward. This is also called *plot placement* (Russell, 1998). From another perspective, DCM can be regarded as the digital version of *advertorials* traditionally designed for the printed press. Advertorials are 'paid advertisements written in the news story format' (Black & Bryant, 1995) and are also known as *infomercials* in broadcast media. Although *advertorials* and *infomercials* are marked by the media and explicitly identified as paid content (i.e., advertisements), they simulate non-marketing editorial content in their writing style and design. Paid DCM is also referred to as *native advertising*, which Native Age Report (2013) defined as "sponsored content, which is relevant to the consumer experience, which is not interruptive and which looks and feels similar to its editorial environment."

DCM can be divided into three types: (a) paid DCM is paid and controlled marketing content distributed and embedded in the digital media content, also referred to as *native advertising*; (b) owned DCM is the marketer's content presented in the organization's digital properties, such as company websites, blogs, or Facebook pages and is controlled by the marketer; and (c) earned DCM is not controlled or bought by the marketer, but is the publicity given to the brand by the media, also referred to as publicity or PR. Our discussion will focus mainly on the transition in PR practice from earned DCM to paid DCM. Earned publicity was once exclusively generated through PR, but now in the digital era it is also the result of consumer and blogger experience in the digital ecosystem (Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Paid publicity (i.e., buying articles, blogs, and specialists recommendations on websites) is a relatively new practice that is slowly supplanting earned publicity.

3. Technological changes and its impact on PR practice

The practice of paid DCM received a major boost due to technological innovations such as personal video recorders (PVRs), video-on-demand (VOD), and ad-blocking applications which allow TV viewers and internet surfers to avoid advertisement content. The loss of ad exposure resulted in troubling implications for the marketing communications industry (Lowrey, Shrum, & McCarty, 2005). Moreover, the increased use and consumption of digital content shifted public media consumption behaviors from traditional passive waiting for content to be delivered to being in control over content they want to receive by actively seeking out desired content through search engines, recommendations, news feeds, niche sites, and more (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009; Foote, 2005). This transformation pressured content producers to create accessible content across an array of platforms and devices (such as tablets and smartphones), formatted and tagged for maximum searchability (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). Kliatchko (2008) claimed that marketing communications planners would be compelled to handle concerns related to content creation such as suitability, propriety, decency, consistency of consumer-created content with the brand vision, and trustworthiness of content. Indeed, marketers have adopted digital technologies including brand placement in social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Calvert, 2008; Moore, 2004), and adopted product integration blurring the lines between entertainment and promotion (Shrum, 2004). These new practices are essentially different from traditional forms of advertising, and are frequently embedded within program or editorial content, resulting in effacing the boundaries between advertising, entertainment, and information (Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005; Calvert, 2008). These