**Reuters**

**And now, a word against our sponsor**

March 8, 2013 @ 9:36 pm

By Jack Shafer

The Washington Post‘swebsite joined the sponsored-content stampede early this week with the introduction of its[BrandConnect](http://www.washingtonpost.com/community-relations/the-washington-post-launches-brandconnect-for-marketers-available-on-wp-homepage/2013/03/05/88a3c056-859e-11e2-999e-5f8e0410cb9d_story.html) [2] Web product, making it the first major U.S. newspaper to embrace sponsored content, according to[Digiday](http://www.digiday.com/publishers/washington-post-tries-sponsored-posts/) [3]. Other high-profile Web publishers selling sponsored content include[Gawker](http://advertising.gawker.com/sponsoredposts/) [4],[Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/sponsored-content/) [5],[Business Insider](http://www.businessinsider.com/sponsored-video-space-by-logitech-2012-11) [6],[Forbes](http://www.forbesmedia.com/re-arch.html) [7],[BuzzFeed](http://www.buzzfeed.com/pillsbury/super-bowl-snacks-across-the-usa) [8],[Slate](http://www.slatev.com/channel/adobe/) [9],[Cheezburger](http://www.digiday.com/publishers/why-publishers-bet-on-sponsored-posts/) [10],[Techmeme](http://www.techmeme.com/sponsor) [11] and [The Atlantic](http://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/ibm-power-data/archive/2012/08/why-social-media-matters-for-your-business/260977/) [12]. Meanwhile, Fortune magazine is creating Fortune-branded content “for marketers to distribute on their own platforms,” AdWeek[reports](http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/fortune-writes-articles-exclusively-advertisers-147662) [13].

Also known as native advertising, the current wave of sponsored content on the Web can resemble the advertorial sections you’re familiar with — the ponderous Russia Beyond the Headlinesand China Dailypages in the print editions of the Postand the New York Times, whichnobody reads, and those sections in glossy magazines you automatically skip. Or, it can look remarkably like the content the site already produces. BuzzFeed has created pages for[Virgin Mobile](http://www.buzzfeed.com/virginmobilelive) [14],[Pillsbury](http://www.buzzfeed.com/pillsbury/super-bowl-snacks-across-the-usa) [8], Coca-Cola,[Dell](http://www.buzzfeed.com/dell/the-most-embarrassing-places-to-lose-your-laptop) [15], the[Nevada Commission on Tourism](http://www.buzzfeed.com/nevada) [16] and[General E](http://www.buzzfeed.com/thegeshow) [17]lectric that could pass for its standard pages as they use jokes to “subtly weave in the values of the brand,” as the Wall Street Journal[reported](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443493304578034732867593920.html) [18] last October. BuzzFeed sponsored content costs about $20,000 for five or six “articles,” reports[Digiday](http://www.digiday.com/publishers/what-online-ads-really-cost/) [19].

If, as George Orwell[once](http://bit.ly/TOuTTr) [20] put it, “The public are swine; advertising is the rattling of a stick inside a swill-bucket,” then sponsored content is the meal so wretched that even pigs will reject unless sugar-frosted. The average sponsored-content page pits the advertiser against the publisher; the former attempts to make his copy and art look as much like conventional news or feature copy as powerfully as the latter pushes back as hard as he can to preserve “editorial integrity” without forfeiting the maximum fee. It’s common for both sides to come away from the transaction feeling soiled and swindled, but, hey, that’s the nature of most advertising.

The Wall Street Journal[reports](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443493304578034732867593920.html) [18] that an estimated $1.56 billion worth of BuzzFeed-style sponsorships will be sold this year, so the rush to created sponsored content is not a fool’s errand. But after stuffing myself with every example of sponsored content I could find this morning, I found myself nodding in agreement with All Things D reporter Peter Kafka, who recently wrote a[column](http://allthingsd.com/20130115/sponsor-content-doesnt-fool-anyone-except-advertisers/)[21] titled ” ‘Sponsor Content’ Doesn’t Fool Anyone Except Advertisers.” The[first](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/brand-connect/wp/2013/03/01/mobile-revving-up-rural-economies/) [22] example of BrandConnect in the Post— “Mobile Revving Up Rural Economies” — couldn’t possibly have hoodwinked the client, wireless trade association CTIA or anybody else. You’d have to be an idiot to mistake it for a Poststory, or for something you need to read. Unlike the BuzzFeed sponsored content, the CTIA sponsored content contains no sugar. It’s a heaping helping of salt that’s been salt-cured.

You can smell the desperation when nosing about in sponsored content. Publishers know that banner advertising doesn’t work for their clients — as theJournal[notes](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443493304578034732867593920.html) [18], banner-ads’ share of Web advertising is shrinking — and they must devise new advertising forms to attract ad revenue.

But as [The Atlantic](http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/01/15/when-advertorial-bites-back/) [23][[r3]](#_msocom_3) [24]  learned in January after running a[Scientology ad](http://www.anonmgur.com/up/9af0dfa26c7bed924a24ef50350d0db9.png) [25] that looked too much like regular Atlantic fare, sponsored pages carry a potential downside that’s greater than traditional “proximity advertising.” Proximity ads place commercial messages next to editorial copy, but they’re boxed and printed in such a fashion (non-editorial typefaces, for example) to reduce the chance that readers will confuse ads with news. It’s equally important to advertising-supported journalism that the news not be confused with the ads that run nearby, a point Benjamin Franklin made in his advertising manifesto in his 1731 “[Apology for Printers](http://www.jprof.com/history/franklin-apologia.html) [26].” Franklin held — and most publishers continue to hold — that the controversy raised in news stories is 1) desirable, 2) should not be held against advertisers and 3) that the content of advertisement should not automatically be held against the newspaper publishing them.

When Web publishers deliberately blur the visual and textual divide that separates editorial from advertising, as The Atlanticdid, they force readers to judge whether a page is news/opinion or a commercial advertisement. But they’re not confused; it’s the publisher and the advertiser who are confused. The publishers and advertisers have polluted their own tradition by erasing the traditional line. Suddenly, it’s completely reasonable for readers to blame controversial news stories directly on advertisers and blame controversial advertisements directly on reporters and editors, because publishers and advertisers have essentially merged operations. Such calamities injure both publisher and advertiser, even already controversial advertisers like Scientology. (In TheAtlantic‘s defense, it should be noted that it ultimately[conceded](https://www.magnetmail.net/actions/email_web_version.cfm?recipient_id=699462885&message_id=2459857&user_id=NJG_Atlan&group_id=0&jobid=12656579) [27] that it “screwed up” the presentation of its advertisers message and promised to do better in the future.)

The Atlanticdebacle hasn’t stilled the enthusiasm of Web publishers for sponsored content. Lewis DVorkin of Forbes, an early promulgator of sponsored content,[continues](http://www.forbes.com/sites/lewisdvorkin/2013/02/04/inside-forbes-before-it-was-called-native-advertising-a-team-in-a-box-had-an-idea/) [28] to bang his drum for it. He claims 20 partners ([SAP](http://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2013/03/08/the-democratization-of-expertise-is-house-of-cards-a-more-resilient-business-model/) [29],[UPS](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ups/2013/02/13/how-small-businesses-can-avoid-mishaps-this-valentines-day-and-every-holiday/) [30],[Harris Bank](http://www.forbes.com/sites/bmoharrisbank/2013/03/01/the-most-disruptive-marketing-trends-of-2013/) [31], et al.) forForbes‘s“BrandVoice.” It’s enough to make you barricade yourself behind Orwell’s collected works when DVorkin approvingly quotes his chief revenue officer’s quip about BrandVoice: “It’s not an ad, it’s thought leadership.”

No, Lewis. If money moved from the client’s hand to that of Forbes, and Forbesposted the client’s copy, it’s an ad.

What Web publishers fear most, I guess, is that as the banner-ad revenue fades and Web ad-rates fall, they must board the sponsored content express now, before advertisers will start to disintermediate them by produce their own entertaining, branded content, as[BMW](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1dYv_gKTA8) [32],[McDonald’s](http://mcworld.happymeal.com/en_US/) [33] and Volkswagen have. This terror of being left behind, I surmise, is what drove TheAtlanticinto posting its lampoonable Scientology advertorial.

I may be an editorial-advertising radical, but I’m not an absolutist. I’ve never feared advertising that advertises itself as advertising. I’m prepared to accept that an advertiser could produce content worthy of my time, though I’ve yet to witness that miracle. I don’t even fear “thought leadership,” as long as the wallet financing the composition and promulgation of the thoughts can be identified, as was the case when Herb Schmertz, Mobil Oil’s vice-president for public affairs, routinely published his company’s “[low-key advocacy ads](http://books.google.com/books?id=hOcCAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA47&ots=Hu6AlabcUL&dq=herb%20schmertz%20mobil%20oil%20new%20york%20times&pg=PA49#v=onepage&q=times&f=false) [34]” on the New York Timesop-ed page beginning in the early 1970s. Just make sure I can see the line.

As a great wag once said, a newspaper is nothing but an advertisement with a news story printed on the back. That arrangement has worked well for American publishers, readers and advertisers for two centuries. But can it work if you have to guess which side contains the ad?

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Who the hell was the wag who said, “A newspaper is nothing but an advertisement with a news story printed on the back”? I know I read it somewhere but can’t remember. [Addendum: 5:35 p.m.Columbia Journalism Reviewintern[*@petersterne*](http://www.twitter.com/petersterne)[35]tracked down the original quotation, which is from H.G. Wells. He[*wrote*](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33889/33889-h/33889-h.htm)[36], "Modern newspapers have been described, not altogether inaptly, as sheets of advertisements with news and discussions printed on the back."] Send the answer to Shafer.Reuters@gmail.com [37]. My[Twitter](http://twitter.com/#%21/jackshafer) [38] feed contains only advertisements for myself. (Norman Mailer said that.) Sign up for email[notifications](http://eepurl.com/gB_ov) [39] of new Shafer columns (and other occasional announcements). Subscribe to this[RSS feed](http://feeds.reuters.com/reuters/blogs/jackshafer) [40] for new Shafer columns.

 [2] BrandConnect: http://www.washingtonpost.com/community-relations/the-washington-post-launches-brandconnect-for-marketers-available-on-wp-homepage/2013/03/05/88a3c056-859e-11e2-999e-5f8e0410cb9d\_story.html

[3] Digiday: http://www.digiday.com/publishers/washington-post-tries-sponsored-posts/

[4] Gawker: http://advertising.gawker.com/sponsoredposts/

[5] Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/sponsored-content/

[6] Business Insider: http://www.businessinsider.com/sponsored-video-space-by-logitech-2012-11

[7] Forbes: http://www.forbesmedia.com/re-arch.html

[8] BuzzFeed: http://www.buzzfeed.com/pillsbury/super-bowl-snacks-across-the-usa

[9] Slate: http://www.slatev.com/channel/adobe/

[10] Cheezburger: http://www.digiday.com/publishers/why-publishers-bet-on-sponsored-posts/

[11] Techmeme: http://www.techmeme.com/sponsor

[12] The Atlantic: http://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/ibm-power-data/archive/2012/08/why-social-media-matters-for-your-business/260977/

[13] reports: http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/fortune-writes-articles-exclusively-advertisers-147662

[14] Virgin Mobile: http://www.buzzfeed.com/virginmobilelive

[15] Dell: http://www.buzzfeed.com/dell/the-most-embarrassing-places-to-lose-your-laptop

[16] Nevada Commission on Tourism: http://www.buzzfeed.com/nevada

[17] General E: http://www.buzzfeed.com/thegeshow

[18] reported: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443493304578034732867593920.html

[19] Digiday: http://www.digiday.com/publishers/what-online-ads-really-cost/

[20] once: http://bit.ly/TOuTTr

[21] column: http://allthingsd.com/20130115/sponsor-content-doesnt-fool-anyone-except-advertisers/

[22] first: http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/brand-connect/wp/2013/03/01/mobile-revving-up-rural-economies/

[23] The Atlantic: http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/01/15/when-advertorial-bites-back/

[24] [r3]: #\_msocom\_3

[25] Scientology ad: http://www.anonmgur.com/up/9af0dfa26c7bed924a24ef50350d0db9.png

[26] Apology for Printers: http://www.jprof.com/history/franklin-apologia.html

[27]conceded: https://www.magnetmail.net/actions/email\_web\_version.cfm?recipient\_id=699462885&message\_id=2459857&user\_id=NJG\_Atlan&group\_id=0&jobid=12656579

[28] continues: http://www.forbes.com/sites/lewisdvorkin/2013/02/04/inside-forbes-before-it-was-called-native-advertising-a-team-in-a-box-had-an-idea/

[29] SAP: http://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2013/03/08/the-democratization-of-expertise-is-house-of-cards-a-more-resilient-business-model/

[30] UPS: http://www.forbes.com/sites/ups/2013/02/13/how-small-businesses-can-avoid-mishaps-this-valentines-day-and-every-holiday/

[31] Harris Bank: http://www.forbes.com/sites/bmoharrisbank/2013/03/01/the-most-disruptive-marketing-trends-of-2013/

[32] BMW: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1dYv\_gKTA8

[33] McDonald’s: http://mcworld.happymeal.com/en\_US/

[34] low-key advocacy ads: http://books.google.com/books?id=hOcCAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA47&ots=Hu6AlabcUL&dq=herb%20schmertz%20mobil%20oil%20new%20york%20times&pg=PA49#v=onepage&q=times&f=false

[35] @petersterne: http://www.twitter.com/petersterne

[36] wrote: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33889/33889-h/33889-h.htm

[37] Shafer.Reuters@gmail.com: mailto:Shafer.Reuters@gmail.com

[38] Twitter: http://twitter.com/#%21/jackshafer

[39] notifications: http://eepurl.com/gB\_ov

[40] RSS feed: http://feeds.reuters.com/reuters/blogs/jackshafer