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news BY ERIN ROKITA

Stealth Advertising

Commercial influence on TV news

Commercial interests have an ever-increasing influence on the nation's TV news reporting, according to a recent study published by UO professors Jim Upshaw and David Koranda and doctoral candidate Gennadiy Chernov. Their work brings attention to the current state of journalistic integrity in television media.

The study revealed that 90 percent of 294 newscasts monitored over four months in 2004 incorporated at least one instance per newscast of "stealth advertising" or "commercial messages outside regular commercial breaks." Their study drew on a selection of nationwide early-evening newscasts. The random sample didn't select Oregon stations for inclusion.

Commercial influence on TV news has a well-documented history.

The Center for Media Democracy (CMD) completed one of the most extensive studies of TV newscasts in April 2006. The study looked at TV newsrooms' use of video news releases (VNRs) over a four month period. The CMD describes VNRs as "fake news" and defines them as "segments designed to be indistinguishable" from locally produced news reports. They are video press releases funded by commercial or government agencies to promote products and services or shape public opinion.

The scandal with VNRs erupted in 2005 when *New York Times* reporters uncovered the federal government's production of prepackaged news reports to push, among other things, an explicit political agenda. They revealed how over 20 federal agencies, including the Departments of Defense and Agriculture and the Census Bureau, made hundreds of VNRs that eventually appeared on stations nationwide without clear disclosure of the source of the material.

The CMD tracked 36 VNRs and found that 77 TV stations aired prepackaged news stories to viewers a total of 98 times. The CMD's study indicated that TV stations intentionally doctored footage to make reports appear original but, one-third of the time, also showed VNRs completely unaltered.

As part of the study, the CMD caught two Portland area stations airing VNRs without full disclosure to viewers. KPTV-12, a FOX affiliate, aired a VNR titled "Sleep is the New Sex," promoting the natural sleep aid product "Rescue Sleep." CBS affiliate KOIN-6 showed part of a VNR titled "A New Kind of Kidnapping" about problems like hacking and identity theft, which was made by the software company Computer Associates to promote its product, Internet Security Suite.

Eugene stations did not air the VNRs tracked in the CMD study.

Commercially influenced newscasts — those that promote products or businesses — "are more prevalent in small television markets," UO professor Upshaw said. He explained that larger markets have more resources and technology at their command.

According to the UO study, commercial time in newscasts accounts for roughly 40 percent of a station's revenue. Findings also reveal

that many news directors feel "pressured to run positive stories on advertisers or kill negative ones."

Stations in Eugene, which are considered small-market stations, said they do not advertise either through product placement or promotional newscasts.

Koranda noted that commercially influenced newscasts hurt the integrity of both news coverage and advertisers. "You end up with

fewer people watching the news — looking for other sources — but it also hurts the advertiser because they've lost that format to advertise cleanly," he said. "People are less informed in a number of ways."

Cambra Woods, vice president of KMTR-16,

said it's challenging to create daily newscasts with limited resources. "It's getting harder and harder for small market TV stations to support works and operations," she said. Sometimes, she said, although the station prefers to shoot its own video and interviews, KMTR airs footage provided by NBC or other sources. In this case, she said it's the station's "job to make sure viewers know where videos come from."

These "other sources" are readily available VNRs, which present a tempting alternative to shooting original footage. But VNRs often come with strong commercial or governmental endorsement messages.

The issue then, as Deana Reece of KVAL-13 said, "is to be on the lookout for someone who has an agenda," and "as any good journalist would, check for accuracy and look for the other side."

Syd Bates, assignment manager for ABC's local affiliate KEZI-9, said their station broadcasts sponsored spots during news programs. He indicated the weekly garden tips segment as an example. The roughly 90-second to three minute gardening piece airs during the news and is sponsored by different local companies. Other KEZI employees didn't return calls.

Mark Hirsh, founder of the VNR company MediaHitman, said that VNRs are as legitimate a source of news as that gathered by news stations. "How can they call what I'm doing fake news, but what Paris Hilton's doing real news?" Hirsh said. According to Hirsh, the content his company represents "has at least as much news value as the majority of stories gathered by a TV stations' own editorial staff."

Among MediaHitman's recent PR clients are Red Lobster, RevolutionHealth.com, Nickelodeon and the Kennedy Space Center. MediaHitman uses news services such as the entertainment daily paper *The Hollywood Reporter* and the healthcare communications platform MedBreak to represent PR content.

Hirsh agrees with professors Upshaw and Koranda that it's a newsroom's responsibility to clearly disclose the origin of information.

Upshaw asked, however, whether stations are fulfilling their commitment to the public by allowing commercial influence to play a greater role in newscasts. "Are you responding to what you think the public needs to know, and even wants to know, by introducing more of this content whether or not you disclose who supplied it?"

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