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The Visual Boundaries of Journalism: Native Advertising and the Convergence of Editorial and Commercial Content

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the visual objects that are used to either disclose or disguise the commercial nature of native advertising as news articles. We adopt a “material object” approach to explore the potential implications for journalism regarding transparency, trust, and credibility. Methodologically, this study used content analysis covering 21 publications in five countries: Germany, Israel, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. We analysed 373 individual native ads. The findings show that news outlets do not follow a consistent way to disclose native ads visually, negotiating the balance between transparency and deception. In this balance, news organizations do not boldly push for transparency and instead remain ambiguous. Our analyses show that both national and organizational characteristics matter when shaping the visual boundaries of journalism.

KEYWORDS

Comparative research; content analysis; journalism; material objects; native advertising; visual boundaries

Introduction

This study explores the material visual objects digital news outlets use when publishing native ads and how they are created and disseminated internationally. By visual objects, we mean visual elements used in digital news websites to either disclose the commercial nature of native ads or to disguise them as news articles. These objects are the specific mechanisms by which news organizations negotiate the boundaries between advertising and editorial content. Their goal is to create ambiguous visual codes and conventions that audiences need to decode. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how native ads are constructed to resemble news while disclosing that they are ads, exploring the instrumental elements that establish the form of news (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). While our primary goal is not to compare media systems and their

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characteristics, this study also aims to compare whether the visual codes and conventions used in native ads are similar or varying in different countries and types of media. This is because journalism offers similarities and differences across national boundaries, not only regarding news making but also in financing and distribution models (Domingo et al. 2008; Hanusch 2009), which might determine how native ads are implemented. By doing so, this study identifies the visual elements used in native advertising production across countries and organizations, as a first step for identifying and deconstructing patterns that can lead to more systems-oriented future research.

As native advertising is a relatively new format, it is likely that news organizations' deployment strategies are still forming and changing. Unclear and ill-regulated forms of disclosure are responsible for readers' troubles in identifying native ads as commercial content (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2018). This, in consequence, has potential implications for journalism regarding transparency, trust, and credibility as readers may feel deceived when they realize content that looks like news is, in fact, advertising. It may also jeopardize the legitimacy of newsrooms (Sirrah 2019). Considering the theoretical and practical implications, it is surprising that, to the present day, there are few studies investigating the converging visual strategies used in native ads.

This study adopts an "object-oriented" approach to journalism (see Anderson and De Maeyer 2015) and draws inspiration from approaches proposed by Machin and Polzer (2015) by adding visual elements to quantitative content analysis. We analyse native ads on two levels – the in-feed homepage lead-item link and the full-page native ad – and compare these to regular news articles of the same outlet. We cover 373 native ads of 21 publications in five countries: Germany, Norway, Sweden, Spain, and Israel. The countries selected to match the researchers' expertise and to capture a broad range of different approaches to native advertising design.

The article starts by covering the literature on native advertising in journalism context and establishing the theoretical grounds for the use of material objects as the key components for the visual boundaries in journalism. We then turn to outline the methodological choices, followed by the results and discussion.

Visual Boundaries between News and Native Ads

The history of news media cannot be understood without the long-standing role of advertising as one of the main sources of revenue for news organizations (see Lauerer 2019). Native advertising is part of a broader phenomenon of increasing integration of the editorial and commercial sides within news media organizations (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020) and has recently been implemented even by news organizations that used to criticize its use (Ferrer-Conill 2016; Wojdyski 2019). Fuelled by an inadequate regulatory framework (Casale 2015) and the increased influence of contemporary corporate capitalism in the news industry (Hardy 2016), native advertising keeps growing fast (Perrin 2019).

Native Advertising in Journalistic Contexts

In news media, native advertising can be defined as "a form of paid content marketing, where the commercial content is delivered adopting the form and function of

editorial content with the attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content” (Ferrer-Conill 2016, 905). In other words, “native advertising deliberately disables consumers’ ability to recognize advertising elements on a website, rendering advertiser and publisher liable for deceiving consumers” (Wojdyski 2019, 1). This integration of advertising within journalism contradicts the long-standing normative tradition of keeping editorial and commercial content separate (see Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018; Glasser, Varma, and Zou 2019), in which news organizations need to establish their authority and autonomy from commercial actors (Li 2019). Its deceptive nature sparks controversy, primarily as the industry increasingly advocates for its deployment (Carlson 2015). Such transgressions of commercial influence over editorial content are not a new development, but they have often been considered a questionable journalistic practice (Bagdikian 2004; Hamilton 2004) against the tenets of social responsibility, especially regarding autonomy, transparency, and deception (Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill 2016).

To legitimize native advertising, news media managers argue that editorial-business collaboration should remain unproblematic as long as newspapers and news websites are transparent enough (Drew and Thomas 2017). However, transparency and deception remain the biggest concerns for native advertising use (Harro-Loit and Saks 2006; Ikonen, Luoma-Aho, and Bowen 2017) because they form an area of tension that is key to native advertising (Iversen and Knudsen 2019; Wojdyski 2016). This tension lies at the heart of native advertising because, on the one hand, deception is key to ensure readers perceive ads as a trusted source of information (Campbell and Marks 2015), and on the other hand, transparency is needed to circumvent regulation and avoid readers feeling deceived, jeopardizing the news outlet’s credibility (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2018). In order to be effective, native advertising is embedded in the form of “shiny camouflage” that both mimics news appearance to lure readers while at the same time, labelling content to warn them (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018).

The attempt to “convince audiences” is demonstrated by scholarship in advertising journals focussing on the effectiveness of native ads (see Wang and Huang 2017; Campbell and Evans 2018; Wang, Xiong, and Yang 2019). Even when ads are disclosed, Wojdyski and Evans (2016), as well as Amazeen and Muddiman (2018), demonstrate that readers often fail to identify native ads’ disclosure and that attitudes towards publishers and perceptions of their credibility declined. Amazeen and Wojdyski (2019) found that when digital news publishers were more transparent about the commercial nature of the content, news consumers were most receptive to native advertising. Making clear visual distinctions and increasing transparency should be an important goal for both news organizations and advertisers, as audiences favour specific cues that flag advertising. This is supported by Krouwer, Poels, and Paulussen (2020) who suggest that providing detailed disclosures about the authorship of native ads has a positive influence on the news website’s credibility and that transparency does not only make readers more receptive to native ads, but it may also help to restore or sustain readers’ trust in news websites.

However, the balance between transparency and deception also depends on the power asymmetries between news organizations’ managers and the influence that marketers have over them (Hardy 2016). In fact, the controversial practice has sparked

a debate about the issue of governance and legislation of native advertising. While Einstein (2015) claims that regulatory bodies have failed to regulate native ads, Ponikvar claims that “regulations would not solve the problem of deceptive advertisements any more effectively than do the current industry practices” (2015, 1210). The European regulatory framework of native advertising consists primarily of the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCPD)¹ and the e-commerce Directive,² as well as several country-specific regulatory and policy structures (Hartsuiker 2016). In practice, the ill-equipped oversight relies on self-regulation by the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) (Lynch 2018), which establishes operational standards for advertising self-regulatory systems. While a detailed account of the regulations of native advertising escapes the scope of this study, it certainly justifies the need for a visual inquiry of how news organizations create and disseminate native ads. The scope of regulations are based on “clear and conspicuous disclosure” with such factors as “placement of the disclosure in the ad,” “the disclosure’s prominence,” or “whether other parts of the ad may distract a consumer’s attention away from the disclosure” (Einstein 2015, 238–9). Similarly, the good practice recommendations proposed by EU regulators revolve around “clear identification,” “label description,” and “different visual demarcation,” such as “shading, outlines, or borders” (Hartsuiker 2016, 6). Therefore, we proposed it is crucial to understand the material ways in which news media and marketers negotiate the disclosure of native ads.

Material Objects of Journalism as Interpretative Signals for Ad Recognition

Most literature on native advertising in journalism focuses on three fronts: the normative implications for journalism (Artemas, Vos, and Duffy 2018); the evolution of the practice (Iversen and Knudsen 2019); and the effects that native advertising has on its readers (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2018). The specific visual elements that are present in news websites’ interfaces used to disguise or disclose native ads are practically unexplored. Adopting a “material sensibility” (see De Maeyer 2016) as a way to recognize the form of native advertising and the explicit design choices made by news organizations and advertisers helps us focus on what native ads are made of, visually. An “object-oriented” approach to journalism allows us to shine “an unusual light on the power dynamics of news production” (Anderson and De Maeyer 2015, 8) by looking at how news media and marketing try to impose their individual visual codes and conventions to acquire a journalistic form while providing commercial content. We refer to objects such as labels, titles, borders, logos, and their characteristics, such as typographies, colours, and sizes, that, while digital, remain purely material. Indeed, as Anderson and De Maeyer mention, “a resolute focus on materiality and objects is particularly useful for these kinds of genealogical expeditions; in an ontological sense, info-boxes and warning tags are purely digital objects, whose form is fluid and endlessly changeable” (2015, 7–8). The logos and labels that signal commercial content, as well as the similar typographies and colours of traditional news articles, establish the visual heuristic cues that help audiences interpret the text they are reading. These material objects of journalism function as ontological mechanisms to both imply an article is news and, at the same time, an ad. This negotiation is taking place at the

heart of news organizations. As Neff (2015, p.77) proposes, “focusing on objects can help show the lines of authority, the contexts of routines, and the richness of practices within organizations, including news organizations.”

At the most basic level, objects in journalism can be defined as “something that can be seen and touched (...) it can be named and materially defined, it is often perceived as a tool, a device, or an artifact” (De Maeyer and Le Cam 2015, 87). Usher (2018) further divides these objects into hard and soft objects. The former relate to tangible objects such as buildings, newsrooms, or newspapers. The latter account for digital objects such as software, websites, or interfaces, which are the focus of this study. And while there is a clear separation between hard and soft objects, there are clear connections between both, as some “soft” objects try to emulate their “harder” counterparts. For example, many news websites tried to replicate traditional designs, aiming to emulate the newspaper look. Other researchers have looked into these “soft” objects that populate contemporary digital journalism, from the perspective of blogs and hyperlinks (De Maeyer and Le Cam 2015), analytics and metrics (Zamith 2018), popularity cues (Haim, Kümpel, and Brosius 2018), digital rewards (Ferrer-Conill 2017), or even chatbots (Belair-Gagnon, Lewis, and Agur 2020).

For our purposes, these material objects are the components of journalistic interfaces by which the current power asymmetries among different actors within media organizations and between news media and marketers become most apparent. In this context, these objects become the interpretative signals for ad recognition, devised and negotiated by management and advertisers, but essentially used by audiences as heuristic cues to interpret the content (Chaiken 1987). The combination of what we call coinciding objects (those used to camouflage ads as news) and disclosing objects (those placed specifically to signal commercial content) represents that struggle. We echo Usher’s claim that “digital news products as objects of journalism are also sites where power is negotiated among the actors that use them, the actors that make them, and by the objects themselves, and in turn, invoke different claims about trust” (2018, 572). While the institutionalized negotiations are intended for actors across interacting social worlds (i.e. news outlets and advertisers), we believe users have an important role in these negotiations, as their interpretations are crucial to the nature of digital news products.

Visual Boundaries of Journalism

Lewis and Usher (2016) argue that objects of journalism have the power to visualize boundary work and the contours of journalism. If the material objects of journalism embedded in native ads have an ontological interpretative power for the audience to decide whether a piece is news or advertising, we argue that they can be used to establish the visual boundaries of journalism. The scale and granularity of material visual objects allow us to utilize the concept as a tool to organize and arrange the interface from the perspective of journalism and advertising.

As Machin and Polzer recognize, the visual aspect of journalism, in general, has been “conspicuously absent” from journalism studies. They argue that while it is clear that “content is collected and shaped to fit a newspaper or a website that has a

clearly formed visual identity,” the “visual aspects of news and journalism have tended to be sidelined as mere packaging” (2015, 1). However, there are notable exceptions. Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) conclude, through a historical account of the material form of newspapers, that the visual medium used to disseminate the news is what establishes the relationship between content and readers. In other words, it is through the material and visual form of the medium that the readers know news is news. This is corroborated by Grabe et al. (2000), who conclude that formal features associated with packaging in a tabloid or standard news programs on TV affect the processing and evaluation of information among the audience. Raeymaeckers (2004) further shows that layout also in print has a significant influence on readers. Schindler, Krämer, and Müller (2017) recently found that the visual appearance and layout style could influence the political slant attributed to a news article.

Moreover, innovation in visual technologies combined with programmatic advertising has the potential to traverse and redefine the boundaries that once may have only been apparent through content (Graham et al. 2011). News organizations establish visual codes and conventions for audiences to associate their products with journalism. However, while journalism employs a fairly homogenous visual communicative strategy across the globe (Machin and Polzer 2015), the visual codes shared by outlets and audiences may vary across types of publications (Coleman 2000) or cultural background (Hanusch 2009; Zhang and Hellmueller 2017). In the online environment, technological affordances affect the material construction of news sites (Pavlik 2000). The digital arena affords an increased mimetic isomorphism within digital journalism (Lowrey 2018) while still sustaining differences internationally (Domingo et al. 2008). This problem is exacerbated by the ongoing fluidity of online news. Multimodality, as a component of liquid news (Deuze 2008; Karlsson 2012), allows for malleable graphical elements of news websites. Templates and design layouts are in potential flux, yielding design choices (such as grids, fonts, and colours) to multimodal modes for communicating the news. Returning to the notion of objects of journalism, Usher points out that “these products are created with specific designs that make an argument about why journalism should be trusted; they enhance and limit the ability of journalists to do their work and also impact the ways that audiences and other actors access and engage with news” (2018, 573).

In the case of native advertising in digital newspapers, different visual objects of news items and native ads can be understood as tools for *disclosure transparency* (Tuchman 1972), referring to the degree of openness by news producers about how news is being produced. However, the specific case of native advertising requires adding the dimension of deception when considering the new rituals of transparency (Karlsson 2010). The tension between transparency and deception, mostly mediated through visual objects, will determine how organizations use native advertising in their digital newspapers. Our assumption is just like in other aspects of journalism, the visual objects of native advertising will sustain similarities and differences in various countries.

Therefore, we argue the visual boundaries between journalism and advertising materialize when examining how news organizations execute native advertising. The objects placed in their interfaces shed light on the material negotiations between

news media and advertisers, and the decoding mechanisms for readers to identify transparency and deception. In our attempt to explore how the combination of coinciding and disclosing objects defines the visual boundaries between news and ads, and whether it changes across publications and cultural contexts, we extend our inquiry about how native advertising is being used in different national and organizational settings.

With such considerations, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the visual objects news outlets use most often in order to disclose or disguise native advertising?

RQ2: How does the use of these visual objects differ among various outlets in different countries?

Methodology

This study aims to identify and explore the material visual objects news organizations and advertisers use to either disclose or camouflage native advertising. Our goal is to capture a broad range of examples in different national and organizational contexts and find out possible similarities and differences. Moreover, the complexity of country-specific regulatory standards is an excellent incentive to study native advertising both within and across countries. Strategies on how to create native ads are at the early stages, and the performance at the visual level is evolving and potentially differing across news media. Thus, trying to capture the visual boundaries between news and native ads poses methodological challenges. We tried to overcome these issues following a two-step strategy.

First, following a similar approach to Domingo and colleagues (2008), the team of researchers selected native ads from the most popular news websites in four EU countries (Germany, Norway, Spain, and Sweden) and Israel. In this exploratory study, the selection of countries was mainly driven by the expertise and the language skills of the research team. These countries represent a sample of Western liberal democracies, in which Germany, Norway, and Sweden share a Democratic Corporatist Model, Spain operates under a Polarized Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), and Israel, while “remarkably similar to the west” (Hanitzsch et al. 2011, 287), follows a hybrid model that draws primarily from the Liberal Model but carries aspects of the other two models (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014). The five countries, though, share a similar trend: the way in which native ads are published is not necessarily decided by news reporters, but by executives and management to maximize profit. These “neoliberalization processes evident in Israel are typical of many additional media systems and labour markets around the world” (Davidson and Meyers 2016, 195). To select the news organizations, we applied two criteria. First, we selected the four news websites in each country that were ranked highest regarding visits in the traffic aggregator *Alexa*. Second, we checked those websites for their current use of native ads. This already revealed interesting insights. In Germany, for example, it was harder to find outlets, which regularly published native ads. In consequence, some of the most popular German websites had to be replaced by outlets with less traffic because they were not using native ads matching, and a fifth outlet (*Der Tagesspiegel*) was added to the German sample to increase the number of

Table 1. Sample of native advertising items by country and online news outlet.

	News Outlet	Type	Mode	website	Items
Germany	Bild	Mass-market	Legacy	bild.de	20
	Zeit	Up-market	Legacy	zeit.de	12
	Rheinische Post	Up-market	Legacy	rp-online.de	20
	Huffington Post*	Mass-market	Online only	huffingtonpost.de	20
	Der Tagesspiegel	Up-market	Legacy	tagesspiegel.de	8
Israel	Ynet	Mass-market	Legacy	ynet.co.il	20
	Calcalist	Mass-market	Legacy	calcalist.co.il	20
	Globes	Mass-market	Legacy	globes.co.il	20
	Haaretz	Up-market	Legacy	haaretz.co.il	20
Norway	VG	Mass-market	Legacy	vg.no	27
	Dagbladet	Mass-market	Legacy	dagbladet.no	11
	Aftenposten	Up-market	Legacy	aftenposten.no	8
	Nettavisen	Mass-market	Online only	nettavisen.no	34
Spain	El Mundo	Up-market	Legacy	elmundo.es	8
	El País	Up-market	Legacy	elpais.com	20
	ABC	Up-market	Legacy	abc.es	16
	El Confidencial	Mass-market	Online only	elconfidencial.com	13
Sweden	Aftonbladet	Mass-market	Legacy	aftonbladet.se	20
	Expressen	Mass-market	Legacy	expressen.se	20
	Dagens Nyheter	Up-market	Legacy	dn.se	20
	Svenska Dagbladet	Up-market	Legacy	svd.se	16

*The German publisher Burda Forward unexpectedly and without giving reasons closed the business of Huffington Post Germany (Huff Post Deutschland) on 31st of March 2019.

items. Thus, a total of 21 outlets were selected, capturing various types and modes. Regarding type, the sample includes almost as many mass-market (tabloid) outlets as up-market outlets (quality). Regarding the mode only three outlets are online-only publications, while the others are the online outlets of legacy media (see Table 1). All the outlets selected are owned by private companies and combine ad-based freemium models and partial paywalls as business models. We acknowledge that other factors, such as journalistic cultures, national regulation, managerial tradition, and technological affordances, may have an important role in the visual appearance of native ads. That is why this study explores and compares the same practices across a sample of publications from five countries, different news outlet type, and different modes of communication of these organizations as proxies for organizational differences, to identify potential patterns in the design of native ads.

In the second step, we selected and collected all the individual native ads published in all 21 outlets during the spring of 2017. A total of 373 native ads were identified and saved as an image screenshot for archiving purposes and simplifying the analysis. During the span of three months, each researcher analysed the websites of the publications in their countries, looking for new native ads. We analysed both the lead-items (in-feed links) on the homepage and the full-page native ads to which they linked. This is an important distinction. While some in-feed native ads suggest and promote recommendations to external sites, and some full native ads do not have in-feed lead-items on the homepage, we focussed on ads that had both an in-feed homepage lead-item and a full-page ad for our study. We considered the lead-item and the full-page item as two components of a single native ad, and accordingly, the analysis was done at both levels.

Following the definition of native ads, we decided to include only those ads that look like a news article and are labelled as advertising. We are aware that there are

Table 2. Visual objects according to the coinciding or disclosing nature.

Coinciding objects	Disclosing objects
Lead paragraphs	Advertiser name
Fonts (sizes/colours)	Advertiser logo
Background colours	Banners
Images	Labels
Pull quotes	Borders

paid articles without disclosure. The fact that they are not labelled, however, means that they are not native advertising (which requires some form of disclosure), and makes them practically impossible to identify. To select our native ads we specified three selection criteria. First, a lead-item on the homepage that presented some form of visual disclosure (such as a label or the advertiser's logo or name). Second, either the lead-item or the ad itself had to look similar to a regular news item. Third, the lead-item on the homepage had to be linked to an advertising page *within* the outlet's domain name. The reason to keep the items within the same domain name is to make sure the ad is published by the news outlet, instead of simply linking to external content as most banners do.

To analyse the sample, we used a quantitative content analysis incorporating visual elements, drawing inspiration from approaches proposed by Machin and Polzer (2015). Our codebook contained variables to analyse both the lead-items on the homepage and the full-page native ads. To measure how online newspapers differentiate between native advertisement and news content, our team of coders also collected regular homepage news items and standalone news articles for each publication as the baseline to which the native ad lead-items on the homepage and the full-page native ads were compared. These baseline homepages and news items allowed us to define the form of coinciding or disclosing objects in their original design (see Table 2). In this article, we present results on those variables that we consider to be most important visual objects: coinciding objects which help mimic the articles (use of lead paragraph, text size, text font, text colour, background colour, authorship bylines, banners), and disclosing objects, which were used to measure how native ads are disclosed (use of borders, number and explanation of disclosures, stating the advertiser and their logos). While this is not an exhaustive list of visual objects, we believe these are the most relevant objects to the contemporary visual mapping (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001) of contemporary native advertising in news media.

After pre-test adjustments to the codebook, we recruited and trained local coders to conduct five country-specific inter-coder reliability tests (Hopmann et al. 2016). The test results were another indicator of the diverse approaches to native advertising and the difficulty of having a unified understanding of the practice. After thoroughly revising the codebook and additional training with the coders, we conducted a second test with 16 items per country (approx. 20%). The mean reliability score (Krippendorff's alpha) for all variables in all countries was .90, and only one variable, i.e. the difference in background colour on the home page, had a mean reliability score below .66 (i.e. .6). For some variables, however, the intercoder reliability score returned a low score, although the coders only disagreed on one observation. Because of the rather low sample size for each country, Krippendorff's alpha returned a slim value. Arguably,

Table 3. Intercoder reliability tests (Percent of agreement [%] and Krippendorff's alpha [α]).

Variables	Coder_NO		Coder_SE		Coder_ES		Coder_IL		Coder_DE		Mean	
	%	α	%	α	%	α	%	α	%	α	%	α
Homepage level												
Use of border	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1
Different background colour	94	0	100	1	100	1	100	1	94	0	98	.6
Stand out on homepage?	100	1	100	1	100	1	90	.76	94	.72	97	.9
Full-page ad level												
Amount of labels	75	.68	98	.91	97	.9	97	.89	100	1	93	.88
Disclosure of explanation	69	.53	94	.87	100	1	100	1	100	1	93	.88
Disclosure of sender	88	.67	100	1	100	1	94	.87	87	.74	94	.86
Authorship	87	.73	100	1	100	1	100	1	90	.78	95	.9
Use of lead paragraph	94	.77	100	1	94	.81	100	1	100	1	98	.92
Different title text font	94	.77	100	1	94	.88	99	0	100	1	97	.73
Different title text size	88	.67	100	1	100	.1	100	1	100	1	98	.93
Different title text colour	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1
Different background colour	69	.1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	94	.82
Use of logo	100	1	100	1	100	1	94	.87	77	.6	94	.89
Use of banner ads for advertiser	100	1	100	1	100	1	94	.87	100	1	99	.97
Use of banner ads for other advertisers	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1	100	1

however, one disagreement out of 16 items (99% agreement) is indeed a clear indication of a reliable result (see Table 3 for an overview of the reliability scores for all variables).

Following our two research questions, we organized our findings by first using descriptive statistics to show which are the material visual objects used by news organizations to mimic news articles and disclose native ads. Second, we use logistic regression models and Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models to analyse variance between countries and different types and modes of news outlets.

Findings

Material Visual Objects to Mimic or Disclose the Commercial Nature of Native Ads

Starting with our first research question, we investigate the *visual objects news outlets use most often in order to disclose or disguise native advertising*. Every native ad comprises a lead-item located on the homepage and the full-page ad to which the lead-item links. Figure 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the most often used objects at the homepage level. We observe that 69% of the articles do *not* include a border around the lead-item that distinguishes the ad from the editorial content, and 87% of the articles use a background colour that blends in with other content on the homepage. Despite not having borders, and showing similar colours, the majority (69%) of the lead-item of native ads overall are “somewhat different” from the lead-items to regular news articles on the homepage. While this assessment required a subjective evaluation from the coders of how much ads stand out, we believe this is the case, for example, because all the lead-items on the homepage presented a disclosing label. This means that, in general, across our sample, native ads are neither very different nor identical to the news items they share space with on the homepage. Needless to say, the lead-items have fewer visual objects to be coded because they take only a little space on the website.

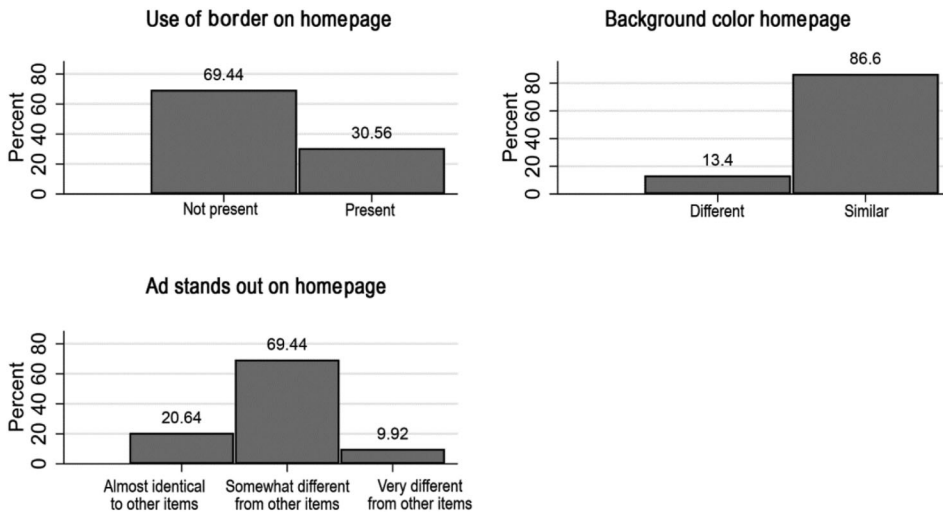


Figure 1. Visual objects at the homepage level.

In the analysis of the full-page ad, we first analysed the disclosing objects (see [Figure 2](#)). The first feature we observed was the number of labels in each ad page. Labels are arguably the most important visual objects disclosing that the full-page ad contains commercial content because they contain signal words like “sponsored,” “paid by,” or “advertising.” The median amount of labels is one label per item, stretching from zero labels (10 percent) to a maximum of six labels within one item (0.3%). We analysed whether there was an explanation of the label, to clarify the type of ad. In other words, do the ads explain what labels such as “paid for” or “sponsored by” actually means? The majority (64 percent) of the ads did not contain information explaining what the disclosure label means. Only 33% of the ads offered such an explanation, and about 3% provided an external page with more information about what the labels meant. More than half the ad pages (55 percent) did not disclose who the advertiser paying for the ad is explicitly, for example, by displaying “sponsored by label X.” A different take on disclosing the advertiser is only making an implicit connection by showing the advertiser’s logo, but without clarifying the role of that organization. In fact, advertiser logos are a popular visual object, as in 68% of the ads presented the logo of the advertiser.

To code for coinciding objects that either mimic editorial content or differentiate commercial content, we compared several visual objects in the ads with regular news articles from the same publication that served as a baseline. This way, we could pinpoint whether these visual objects are different or similar in native ads and news articles from the same publication. Starting with the website’s background colour (see [Figure 3](#)), the majority (82 percent) of the ads use a similar colour as the news articles. Most titles of the native ads use similar typography (62 percent), a similar font size (78 percent), and a similar font colour (78 percent) as regular news articles. More than half of the native ads (54%) use lead paragraphs to introduce their stories, just like the news articles in the respective publications. Another 23% is identical with the news articles in this regard as they do not use lead paragraphs, just like news articles in their publications do not. This means that about 77% of native ads mimic the use

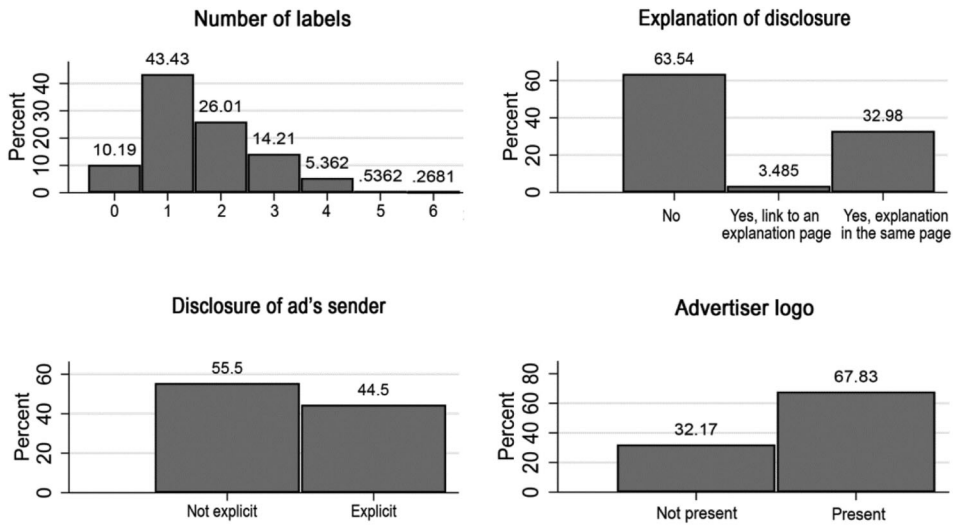


Figure 2. Disclosing visual objects at the full-page ad level.

or lack of lead paragraphs. Only 23% of ads dissent with the typical use of lead paragraphs in the articles of the respective news outlet: 12% of ads do not use lead paragraphs when news articles do, and 11% do use lead paragraphs when news articles do not. This is important because a lead paragraph is a staple of journalistic format, and native ads harness it as a coinciding object to resemble a regular news item.

Another staple of the journalistic genre is the disclosure of authorship. This is absent in 46% of the ads, while 54% explicitly specify the author as a person, news organization, or company. Finally, one visual object that is regularly present in the context of journalistic articles, namely banner ads surrounding the content, does not make its appearance in two-thirds (66 percent) of the full-page native ads. This probably indicates that, in most cases, news organizations offer undivided attention to the that advertisers run native ads.

Differences between Countries, Type, and Mode of the Outlets

In order to answer our second research question, we use logistic and Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models to analyse *the use of visual objects and whether they differ among various outlets in different countries*.

To get a clearer picture of how different forms of native ads manifest across the field, we have categorized the different news outlets by country, type of outlet (up-market or mass-market), and mode (legacy or online-only outlets). Table 4 shows these differences at the homepage level. Norway, online-only, and mass-market are the reference values for country, type, and mode, respectively. The first model shows the results from a logistic regression model where the presence of a border around the native ad on the homepage is the dependent variable. Because neither of the outlets in our sample from Norway and Spain use borders on the homepage, and because we observe minimal variation within countries, we do not include the country variable in the model. However, as there are substantial differences across countries, it is important to note that excluding or including

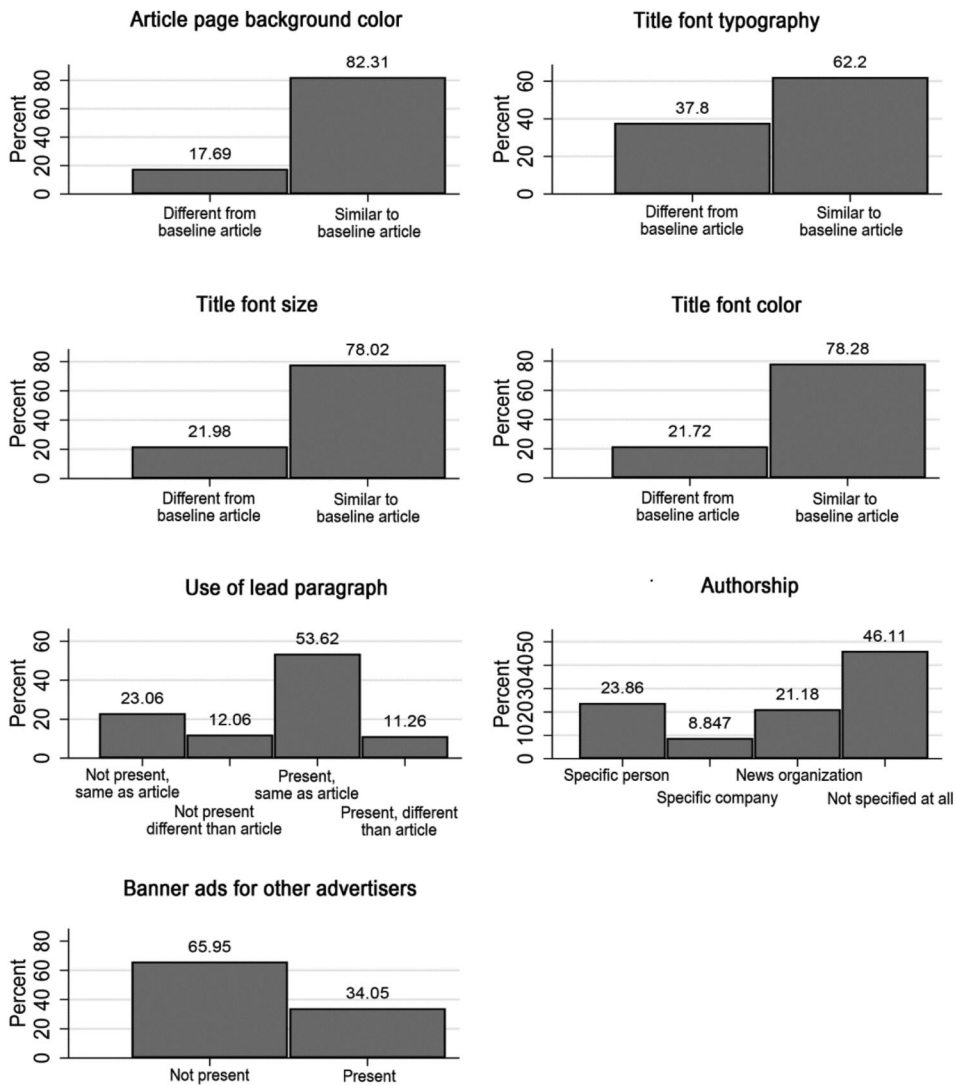


Figure 3. Coinciding visual objects at the full-page ad level.

countries as a control variable in the model does not matter for any of the results reported here. The first model shows that the type of outlet yields a statistically significant effect. Up-market outlets are more likely to use a border on the homepage than mass-market outlets. Similar to the first model, the second model in [Table 4](#) does not include mode as a variable, because none of the online-only outlets in our sample use a different background colour to separate the ad from editorial content on the homepage. Model two shows that up-market outlets are statistically significantly less likely to use a different background colour compared to mass-market outlets. Turning to the third and last model in [Table 4](#), we use an OLS regression model to estimate differences, but these results show an identical pattern if we instead use ordered logistic regression models. Because of the level of variation across countries present very little variation within some of the countries (e.g. all outlets in Norway stood out as “somewhat different” on the homepage), we

Table 4. Differences at the homepage level: Logistic and OLS regression models of differences between countries and newspapers.

	(Model 1) Use of frame on the homepage (1 = yes, 0 = no)		(Model 2) Background colour different (1 = yes, 0 = no)		(Model 3) Stand out on the homepage (0 = almost identical, .5 = somewhat different, 1 = very different)	
	b	se	b	se	b	se
Country:						
Norway					Ref.	(.)
Sweden					-.11*	(.042)
Germany					-.072	(.04)
Israel					.16***	(.041)
Spain					-.015	(.046)
Publication mode:						
Online only	Ref.	(.)			Ref.	(.)
Legacy	-.04	(.34)			.21***	(.039)
Publication type:						
Mass-market	Ref.	(.)	Ref.	(.)	Ref.	(.)
Up-market	.70***	(.25)	-1.06***	(.31)	.026	(.031)
Constant	-1.12***	(.18)	2.38***	(.24)	.38***	(.034)
Observations	373		373		373	
Adjusted R ²	.037		.057		.22	

Coefficients are unstandardized beta coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$.

Logistic regression models (models 1 and 2) show Nagelkerke's R-square. All models are robust if we exclude or include countries as a control variable.

Table 5. Differences at the full-page ad level: Logistic regression models of differences between countries and newspapers.

	(Model 1)			(Model 2)			(Model 3)			(Model 4)		
	Similar title text font (1 = yes, 0 = no)			Similar title text size (1 = yes, 0 = no)			Similar title text colour (1 = yes, 0 = no)			Similar page background colour (1 = yes, 0 = no)		
	b	se		b	se		b	se		b	se	
Country:												
Norway	Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)				
Sweden	2.82***	(.44)		1.57***	(.44)		1.41***	(.46)				
Germany	3.98***	(.48)		2.23***	(.5)		3.71***	(.71)				
Israel	3.39***	(.47)		1.96***	(.45)		.27	(.38)				
Spain	2.43***	(.46)		1.29***	(.51)		2.35***	(.54)				
Publication mode:												
Online only	Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)							
Legacy	.74	(.44)		-2.23***	(.66)							
Publication type:												
Mass-market	Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)		Ref.	(.)	
Up-market	-1.79***	(.36)		-1.46***	(.051)		-2.165***	(.37)		-0.96***	(.28)	
Constant	-1.72***	(.19)		2.5***	(.6)		1.1***	(.26)		1.99***	(.21)	
Observations	373			373			373			373		
Adjusted R ²	.417			.251			0.268			0.054		

Coefficients are unstandardized beta coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$;** $p < .01$;*** $p < .001$.

Logistic regression models (all models) show Nagelkerke's R-square. All models are robust if we exclude or include countries as a control variable.

only use the country as a control variable in the analysis. We observe that native ads on the homepage of legacy newspapers are more likely to stand out than native ads on the homepage of online-only outlets. In sum, while there is limited variance within countries, we still observe substantial variance across countries, publication modes, and publication types regarding the use of visual objects on the homepage.

When it comes to the individual full-page ads, the first model in [Table 5](#) shows the results from a logistic regression model with the difference between the regular news articles' title font and the native ads' title font as the dependent variable. We observe that, compared to Norway, all of the other countries are more likely to use a similar title font. While we do not observe any effect of mode, we observe that up-market outlets are less likely to mimic the regular news articles regarding title text font than mass-market outlets. In regards to the size of the title typography, the second model in [Table 5](#) shows a similar pattern in terms of country differences and type differences. In contrast to the first model, however, we observe that the type also yields a statistically significant effect, as online-only outlets are more likely to use a similar text size than legacy outlets. Regarding text colour, the third model does not include outlet type as an independent variable as all of the online-only outlets in our sample use a similar text colour for the title text of the native ads. Controlling for country differences, the third model shows that up-market outlets are less likely to use colours in the title text that mimic the colour of the regular news articles. For the fourth and last model in [Table 5](#), we again need to limit the analysis to include outlet type as the predictor, due to the same omitted variable bias reported for the analyses above. Regardless of whether or not we include country as a control variable, up-market outlets are more likely to use a different background colour, while mass-market are more likely to use a similar background colour, compared to the baseline articles.

Although our main intention of including countries in the models in [Tables 4](#) and [5](#) is to control for country variations, we also observe that there are differences between countries regarding implementing native advertising. The strategies in using coinciding objects (especially on text size and colour, as well as background colour) are indeed different across countries. No country, however, predominantly designs native ads to look identical or very different from other news items.

Replicating the Visual Codes of Journalism – a Discussion

The findings show that, while news outlets have not reached – and may never reach – a consistent way to disclose native ads visually, the balance between transparency and deception is based on the combination of similar material visual objects. While they could make them look clearly different, most news outlets use coinciding visual objects in a similar way in both native ads and regular news articles. Because these objects diverge minimally, we believe coinciding objects are strategically used to camouflage native ads and pass them for regular news articles. At the same time, they use disclosing objects to signal their commercial status but not in an obvious manner. On the homepage, for example, native ads usually appear in the regular news flow, sharing space with editorial content. The prevalent choice is not to use a border or a different colour, but to add a small label as disclosure. Such a combination of visual objects

provides support for Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson (2018) claim that native advertising functions as a “shiny camouflage,” using design to hide and disclose its commercial nature at the same time. As Ikonen and colleagues (2017) suggest, the majority of visual objects in our sample attempt to maximize deception, and relatively few news outlets work towards transparency by making coinciding objects look different than news articles.

While this study only focussed on the visual composition of native ads in content analysis, it is possible to link our findings to studies investigating the production and consumption of hybrid ads. For example, those claiming that readers find it difficult to distinguish native ads (Wojdynski and Evans 2016; Amazeen and Muddiman 2018). This is because, as Wojdynski (2019) points out, native advertising purposefully combines the objects on the website to confuse readers. Studying native advertising with a “material object” approach (Anderson and De Maeyer 2015) is helpful in understanding what elements are used exactly. By breaking down native advertising into “soft objects” (Usher 2018) we can see how native ads try to replicate the visual codes of journalism in order to appropriate news media’s clout (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018). By looking at them individually, we can see how news outlets use these material visual objects as a deliberate source of ambiguity for mimic and differentiation, and become the key factors of transparency and opacity. The combination of these visual objects often leaves it to the informed reader to decode that this is advertising. News organizations and advertisers know how to replicate the visual codes of journalism (Machin and Polzer 2015) and use the layout to influence readers (Raeymaeckers 2004; Schindler, Krämer, and Müller 2017).

Further, our results can be linked to studies on content production and on the negotiations among potentially involved actors (Usher 2018). Although this study offers no empirical evidence, we believe that these visual objects may offer an intuitive one: the visual boundaries between journalism are not universal but rather seem to depend on the negotiation between managers, journalists, and advertisers, and on how much a news organization is willing to risk declining trust in exchange for higher revenue. Moreover, if we consider the results instead of the process, our findings provide evidence to support the existence of power asymmetries (Hardy 2016), which suggests that in a case of direct clash, between commercial and editorial considerations, the former may get the upper hand.

The comparative aspect of this study reinforces our suspicion that while the visual boundaries of journalism and advertising are blurring across the field, the way in which native ads use visual objects are partly explained by their organizational cultural background (Hanusch 2009). However, this study provides evidence to suggest that the way in which a news organization disguises or discloses native ads is likely to be associated with its commercial market (type), and whether it is an online-only outlet (mode). Our findings show that the degree of transparency is not only contingent on national boundaries. Instead, online-only and mass-market publications tend to employ visual objects that facilitate mimicking content, while legacy and up-market outlets tend to favour transparency. This could be related to the fact that legacy media and up-market outlets have closer ties to the traditional understanding of journalism and may have a higher price to pay if they jeopardize their trust by not disclosing native ads clearly (Karlsson 2010; Krouwer, Poels, and Paulussen 2020). More importantly, what these significant differences among up-market and mass-market,

digital-only and legacy, and their attempt to replicate the visual codes of journalism, is that material objects of native advertising represent the socially constructed visual identity of news and how marketers and news outlets shape them to communicate to their readers where the contours of journalism and advertising meet. Indirectly, the blurring of editorial and commercial content in terms of design requires additional markers that again separate the one from the other. These are signals that help news media, advertisers, and readers decipher the visual boundaries of digital journalism.

Negotiated Visual Boundaries of Journalism

This article has explored the material visual objects that news organizations use in their native ads and how the use of these objects varies across nations and publications. After analysing 373 native ads, we propose two main conclusions. First, while we found various approaches to native advertising design, there is a clear pattern across the board. Although coinciding and disclosing objects could be used to maximize transparency, native ads use coinciding objects to camouflage ads as much as possible and disclosing objects only to a minimal extent. This means that in the balance between transparency and deception, news organizations do not boldly push for transparency and instead remain ambiguous. We believe this suggests that in the negotiation between news organizations and marketers, the power asymmetries and needs for new forms of revenue pushes news media to integrate commercial and editorial content without clearly disclosing it. Furthermore, since the material visual objects act as a mechanism for readers to decode content is news or ads, their capacity to tell the two genres apart is intentionally diminished.

Second, while there are clear differences and similarities among the selected countries, there are also clear differences across the type and mode of news outlets. This indicates that differences within countries are more, or at least just as important as differences across countries. This could also imply that not only national regulatory frameworks but organizational settings shape the use of native ads. More concretely, we found mass-market organizations and online-only outlets tend to be less transparent. We believe this is because up-market and legacy organizations are often regarded as more trustworthy by the public, and therefore news outlets risk damaging their reputation and credibility to a greater extent (Wojdyski 2016). An alternative explanation (or perhaps a combination of both) is that up-market and legacy organizations have the economic and social capital to maintain power asymmetries more balanced and, therefore, can impose more transparent native ads.

The study contributes to journalism studies in various ways. First and foremost, it is the first attempt to visually compare how news organizations in different countries use native advertising. Focussing on the material visual objects, this study illustrates that the visual boundaries of journalism rest upon a few objects that, when tweaked, reveal or conceal the nature of commercial content. We contend that these boundaries, while they may be clear to practitioners, are certainly ambiguous and difficult to navigate by the audience, to which most scholarship on native advertising points. Thus, this set of visual objects are the primary markers for what is visually considered news and how native ads attempt to exploit those boundaries.

Despite the apparent celebratory rhetoric of news media managers (Ferrer-Conill 2016), practitioners in marketing and in news media organizations that have influence over how native ads look like should strive to establish a cohesive visual strategy that clearly discloses ads – at least within one market. Both coinciding and disclosing objects should be used in that effort. We know regular journalists may have little to no control over how native ads appear on websites, and that these decisions reside in the hands of management, marketers, and technical people. However, we believe that if native advertising is the site of contestation of journalistic power, a strong push by journalists should be taken to maintain visual clarity over journalistic jurisdiction.

The findings of this study are shaped not only by the countries we covered but by the decision to analyse the “most visited” news websites. With the rapid change of native advertising and the differences of implementation, these results should be interpreted as an initial snapshot of the practice internationally, and not as a generalizable practice in all news media. While our choice of method proved to be the best for the purpose of the study, it comes with limitations. The first one is about the possibility of missing those native ads that are disclosed extremely opaquely. Another issue is the “shelf life” of the designs we captured. Native advertising may be a rapidly changing practice due to technological innovation, regulatory changes, and the evolution of the advertising industry. While we believe that these objects reflect a negotiation of power (Usher 2018), we are aware that our data, collected in 2017, only cover visual elements present in the digital layout, and therefore relies on our interpretation of the use and meaning of visual objects. In itself, studying visual objects is a moving target that is contingent on the time of data collection. Our analyses, however, show that these tendencies exist in the outlets we studied, and we believe they paint a familiar picture. While specific combinations of visual objects may vary across the board, our aim was to bring to the fore the importance of the material construction of native ads and to visualize how fragile the visual boundaries of journalism become in a digital environment. Future research could complement this study by looking into how actors within news media actively negotiate the visual output of native ads. A thorough account of the adequacy of regulatory frameworks but also how news organizations address the use of visual elements in their policies could inform current compliance with regulations. Further, longitudinal studies that attempt to scrutinize the evolution of these strategies and mechanisms of disclosure and camouflage could continue to expand our knowledge about the visual boundaries of journalism.

Notes

1. UCPD – Directive 2005/29/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2005:149:0022:0039:EN:PDF>)
2. E-Commerce Directive 2000/31/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32000L0031&from=EN>)

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