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ARTICLE



# The Creation of Branded Content Teams in Spanish News Organizations and Their Implications for Structures, Professional Roles and Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, top media organizations have restructured their newsrooms and created branded content teams, or studios, devoted entirely to the production of new native advertising formats in order to leverage this business opportunity. The goal of this exploratory study is to analyse how news organizations in Spain implement this strategy and create branded content teams, changing the structure of their newsrooms and shaping the practices and roles of the editors and journalists involved. Semi-structured interviews with professionals ( $n = 11$ ) who work at news outlets ( $n = 8$ ) were carried out in order to explain their structural, professional and ethical challenges. The results show that branded content teams can be classified into three organizational models (integrated, autonomous and emerging) and they are usually formed by hybrid professionals, linking commercial, editorial and design practices. The study participants justify the new practice adopting the role of norm entrepreneurs. Despite the warnings and risks, the interviewees asserted that by inserting an appropriate disclaimer in these new formats, credibility and transparency are not endangered. They also believe that sponsored content will become a fundamental pillar for the business models of their news organizations.

## KEYWORDS

Sponsored content; native advertising; business model innovation; ethical challenges; professional autonomy

## Introduction

Native advertising and branded content are increasingly important revenue streams for news outlets (Carvajal and Pastor 2018). Over the last decade, top media organizations have restructured their newsrooms and created branded content teams, or studios, devoted entirely to the production of new native advertising formats in order to leverage this business opportunity. At the same time, the ethos of editors and journalists within and beyond these teams is being transformed by activities that involve creating and distributing branded content in conjunction with advertisers.

This response has drawn considerable attention from academia. On the one hand, the introduction of branded content teams and native advertising formats is viewed

as an innovation of the media business model aimed at improving the value proposition for brands and mitigating the overwhelming power of social media platforms in capturing advertising expenditure (Carvajal et al. 2015; García-Avilés et al. 2018; Watson et al. 2018; Nielsen and Ganter 2018; Lynch 2018). On the other hand, the proliferation of these units in newsrooms weakens the traditional separation of editorial and marketing departments, and also jeopardizes the credibility of journalistic brands (Carlson 2015; Ferrer-Conill 2016).

Criticism centres around potential pressure from advertisers regarding news content (Atal 2018), the challenge faced by users in identifying native advertising (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2020; Li and Wang 2019), and the risks of “alienating readers once they do figure out that some of the publication’s content is sponsored by advertisers” (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2020: 16). This sponsored content trend is seen as an extension of McChesney’s idea of “hyper-commercialism” that erodes the fundamental values of journalism (Carlson 2015) and endangers its perceived quality (Bachmann, Hunziker, and Rüedy 2019).

In the meantime, news organizations continue to introduce this new revenue stream as a way to diversify their business model, and the professionals who comprise these teams assume and justify their role in the sustainability of their media outlets (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020; Lynch 2018; Duffy and Rui Jun 2020). This trend appears in leading markets, including Spain, where prominent news organizations, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Confidencial*, *El Español*, and regional press groups along the lines of *Henneo*, *Godó*, *Vocento* and *Prensa Ibérica*, which are among the top 10 media outlets with the most users in Spain (comScore 2019).

In 2019, Spain had a population of 47 million people and an internet penetration of 91% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2020), where two out of every three people used their smartphones to access online news. According to the Digital News Report (Reuters 2019), 10% of Spain’s population was willing to pay for online news and overall trust in news was 43% (-1), with the nation ranked 19th out of 38 countries.

This article examines how news organizations in Spain implement this strategy and create branded content teams, shaping the roles and practices of professionals. We follow the same path as Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2020) when focussing on the rhetorical and normative discourses of editors to understand how they legitimise new working practices that are inconsistent with traditional norms. We also see how the interviewees justify their work by overcoming the problems of editorial-advertising integration and stretching the meanings of their ethical and professional standards (Carlson 2015).

The goal of this exploratory study is to gain a better understanding of how these teams are organized after identifying the presence of three organizational models. Branded content teams follow a similar pattern and, in general, offer the same services, and their organization varies according to the size of the corresponding media outlet. Semi-structured interviews with the editors ( $n = 11$ ) of news outlets regarding this new advertising alternative were carried out in order to address their ethical and professional challenges.

## Theoretical Background

We theoretically frame the emergence of branded content teams as a phenomenon related to the transformation of news organizations in the context of media

innovation. However, native advertising and branded content are changing the practices and norms of the editors and journalists involved, and could undermine their professional role and the fundamental values of journalism within their organizations.

The challenges for sustaining the business model provide the context for internally restructuring and reconfiguring media outlets, and redefining editorial practices (García-Avilés et al. 2018). The resulting changes lead to hiring professionals for various roles, ranging from marketing to data backgrounds, to help develop new practices and values (Valero-Pastor and Carvajal 2017; García-Avilés 2018). These teams emerge in response to the communication industry's adaptation and survival because media outlets transform how their editorial departments are organized in order to help create value (Küng 2017).

Branded content, innovation and data teams make it possible for professionals specialized in techniques and subject matters to create greater economic value for their organizations (Salaverría 2015; Valero-Pastor and Carvajal 2017; García-Avilés 2018). This type of structure favours specialization, innovation, adaptation to market fluctuations and employee creativity (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020; Küng 2017: 172). They are made up of multidisciplinary roles, depending on the nature of the projects they offer (Lynch 2018).

Recent research based on interviews with lifestyle magazine editors and news editors showed the emergence of "hybrid editors" in newsrooms, serving as a link between sales and editorial departments (Poutanen, Luoma-Aho, and Suhanko 2016). The changing nature of journalistic work and organizations is affecting the professional status, roles and practices of journalists, eliminating the professional control that previously existed because the division of labour in media production has become much less clear (Witschge and Nygren 2009).

Business objectives have been integrated more intensely into the editorial agenda of commercial news media outlets within the ongoing transformation of news organizations (Baumann 2013; Waldenström, Wiik, and Andersson 2019). Dominant digital intermediaries are restructuring the environment in which news outlets operate, and even larger media organizations are struggling to adapt to their growing dependence on players such as Google and Facebook (Nielsen and Ganter 2018). These platforms have decimated the digital advertising market for online news operations, resulting in desperate attempts to find alternative revenue streams such as sponsored content and native advertising (Lynch 2018). Following this trend, news start-ups with various organizational formulas coexist in the digital marketplace, offering branded content and other marketing services (Deuze and Witschge 2017; Valero-Pastor and González-Alba 2018: 561; García-Avilés et al., 2018).

The integration of editorial and advertising departments poses a threat to the tenets of social responsibility of the press (Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill 2016). Native advertising and branded content generate obvious concerns about the deterioration of the traditional separation between advertising and editorial departments (Carlson 2015; Coddington 2015; Ferrer-Conill 2016). News outlets that stand for high quality could undermine their quality by engaging in native advertising (Bachmann, Hunziker, and Rüedy 2019). The widespread use of these formats that endanger journalistic autonomy is criticized as part of a global process that is not limited to branded

content but rather to an industry crisis (Carlson 2015; Ferrer-Conill 2016; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019).

According to Lynch (2018), native advertising has a number of competing genealogies and manifestations, leading to disagreements about what it actually refers to. For the purpose of this study, native advertising is a paid media strategy that enables brands to control the content that is published. Sponsored editorial content can be used to describe various kinds of brand involvement, including native advertising. However, it also includes content that is sponsored/supported by brands (paid) but where editorial control rests with the publisher or is shared.<sup>1</sup> Native advertising is labelled with different types of disclaimers such as sponsored content, branded content, or promoted content (Amazeen and Muddiman 2018).

In Spain, overall, professionals involved in branded content teams—such as the interviewees of this study—use the term “branded content” when referring to content features that are paid for by the advertiser but created by the publisher, and the process is supervised by the brand at the beginning (briefing) and at the end of the process.<sup>2</sup>

Branded content (or sponsored editorial content) and native advertising are part of a new marketing strategy used by companies to connect with audiences (Hardy, MacRury, and Powell 2018; Feng and Ots 2018). Both strive to emulate editorial content in order to enhance the advertiser’s brand and its message’s appeal (Harms, Bijmolt, and Hoekstra 2017). These formats sometimes fail to provide basic information as to the existence of commercial interests (Perales Albert 2018; Ferrer-Conill et al. 2020).

Amazeen and Muddiman conclude that by blurring content in this manner, the credibility of online publishers is diminished (2018). However, effectively designed disclosure labels facilitate the recognition of native advertising (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2020; Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Indeed, Li and Wang (2019) found that any effort to increase advertising recognition with an intent to be transparent would not hinder the perceived credibility of news outlets.

Nevertheless, in a recent study, editors and journalists state the need to move away from traditional normative models so as to integrate these new solutions (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020). Some journalists do not view branded content as a threat to professional autonomy but rather as a way to work together to ensure commercial sustainability. However, this new form of cooperative interdependence between advertisers and journalists alters news practices profoundly (Carlson 2015), as has been shown in existing studies focussed predominantly on US media outlets. The discourse on journalistic independence and autonomy is being questioned by the growing trend of adopting native advertising in the digital editions of traditional news media outlets (Ferrer-Conill 2016).

Our work is based on the premise that the challenges of integrating editorial-advertising content are well known, as outlined in the theoretical framework, but similar studies on Spanish news outlets have not been carried out to date. Therefore, it is essential to understand how commercial and journalistic discourses are assimilated by editors in order to confirm the existence, in other markets, of trends that have already been studied in English-speaking countries.

To understand how news organizations in Spain implement branded content and create dedicated teams, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How are branded content teams structured in their news organizations?
- RQ2: How do these new practices affect their professional routines and roles, and how do they face the ethical challenge?
- RQ3: In what way do these professionals believe that this new revenue source will impact the sustainability of their organizations?

## **Methodology**

To answer our research questions, we relied on a qualitative methodology of a descriptive nature that addresses the phenomenon in order to understand it within its practical context. Studying the inclusion of branded content teams requires a more holistic approach because they combine market principles and technologist-driven cultures, norms and practices (Westlund and Lewis, 2014).

### ***The Interviews***

The interviews consisted of in-person meetings and phone calls that took place between March and September 2019 and lasted an average of 40-60 min. A recording and transcription of each conversation is available in a digital repository for private queries. The material was used by the team to filter the research results.

In the interviews, we collected general data about these departments, such as their origin, structure and the roles involved, but we also focussed on the ethical and normative approach of professionals. The data set provided a glimpse into these branded content teams and helped us to define the rhetoric of editors and journalists, delving into the troublesome aspects noted in literature.

The first section (organization and workflows) includes descriptive questions about how the organization operates (What steps are involved in creating a piece, from start to finish? Which is more common: projects that are proposed by brands or by the media outlet?). The second section (ethical and professional challenges) contains questions aimed at evaluation (Do you believe that branded content is labelled accordingly? Is the editorial department involved in any of the creation phases? What type of support or resistance have you encountered from your editorial department? Do they fail to defend this format because it is their job? Could it negatively affect the media outlet's reputation?). In the case of the latter (importance for the business model), the goal is to understand how they view their role within the organization (How important is this revenue stream for your media outlet? In what direction is this type of content headed?).

However, the conversations did not follow this order. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were informed that their answers would be anonymous. Questions were first asked to profile the interviewee and introduce them into the conversation. Once a level of trust had been established, the more challenging questions were asked in order to obtain more elaborate responses than by asking directly.

Finally, the full answers were transcribed by two researchers and then read independently to summarize and highlight the most relevant aspects using the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### **The Sample**

The current media system in Spain emerged from of a profound economic crisis that resulted in the elimination of more than 12,000 jobs between 2008 and 2015, but also incentivized media innovations and the creation of more than 500 news start-ups (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid (APM) 2015). Legacy newspapers such as *El País* and *El Mundo*, along with regional groups like Vocento, Prensa Ibérica and Godó, now have counterparts in the form of thriving digital outlets that include *El Confidencial*, *Eldiario.es* and *El Español*. These leading digital publications have uncovered top news stories and proven their appeal to new demands of the public (Mancinas Chávez, Moreno-Cabezudo, and Ruiz-Alba 2019).

For the purpose of our study, eight Spanish news organizations were selected: newspapers with print and digital outlets (*El País*, *El Mundo*), two digital native publications (*El Confidencial*, *El Español*), and several media publishing groups (Henneo, Godó, Prensa Ibérica and Vocento). The selected sample is intentional and represents digital native media (2) and newspapers with traditional print versions (6). Additionally, the sample is also representative of local and regional publishers (4), and national news media (4). It is worth noting that these selections represent industry trends exclusively from commercial enterprises. Additionally, eight of the media outlets selected are ranked in the top 10 in terms of monthly unique visitors according to comScore indexes (September 2019). On a nationwide level, the sample is not representative of the vast media industry. However, it is useful for the purpose of this research because it makes it possible to explore the arguments of editors at top news outlets.

Two of the interviewees work for media groups that operate a combined total of more than 27 local newspapers. Both chains have implemented corporate strategies that impact all of their regional dailies (Carvajal and García Avilés 2008). The remaining respondents—who help produce and plan this type of sponsored content—offer a more comprehensive vision of each phase and of how these departments are organized. As far as the personal profile for the sample, the interviewees were selected within each organization among professionals involved only in producing branded content as opposed to regular editorial tasks (Table 1). They work exclusively in their branded content positions and all are former journalists (most previously formed part of news departments). It is worth noting that all the interviewees have degrees and experience in journalism. Of the total, seven are managing editors with key responsibilities in the tasks at hand, three are professionals who write and edit content, and the eleventh is a product manager. The tasks for several managing editors include coordinating production efforts, creative direction, negotiations and sales. In Spain, "editors" are also known as "directors" (with managerial duties), as opposed to regular "editors" who produce content (writing and editing). In our sample, we interviewed both types of editors. It should be noted that they frequently refer to themselves

**Table 1.** List of interviewees, roles and main tasks in their branded content (BC) team.

News outlet	Role	Main tasks
<i>El Español</i>	BC Managing Editor	Managing
Prisa ( <i>El País</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing
<i>El Confidencial</i>	BC Editor	Managing, producing and designing
Prensa Ibérica	BC Editor	Producing, writing and editing
Henneo ( <i>20 Minutos</i> )	BC Editor	Producing, writing and editing
Vocento ( <i>Abc</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing
<i>El Confidencial</i>	BC Project Manager	Account planning, writing and editing
Prisa ( <i>El País</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing
Godó ( <i>La Vanguardia</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing
Unidad Editorial ( <i>El Mundo</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing
Henneo ( <i>20 Minutos</i> )	BC Managing Editor	Managing

\* The interviewees' roles are only linked to branded content teams.

"journalists", although they were not producing journalism (gathering and reporting news, etc.) at the time of the interview.

## Results

The branded content team that serves *El País* (Prisa Content) was founded in 2014. This unit serves the entire group and is made up of more than 100 people. Most of the editors were brought over from *El País*. The Godó's Brands Lab was created in early 2016, initially with two people, although it now has 15 team members who create branded content projects and special actions for the group's media outlets. They include SEO specialists, analytics experts and designers, in addition to seven content editors. Unidad Editorial developed the first branded content projects in 2012, but their team dates back to 2014, when UEstudio was founded. The group consists of nine editors who write branded content, two camera operators/editors, three production staff members, six designers and two analytics experts, in addition to accounting and project managers.

In 2015, Henneo created a specific brand content unit, made up of 11 editors and two designers, at its Zaragoza headquarters. In 2018, the unit was expanded to Madrid in the form of a team with two editors and a designer who offered their services from the capital following the acquisition of *20 Minutos*. The *El Confidencial* branded content team was founded in 2014, although it focussed on other production tasks. In 2016, it was renamed EC Brands and established as a creative agency that offers services for brands. The team has grown significantly, reaching a total of 16 professionals, of which eight are former journalists. The *El Español* branded content team emerged with the creation of the news outlet in 2016. The unit grew progressively and by 2019 was comprised by three journalists editing branded content who receive assistance from other editorial staff members, particularly in the area of photography/video and design.

The branded content team at Prensa Ibérica was founded in 2017 with two professionals. The unit is now made up of four people: the managing editor, a designer and two editors. The team's work is very horizontal and collaborative because it is organized as a creative team that serves the group's regional newspapers. Similarly, the branded content unit at Vocento (Content Factory) is made up of five professionals:



two editors, two designers and a project manager. Created in 2016, it works centrally for the group's news outlets and forms part of the group's advertising marketer.

### **RQ1. Structure, Processes and Roles**

The size of news outlets is the first conditioning factor for the organizational structure of these departments. In small-sized native media outlets, the average team consists of a managing editor, two editors, a product manager (who coordinates the dates and times for posting content on the website), a designer and a person who handles technological development. All of the departments analysed, regardless of their size, work with external partners specialized in various areas, such as audiovisual production and user analytics.

In the news outlets researched, three organizational models were identified in relation to the rest of the entity. Medium or large-sized national media outlets tended to have an *autonomous model*. In other words, the team is self-sufficient and has all the professionals needed to create this type of content, from the beginning to the final results assessment report for the advertiser (performance metrics). This organizational model does not depend on the editorial department for any key phases of the production process.

There is a second organizational structure we refer to as the *integrated model*. This formula shares the branded content team's design and audiovisual production resources with the rest of the editorial department. Due to its limited size, the branded content team must rely on developers and tech specialists from corporate departments.

Finally, the *emerging model* has been identified in print-centered publishers with less experience in formats, new narratives and other innovative journalism elements. These small departments only include journalists and are sometimes one-person teams. Based on the needs that arise (design, technology and web optimization), the branded content team must rely on the resources of cross-company departments.

In all of these models, the analytics service is centralized within the organization. However, the interviewees state that their branded content departments prepare reports containing consumption data for clients. This task is usually done by product managers, a hybrid professional that sometimes does not write or create content, but remains in contact with the brand, focuses the idea, advises production and ensures the narrative goal of the piece is attained (Poutanen, Luoma-Aho, and Suhanko 2016). These professionals are usually former journalists from the newsroom who have taken on responsibilities in the area of design or new formats, or who have special training in corporate communication.

In addition to the aforementioned product manager, these teams are comprised by other multidisciplinary professionals with journalism training. For example, one of the members of a branded content team holds a degree in Journalism but specializes in this field thanks to a master's degree in Corporate Communication and prior experience in advertising. Another respondent explained that they try to recruit creative profiles with a background in business or public relations. According to this participant, the ultimate goal of this mix is to achieve that complicated balance between the brand's needs and creating useful and interesting information for readers.

However, the highest authority is always an editor with experience in news departments. In fact, an interviewee acknowledges that they prefer professionals who have a journalism background in the branded content team. According to a product manager at a digital news outlet, “It is better if they have never worked in corporate because their journalism profile is perfect for identifying interesting angles for readers.”

Although the idea of a project originates from a brand, it is increasingly common for product managers to submit proposals to a media outlet’s sales department. This flow of proposals emanating from the branded content team and passed on to prospective clients through sales teams relates to other models discussed in the literature (Lynch 2018), where the unit liaises with the client without the sales department’s involvement. The business opportunity in selling a variety of storytelling services opens the door for clients who seek new marketing opportunities, forcing news organizations to turn their studios into ad agencies and selling the narratives that journalists produce (Lynch 2018, p. 97-100). According to a product manager at a digital news outlet, “The sales team catches the prey, and we prepare and serve it”. However, the interviewees explain that brands (or agencies) are the ones who take the first step when it comes to launches, campaigns or reputation crises.

Based on what was mentioned in interviews, the workflow for branded content follows a similar pattern as that of an advertising agency: first the strategy is devised alongside the brand, delving into its communication goals, and then a proposal is prepared. If the client approves the proposal, the editors produce the content. The terms of the agreement determine the frequency, location and date when the piece will be published in the news outlet’s portals.

As far as the separation of sales and editorial departments, the interviewees note that their media outlets keep the branded content team separate from the editorial department, with clearly differentiated tasks. The only exception occurs with designers and programmers, who in some of their organizations tend to be shared with other editorial teams, such as at *El Español*, *El Mundo* and *Henneo*.

Do they encounter resistance in the editorial department of their newsrooms? It depends on the case. Participants confirm this reality, but they generally do not address any specific complaints. The clearest answer is from an editor who notes that resistance emerges when the branded content fails to add value or is not aligned with the media outlet’s philosophy. Another participant from a legacy media admits that the news outlet’s traditional departments know very little about branded content, leading to reluctance: “On a positive note, departments with an eye on the future (developments, new narratives, formats and leadership) are familiar with branded content, and they support us.”

Branded content teams are more aligned with the organization’s business goals and values (Poutanen, Luoma-Aho, and Suhanko 2016; Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020). The need to innovate the business model leads to the creation of these departments, which have a strong business acumen. A respondent asserted that there is no friction between their department and the editorial team. To confirm whether or not that tension exists between professionals on both sides, responses should be obtained from the other journalists. Another branded content editor admits that the supervisor must

have authority and a journalistic background to gain such credit from the rest of the newsroom:

Branded content is a solution and a response to prevent conflict with editorial departments because the content is created according to the editorial style and interests of readers (branded content managing editor at a news group).

There are no issues or reservations, explained a respondent, because "it deals with information of interest that the newspaper could publish without the involvement of a brand. Brands and agencies must be evangelized because many still struggle to accept that this format is advantageous over traditional advertising."

With regard to the location and the editorial calendar, a participant admits that the same criteria is used as for traditional advertising. In other words, the space, frequency and location are determined by the media outlet (explicitly or implicitly). In this sense, a respondent states, news content takes precedence over branded content:

If a colleague from the editorial department has an exclusive, this piece has priority over branded content, which is in turn postponed. These concepts are not timeless. They usually have an angle, or at least that is the goal, and we publish them on the dates that make the most sense.

A managing editor acknowledges that they primarily look after the top section of the front page and position ad-oriented articles along the sides: "We pay attention to the content and make sure it does not sound too much like an advertisement, particularly if it will appear in a prime location on the front page." These decisions are aligned with the news outlet's management, and according to interviewees, editorial guidelines are strictly followed. When asked about the specifics of these guidelines, it seems that a specific document containing branded content parameters does not exist, and they instead refer to an abstract set of rules and norms.

In Spain, there is no specific mention of native advertising or branded content in government regulations. According to article nine of the country's General Advertising Law, all advertising activities should be easily identifiable as such and the media must clearly differentiate informative statements from those that merely serve advertising purposes. However, native advertising is specifically regulated by the independent advertising self-regulatory organization (SRO), which specifies that any "commercial communications must be identifiable as such, regardless of the means, format, or media used" (Autocontrol 1996, 2019):

When commercial communications, including "native advertising," appear in a medium that contains news or editorial content, they must be presented in a way that they are easily recognizable as ads and, when necessary, labelled as such. It must be obvious that the real intent is advertising [...] (article13).

The results show that these branded content teams were created using the same formulas at all of the media outlets analysed, with the organization's size as the fundamental difference in terms of the number of newsroom staff members. Therefore, the emergence of three organizational models shows that the most evolved model is quite similar to how an advertising agency operates. The data reveal that the primary focus of these teams is to serve advertisers and to bring in revenue for the media outlet, but their discourse is based on journalistic values, such as the creation of quality

content. The results reveal that keeping these teams separated from the rest of the editorial staff is perceived as a protective barrier against potential pressure from brands regarding news content, although the ramifications and guidelines of these activities remain unclear. Lastly, the representatives of these teams handle discourses that are more aligned with managerial practices, probably because some of them hold leadership roles in these units.

## ***RQ2. Ethical and Professional Challenges***

Publishers involved in the study also have their own codes of conduct, but they do not specifically mention any limits on native advertising or rules on disclaimers, labels and warnings when using branded content. Five media outlets involved in the sample are affiliated with the Trust Project, an international consortium in which dozens of news organizations work towards transparency and accountability in global news, but there is no specific mention of this practice.

On a professional level, the only ethical reference belongs to FAPE, the leading professional journalist organization in Spain, with more than 49 federated and 17 linked associations that together represent about 19,000 members. The organization promulgates a code of principles and deontological standards for the journalistic profession. Article six states that “so as to not mislead or confuse users, journalists are required to make a formal and rigorous distinction between information and advertising,” and warns that “its simultaneous exercise with advertising goes against the ethics of the journalistic profession”, among other institutional or private activities that could affect the principles and deontological standards of journalism (FAPE, Code of Ethics 1993 and updated in 2017).

Respondents in the study believe that branded content pieces are undertaken with the same professional and ethical standards as news content. Among the terms used by interviewees when referring to producing this format, the words “quality,” “rigor,” “interest” and “editorial coherence” stand out.

The content must be socially relevant or interesting for our readers in order to publish it. Since the team is made up of former journalists, we follow journalistic criteria. We do not publish anything that has not been verified. If an advertiser includes false information, we won't publish it (branded content managing editor of a digital-only news organization).

They believe that this new concept is a hybrid alternative that balances the brand's message with the newspaper's values and philosophy in order to provide useful and interesting content for readers. Unlike native advertising, which has a stronger commercial and persuasive nature, branded content reflects the advertiser's brand values through a story that goes beyond the product, in which making an impact is not the goal:

This content is not shared by a company and does not consist of advertising messages with a journalistic touch. Fundamentally, branded content is content. It is content that creates value in several directions: for readers, for brands and for the newspaper (branded content editor of a digital-only news outlet).

Previous studies have shown that sponsored content represents commercial advocacy that must be kept completely separate from journalistic values, which

respondents believe they protect and secure. In this age of hybrid editors, there is a need to develop such a journalistic code of ethics on sponsored content, which would make the blurred boundaries as distinct as possible (Poutanen, Luoma-Aho, and Suhanko 2016).

An editor from a digital news outlet explains that the journalistic approach is constantly being debated. "We take great pains to ensure the team is equally comprised by people with corporate and journalism backgrounds in order to find that middle ground," explains the participant. "95% of the headlines we publish have been agreed upon by everyone."

However, a respondent from a regional press group points out that branded content is published because "there is an investment, a payment, a collaboration or a brand sponsorship." This participant notes that it is essential to find a balance between news and business because "if branded content is merely viewed as a revenue stream, it will have a very short lifespan."

Do they include an appropriate disclaimer? Participants responded affirmatively to the question. "Our brand and reputation are on the line, so we rigorously follow the recommendation and label absolutely everything," explains a managing editor. Interviewees mention the importance of transparency with readers to ensure credibility. "We cannot take the risk of readers feeling deceived; they must always be perfectly aware of sponsored content," notes another respondent. In fact, they continue, it is essential for the content to be labelled accordingly because this is what brands want: "Sometimes they want a bigger logo, but we have to dissuade them".

In any case, editors understand that unless a disclaimer is used, branded content could be perceived as intrusive, just like traditional advertising. A branded content editor at a regional group believes that this could "undermine readers' trust" and affect the newspaper's reputation. Another participant argues that they try to avoid the confusion by adding a formal disclaimer:

Confusion is avoided if a disclaimer appears at the top. We always include a disclaimer near the top, and on social media, clients are tagged as partners and a disclaimer is added.

Another respondent from a national news outlet also states,

We believe that a disclaimer is essential. Just like opinion pieces are labeled accordingly, the same applies to branded content.

Interviewees distance themselves from advertorials and defend the journalistic value of branded content, which uses stories to connect with the brand's values, but above all, it does so "with the audience's interests in mind since this is what clients want." However, a former branded content editor warns that some of the local editorial departments within the group at which they worked are unfamiliar with the format, resulting in "content more along the lines of an advertorial rather than branded content, and leading to lower quality." In a comparative study on audience perceptions and expectations of content creators and journalists, Banjac and Hanusch (2020) find that a shift towards commercial and market-driven imperatives among both actors leads audiences to disconnect because they feel like consumers sought out primarily for financial gain.

Still, another editor acknowledges that they “work hard to ensure the quality of the topics covered so readers receive valuable information as opposed to an advertorial, regardless of whether a piece has been paid or sponsored by a brand”:

We do not create ads, banners or third-party content. Sometimes a piece may seem more like an advertorial than branded content because companies struggle to understand the formula and remain stuck on traditional paper formats. However, this is becoming less common.

They follow the entity’s editorial criteria to ensure the branded content does not tarnish the media outlet’s standards and editorial style. “We are aware of what can and cannot be done. Many topics are off limits, such as health content, which we believe should follow editorial criteria and requires a certain level of authority for our readers,” explains another respondent. As a participant puts it,

The aim of our branded content is to position leisure as a fundamental part of the project by creating editorial narratives focused on entertainment, and indirectly linking them to the brand’s values.

As shown by Amazeen (2019), in soft-news contexts, consumers tend to be less likely to perceive the commercial intent in native advertising as commercial in nature, and this could indicate that consumers already perceive soft news as having some degree of commerciality.

When participants are asked whether it is possible that readers will be unable to identify a piece as a sponsored content, this depends on the efforts of the professionals involved and also on the format. Data from interviews revealed the complexity and editorial hybridization of this phenomenon. For example, as far as the design and integration in the feed (look and feel), an editor explains that the pieces they create are identical to the rest of the content: they use the same fonts, page layout and visual code as for the rest of the news in the website. The home page also has the same visual style, except for the addition of a logo and/or disclaimers such as “Sponsored by [the brand]” or “[The news outlet] for [the brand]”. In fact, these pieces are usually created through the media outlet’s CMS (content management system).

Some of our branded content pieces are read just as much as any news article, despite having a “Powered by” banner (branded content editor).

On the other end of the spectrum, another respondent asserted that all branded content must have a different design and the writer’s name is always omitted to keep the piece from being confused with a news article. In effect, editors use external CMS templates that are managed directly by the branded team. This decision not only covers the look and feel or editorial criteria, but it also addresses functionality: the piece must be replicated in more than a dozen of the group’s outlets, each with its own design.

Could they possibly be undermining the credibility of their brands?

Conventional advertising is decreasingly effective, so new revenue streams must be found. This is not a bad thing, and when handled accordingly, there is no reason for it to be viewed in a negative light (product manager at a digital-only news operation).

As another editor puts it answering the same question,

Past formulas were worse. If we criticize branded content, then what can be said about advertorials that could not be altered in any way? It is good that the messages brands want to share are filtered by the media and follow their criteria. Which is better? Publishing a piece created by the brand or making something with journalistic criteria? It is useful and interesting information about a popular topic that awakens interest, as proven by analytics. However, a brand happens to be behind it.

A respondent believes that branded content specialists serve as a firewall for business propaganda and public relations. This self-legitimizing perception reveals not only how editors are working together with managers to ensure commercial sustainability, but also how they are actually establishing new boundaries through the practices, discourses and values that set them apart from other fields, i.e. *branded content vs. propaganda* (Carlson and Lewis 2015). However, an editor warns that at precarious or smaller media outlets, there is a risk of producing this type of content with lower standards, thereby betraying the format's supposed positive aspects.

The findings show that there is a hidden contradiction between the participants' perceptions as editors and creators of content for readers and as marketing service providers for brands. The interviewees acknowledge the commercial origin of branded content, however, they do not view branded content as merely an advertising format. This finding is in line with Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2020), in which senior editors and managers stress the need to abandon traditional norms and move towards more integrated organizational solutions, which they associate with positive values such as dialogue, openness, sensitivity and an understanding of other peoples' contributions to shared goals (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020).

According to the participants, branded content would cease to be valuable and simply become an advertorial without the editorial insight of a journalist's mindset and storytelling techniques. In Spain, there is the general perception that certain native advertisements resemble advertorials, so the participants have distanced themselves from this traditional format because there is no editorial involvement. They do not view branded content as advertising, however, it is sold as such, arranged as such and negotiated as such. The use of the term "content" could disguise this conceptual weakness. In summary, there is a range of justifications appealing to different values (for brands, publishers, readers) that the participants suggest are mutually beneficial. The value for brands and publishers can be measured more easily in economic terms, but the value for readers requires a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits, beyond clicks and page views. Competing for a place in a site's most-viewed section is not an adequate way to measure quality for readers, although this perception reflects a deeper and wider issue with what constitutes public interest.

### **RQ3. Future Business Implications**

The interviewees were asked as to the importance of this revenue stream for their news outlet, and the fairly unanimous response was "very important." Over the past year, their departments have grown and are likely to continue to do so based on the upward advertising spending forecasts for this category, as they confirmed.

The interviewees note that their sponsored editorial content studies produce more for an increasing number of clients. Among the portfolio of journalistic formats and

genres, they provide news, the most basic and direct format, with the same style as the rest of the pieces in the website. Participants also agree on the growing importance of video content and multimedia features.

A managing editor believes that the number of branded content requests will increase. In the medium term, proposals will have to be turned down in favour of bigger projects involving long-term relationships between brands and news outlets. "Projects that are more solid and lasting will arise," asserted the respondent.

An editor notes that there is room for growth in persuading certain agencies and clients that cling to formats similar to advertorials. "They understand this upon seeing content of this type among the daily top reads, thanks to the quality of the texts and the connection with readers," suggests another.

Another respondent predicts greater success "with the smart use of data in an effort to adapt content to readers and segment those who are truly interested." To achieve this, the idea is to collect information through surveys, registration systems and cookies. Another editor agrees that data will facilitate personalization, making "branded content as important to readers as other information."

With regard to future trends, a product manager believes that interactivity works very well: when gamification, participation or audience engagement are integrated, there is a spike in consumption time and in positive feedback from readers. For the coming years, the interviewees are certain that, beyond formats and passing trends, content will be key: the bridge between informative and business elements is to create pieces that benefit news outlets and brands, without diminishing reader trust.

The findings show the general consensus that this activity will be a key element in the business model of their media outlets. This agreement is particularly evident in those who hold leadership roles, as opposed to editors and product managers who lack a global perspective of their unit and its impact on the company's numbers. It is important to highlight that branded content editors and other managing journalists are not representative of the broader journalistic professional culture (Carlson 2015). In any case, the discourse of those interviewed replaces journalistic categories such as public interest, editorial responsibility or reader trust, with concepts that are more aligned with the business side, such as innovation, the future, solutions or value creation. On the other hand, as Carlson (2015) notes, the move from the traditional norm of separation to the new norm of integration is not a wholesale rejection of established editorial values, but a shift towards a new set of practices that remain committed to accuracy, fact-based reporting and other journalistic principles.

A new norm of integration, based on combining established editorial values with the concepts of collaboration, adaptation and business thinking, has emerged and already plays a central role in our interviewees' rhetorical and normative discourses (Carlson 2015). The shift is made clear by the terminology used by employees in the interviews and justifies the existence of these teams. Tellingly, Artemas, Vos, and Duffy (2018) find the use of metaphors for introducing an amoral discourse that legitimated closer collaboration between editorial and advertising and presented evidence for how a rhetorical deconstruction or renegotiation of journalism's cultural capital might come about (Artemas, Vos, and Duffy 2018). This has been the case when dealing with the different titles and roles of the editors involved, who sometimes call



themselves “journalists” even though they are not technically producing news of any kind. “We can observe a growing diversity in media content, reflecting a fragmentation of the audiences and a blurring of media genres such as journalism, entertainment and fiction, making journalism more difficult to define as a profession” (Witschge and Nygren 2009).

The adoption of native advertising is slowly showing signs that the discourse on journalistic independence and autonomy is changing from within (Ferrer-Conill 2016). Following Carlson’s (2015) findings, if the norm of separation was supposed to enable professional autonomy in the past, our interviewees argue that the norm of integration (in-house branded content teams) is necessary to enable professional autonomy in the future. Editors describe positive consequences from this commercial orientation, such as newspaper content that is better and sharper, or news that is more relevant to the audience, but this has also led to drastic deteriorations from the perspective of others in journalism (Waldenström, Wiik, and Andersson 2019).

## Conclusions

This article shows how news organizations in Spain introduce branded content teams to adapt their business model to a new advertising demand. The paper is a study of the people who form part of branded content teams and who do not work as regular journalists. Therefore, it is a study of the new practices and values adopted by those involved in producing branded content. The professionals who comprise these teams assume and justify their role in the sustainability of their media outlets (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020; Lynch 2018). The study identifies three organizational models (autonomous, integrated, emerging) in the creation of branded content teams and each of them differ in size, scope and profiles. They are usually comprised by editors who previously worked in news departments and now have new roles as managers, editors and product managers.

We theoretically frame the emergence of branded content teams as a phenomenon related to the transformation of news organizations in the context of media innovation. However, native advertising and branded content are changing the practices and norms of the workers involved, and could undermine their professional role and the fundamental values of journalism. We follow the same path as Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2020) when focussing on the rhetorical and normative discourses of editors to understand how they rationalize their role, how they take on risks and how they evaluate this organizational strategy at their media outlet. The interviews show how they react to ethical concerns and to potential threats affecting the media outlet’s reputation.

The research focussed on editors from eight Spanish media outlets that offer branded content. Three organizational models were identified. Medium or large-sized national media outlets have an *autonomous model* that does not rely on the editorial department for any of the key phases within the production process. There is a second organizational structure we refer to as the *integrated model* that shares the branded content team’s design and audiovisual production resources with the rest of the editorial department. Finally, the *emerging model* has been identified at laggard

media outlets with less experience. These small departments are sometimes one-person teams.

The study reveals the emergence of a hybrid editor that sometimes does not write or create content, but remains in contact with the brand, focuses the idea, advises production and ensures the narrative goal of the piece is attained (Poutanen, Luoma-Aho, and Suhanko 2016). These professionals are usually former journalists from the editorial department who have taken on responsibilities in the area of design or new formats, or who have special training in corporate communication, linking commercial, editorial and visual practices.

We have verified that the professionals involved in branded content teams justify these practices. The respondents studied have seamlessly incorporated the “business” discourse that past studies predicted, and from their perspective, it does not pose an ethical risk. This rationalization of their work is in line with other conceptual research initiatives (Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill 2016; Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020). In balancing the quality of their editorial content with their desire to justify their commercial tasks, branded content team members have found an interstice to embrace their work. The acceptance of their activity suggests that in Spain, branded content has become normalized in a wide range of newsrooms.

Following Carlson (2015), our work provides evidence of the emergence of “norm entrepreneurs,” particularly among those in management roles. Our data show that those in more senior roles seek to normalize advertising–editorial hybrid forms through a set of arguments regarding the editorial quality, ethical standards and sustainability of their news organizations. The results show that the rhetorical and normative discourses of editors attempt to legitimise their new work practices to overcome the problems of editorial-advertising integration by stretching the meanings of their professional standards (Carlson 2015).

The existence of native advertising and branded content teams is as a threat to the traditional separation of church and state as has been warned by many authors (Carlson 2015; Coddington 2015; Ferrer-Conill 2016; Lynch 2018). However, the data we obtained reveal that five of these teams operate independently from the editorial department. Compared with other newsroom editors, they are more in contact with the sales department, which assigns projects to them. However, the study’s ethnographic focus cannot determine the degree to which these teams have affected the editorial outcome of their organizations, which is one of the fundamental aspects of this separation.

The study provides a deeper understanding of the rationales that branded content defenders employ. It shows how they differentiate branded content from other advertising formats, emphasize its hybrid nature, and highlight its usefulness and interest for readers. In their eyes, this format provides interesting information and is markedly different from an advertorial, a term that has sometimes been used to play down the importance of branded content and criticize it as an old entity. There is a clear contradiction between this vision and the marketing strategy implemented by these teams to attract advertisers. If branded content is not advertising, then why is it sold as such, arranged as such and negotiated as such? The use of the term “content” disguises this conceptual weakness and opens new windows to justify this practice.

Specifically, the study finds that there is agreement as to the importance of transparency with readers in order to ensure the credibility and therefore the future of the business model. The analysis of interviews indicates that branded content editors do not want their readers to feel deceived. They want them to have a clear understanding of which content is sponsored, and believe that if readers are informed accordingly, these formats will not harm the journalistic brand's credibility. However, as other studies have found, in the balance between transparency and deception, news organizations do not boldly push for transparency and instead remain ambiguous (Ferrer-Conill et al. 2020).

Extending the conceptualization in previous contributions by Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2020), the study demonstrates how editors from branded content view this new advertising format as a much-needed alternative to help ensure sustainable journalism. As a result, they believe that the branded content teams at media outlets are in the best position to offer these services to brands. In light of the ever-changing digital ecosystem, the interviewees' appreciation of branded content and their essential role in sustaining the business show how editorial and commercial integration became a norm. As Carlson (2015) argues, changes in professional norms are also presented as being necessary to survive in an increasingly challenging media environment.

In conclusion, our findings show a positive endorsement of branded content among those involved in these units, which include managing editors, editors and product managers. It should be clarified that our study examines only commercial enterprises where the integration of such practices is more common and reflects professionals' adaptation to comply with a news organization's goals and values (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019).

While this work addresses the creation of branded content teams and the attitudes of the professionals within those units, it does have certain limitations and shortcomings. More data is needed, especially to gain a deeper understanding of how branded content teams impact the entire structure of the newsrooms. By selecting a sample that is more representative of journalists and reporters, we could better assess how their practices and routines may be affected by the existence of those units. Another limitation is linked to the absence of an extensive content analysis that makes it possible to measure the reality of published pieces, specifically in terms of labelling. It would also be convenient to set up field work research efforts that measure the degree to which these teams are isolated from the rest of the editorial staff, and whether these organizational models provide effective protection against internal or external commercial pressure. Future research should further expand on the three organizational models that have been identified for branded content teams and their evolution in Spain's media industry.

## Notes

1. In Spain, "sponsored content" —as opposed to "branded content"— consists of pieces, formats or sections created entirely by the newsroom and then financed by a brand, and labeled accordingly (using formulas such as "sponsored by" ["patrocinado por"] or "supported by" ["con el apoyo de"]). The professionals involved in our study do not engage with this latter form of sponsorship.

2. The Spanish translation of “branded content” is “contenido de marca,” but the interviewees regularly used the English version instead, sometimes shortened to simply “branded” and omitting “content.” Spanish journalism professionals frequently use English terms for innovative phenomena, such as “product manager,” “fact-checking,” and “clickbait,” as well as acronyms like “SEO” (search engine optimization) and “CMS” (content management system).

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