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### Discussion

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

Tamar Lahav\*, Dorit Zimand-Sheiner

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

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### ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

The current article has four objectives:

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

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

## 2. Paid content profile

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

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

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

## 3. Technological changes and its impact on PR practice

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

changes have become a driving force in the way PR practitioners are developing and maintaining corporate brands and images (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008).

The development of digital communication channels and social networks led to the creation of new practices applied by digital specialist PR practitioners. In this context, Paine (2009) asserts that the emergence of new media tools bolster the claim that social media demands various new approaches to PR and new types of PR expertise. It can reasonably be assumed that new digital technologies facilitating embedded paid content are among the factors that have changed the practice of PR.

### 3.1. Israeli PR and embedded paid DCM

In Israel, invasive online paid content practices began in the second decade of the 21st century, when the Israeli communications industry suffered an economic crisis. The Ifat Group, an Israeli company supplying analyzed and processed information, published data showing that in 2011 advertising in Israel decreased by 4.5% (Toker, 2012). A possible reason for this decline was the sudden appearance of a local social movement that organized vocal demonstrations across the country, protesting against high costs of living. These massive social protests could have played a role in marketers drastically slashing advertising volumes (Bein-leibovitz, 2012). Moreover, the decrease in annual advertising spending followed a prolonged decline in newspaper publishing, which led to drying up of print media and television channel revenues, and, ultimately, the closure of a few venerable newspapers (Mann & Lev-On, 2014).

Although advertising expenditures have decreased, the use of paid DCM has flourished in the form of using content distributors and buying articles from major news websites and bloggers. A considerable segment of paid DCM is managed by PR practitioners who buy content from the media and also buy content distribution. The relative simplicity of distributing paid content in digital media can be attributed to two well-known international companies established by Israeli entrepreneurs, Taboola and Outbrain. These companies allow PR practitioners to engage in the practice of embedded paid DCM by promoting sponsored content on platforms which drive traffic to articles, blogs, and to sponsored content recommendations on websites. In other words, this practice enhances PR ability to control content (text, video), but also allows segmentation of target markets, timing control, and location (Web platforms) control. Needless to say, to secure such control is not free of charge. Other drawbacks of embedded paid DCM include lack of transparency as to the content source, the obsolescence of media relations, and the inequality such that publics are not dialogue partners, but receptors of imposed messages.

In view of the changes in the Israeli media map and due to deficient regulation, it can be assumed that in the looming future, the practice of embedded paid DCM will continue to flourish, and Israeli media consumers will be subjected to it in increasing amounts on various digital platforms. The content will be promoted with the help of advanced technologies, and its effective use will help PR practitioners blend effectively, but not morally, the online ecosystem with stakeholder needs.

And so three major questions of PR practice are raised: 1. Does payment for content – which entails PR practitioners control over content that receive publicity demand a review of PR practice definitions? 2. Does the new practice of paid DCM makes give-and-take relationships with journalists and the “two-way symmetric model” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) redundant in the digital channels? 3. What are the ethical implications of embedded DCM for PR practitioners and brand stakeholders?

## 4. Public relations definitions

The examination of definitions of PR, and reviewing the differences between PR and advertising, is a necessary precondition for any discussion of embedded paid DCM. One of the many definitions of PR is “the development of and maintenance of good relationships with different publics” (Smith & Zook, 2011). This definition is in the spirit of previous definitions focusing on PR as a management of the relationship between organizations and stakeholders, such as “PR is responsibility and responsiveness in policy and information to the best interests of the institution and its publics” (Newsom & Scott, 1985) or “PR is the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) describe PR as “strategic management of communication, and point out the developing of relationships between an organization and its external as well as internal publics (such as the organization’s employees). The role of PR is to promote a favorable image of the organization by building mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Cutlip, 1989; Lahav & Avraham, 2008). That is to say, PR practitioners are in the business of building relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (e.g., investors, suppliers, consumers, the community, journalists, the government, etc.), leading to a positive image.

These definitions emerge from the ‘two-way symmetric model’ (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), based on two-way communication. On the one hand the model represents the organization’s own interests, and, on the other hand, the public interests. Organizations respond to stakeholder needs and aspirations, but also introduce and clarify their actions to avoid misunderstandings, minimize disputes, and to gain mutual understanding (Grunig, 1989; Ikpe & Olise, 2010; Ledingham, 2009).

Since the embedded paid DCM practice diminishes the necessity for two-way communication, and thus of the “two-way symmetric model” – we suggest that definitions of PR as a practice that buys content should be reviewed and re-discussed, especially in view of the digital arena and in the context of marketing PR.

#### 4.1. Marketing public relations (MPR)

Practitioners who view PR practice as a messaging, publicity, informational, and media relations exercise often define PR as a marketing communications function (Grunig, 2009). The contribution of PR for marketing purposes has been broadly discussed (e.g. Kitchen, 1996; Kotler, 1982; White, 1991), and from a marketing perspective PR publicity function is used primarily as a tactical marketing campaign support tool (Kotler, 2000; Moss et al. 1997). It also possesses a strategic role through managerial PR, carrying out activities typical of the managerial level such as deciding on communications policies and strategic goals (Lages & Lages, 2005; Lages & Simkin, 2003).

#### 4.2. PR and control

One tool of PR activity is positive *publicity*, which Belch and Belch (2009) define as “communications regarding an organization, product, service, or idea that is not directly paid for or run under identified sponsorship.” Bivins (2009) adds that PR does not actually pay the media for positive publicity and defines it as ‘free coverage provided usually by the media and instigated by such message vehicles as press conferences, press releases, and product publicity’, and remarks that unpaid publicity is “uncontrolled information” as it turns over the control of the message to the media. Namely, traditional PR practitioners have no control over whether the message will appear in the media, in which medium, and – if it appears – when and in what way (positive or negative) (Arens, Schaefer, & Weigold, 2012; Egan, 2007).

On the opposite side, the key advantages of advertising are marketer ability to control the content of the message delivered by the advertisement and power to choose the media by which the message is transferred as well as the exact timing of its appearance (Arens, 2006; Belch & Belch, 2009). The use of the expression ‘control the content’ is not new, and Bolen (1981) defined advertising as informing and persuading a selected market through any controlled form of non-personal promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor. Four years later, Newsom and Scott (1985) deepened the discussion about control, claiming that advertisers nearly always have total control over the message, context in which it will appear, and medium.

We claim that the penetration of PR into buying digital media and thus buying control in the same way as advertising compels the question: Is there an essential difference among definitions of advertising and PR in the digital era or are the lines between the two blurring as an outcome of paid DCM? Moreover, advertising practitioners, by fighting consumer awareness advertisements through increased use of paid DCM that is unidentifiably-sourced, also contributes to ambiguous line between PR and advertising. PR publicity is unidentified by nature but advertising is identified by definition. Therefore, the two practices using embedded paid DCM strengthen our argument, as outlined above.

#### 4.3. PR and media relations

Publicity through media relations is focused on pragmatic relationships with media people. According to Newsom and Scott (1985), to formalize these relations PR practitioners should follow a number of steps such as informing themselves about individuals who work in the news industry, using courteous and considerate manners with newpeople, and being available to answer their questions. Lahav and Avraham (2008) claim that close personal relationships between PR practitioners and journalists are not spontaneous, but rather initiated, forming give-and-take interactions. Moreover, journalists are also interested in nurturing these relationships since they believe them to be professionally and personally beneficial.

PR research has confirmed that give-and-take relationships between PR practitioners and journalists, known as media relations, help the former to obtain better access to the media. About thirty years ago, Grunig and Hunt (1984) noted that media relations are traditionally the function associated with PR practice, as the media are the gatekeepers controlling the information that flows to other publics. The practice of media relations exists nowadays, as close personal relationships between PR practitioners and journalists help the former to receive better access to the media on an everyday basis and in times of crisis (Lahav & Avraham, 2008), and functions to maintain media contacts and to disseminate newsworthy press releases (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 2013). Enhancing media relations endows PR practitioners with power (Bovet, 1995) especially when these relations are facilitated by journalist work.

The Internet has completely changed this component of media relations in PR work, since it offered PR practitioners numerous possibilities to improve their professional expertise and streamlined nearly all forms of communication (Mayhall, 2005). The Web is quickly emerging as a key PR tool, and quality media relations and media coverage are facilitated by immediately directing journalists to company homepages (Callison, 2003). From the perspective of PR practitioners, the Internet plays a significant role as a channel for conveying information to the public or subgroups within it (Wright & Hinson, 2010), as well as a channel for conversation and community (Gillin, 2008). In other words, the Internet and especially Web 2.0 encourages conversation, interaction, collaboration and more between organizations and their stakeholders (Richardson & Laville, 2010). In this context, the significance of the Internet is in giving priority to the development of focused relationships with target audiences and to the creation of an ongoing dialogue between parties (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). That is, in the traditional media ecosystem, media relations existed between PR practitioners and journalists, in digital media, media relations expanded and now exist between PR practitioners and journalists, consumers, customers, and other stakeholders. But when it comes to PR practitioners engaged in embedded paid DCM, fostering relationships based on trust and mutual understanding with journalists is not a requirement, and the role of journalists as objective mediators between PR messages



and its publics is rendered moot. Moreover, even if the content of embedded messages is respectful, understanding, and considerate of the needs and desires of the target audience, it would still be perceived as misleading as its source is not transparent. Thus, the long-standing notion that there is a “wall” separating editorial content of news organizations from its business organization counterpart, endowing both with a sort of credibility – is no longer relevant (Berkman & Shumaway, 2003).

## 5. Embedded paid DCM and PR models and theory

Embedded paid DCM involving payment to the media for the distribution of PR content completely contradicts the principles of the “two-way Symmetric model. It can be assumed that a new model is emerging, which has nothing to do with the symmetrical communication that PR practitioners should aspire to, and is more comparable to the ‘press agency/publicity model.’ According to this model, the primary goal of an organization is to convince (even with manipulative methods) the public to act according to its needs. Thus, the voice of the public is not important and is not considered (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Furthermore, embedded paid DCM can be associated with functional PR, a perspective that was widespread decades ago, mainly focusing on production of strategic organizational messages. As for this pragmatic practice, Botan and Taylor (2004) state that the major relationship interest while practicing functional communication activity, is between PR practitioners and media journalists, hence utilitarian theories can be employed. These researchers claim that as the PR field became more interested in theoretical issues, it expanded to a cocreational perspective emphasizing that publics are partners and not means to an end, and the major relationship interest activity is between publics and organizations. Bruning and Ledingham (2000) state that the cocreational approach’s main component is multi-stage dialogue between organizations and its publics, mediated by PR practitioners (i.e., the organization is willing to see the public as an equal interlocutor). These researchers consider the two-way communications model as ineffective since the model is not based on the construction of planned, cultivated, and maintained relationships with the public.

We argue that the new cocreational approach is irrelevant when it comes to unidentified paid DCM, and pulls us back to functional PR. In other words, the predicted transition from the functional perspective, with its top priority of promoting organizational objectives, to the cocreational approach, with its essence in establishing trustworthy relationships between organizations and its publics, cannot be completely executed due to the appearance of the relatively new PR practice of embedded paid content.

## 6. Ethical implications of paid DCM on PR

Traditionally, buying media and receiving a commission from media was the exclusive domain of advertising agencies. However, nowadays PR practitioners, who are expected to deliver publicity through media relations or stakeholders relations without paying the media for exposure, are in the midst of an accelerated process of buying DCM. Whether this involves paying for the writing or dissemination of editorial content, PR is no longer restricted to unpaid media promoting marketer messages. Since Paid DCM is media purchased by the marketer, like “native advertising” we forewarn for the potential blurred lines in the media environment of Israel.

The immense impact of digital media on PR practitioners brings up ethical considerations regarding embedded paid DCM practice, and PR practitioners are continuously charged with unethical conduct.

Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) consider four factors regarding this state of the PR industry: (a) lack of clear definition of parameters for PR work; (b) error in perception by PR that has not fully extricated itself from its journalistic roots, and therefore still sees itself as acting in accordance with a standard of journalistic objectivity; (c) absence of state regulations resulting in PR industry defining its own work standards; and (d) “guilt by association” – the reflexive linking of ethics and values of organizations represented by PR practitioners with those of PR practitioners themselves.

However, a “PR ethical dilemmas model” could conceivably partially rehabilitate the troubling state that the PR industry is currently in (Limor & Rashi, 2012). This model aims to introduce techniques for allaying PR ethical dilemmas, and to integrate the ethics from the worlds of abstract values and performative action. It is based on five stages, with the fifth formulating tactics for implementing ethical and professional strategies. This stage includes a host of ethical issues: truth, accuracy, fairness, social responsibility, boundaries of the organization/client and PR practitioners, public right to know, public demand for transparency, and accountability.

According to the “two-way Symmetric model, symmetrical communication relationships between organizations and its stakeholders are based on dialogue leading to mutual understanding, and so these relations are not based on concealment and manipulation that characterize the field of paid DCM. On the contrary, PR ethics consist of such values as loyalty, respect, honesty, and integrity. PR ethical guidelines ‘eschew secrecy’ and ‘avoid deception’ (Bowen, 2007; Bowen 2013), with the practice of two-way symmetrical communication having the potential to promote better relationships between organizations and its stakeholders and thereby contributing to higher organizational effectiveness, greater profits, and stronger ethics (Grunig & Grunig, 2013). Limor et al. (2014) propose three reasons why PR organizations adopt and formulate a code of ethics: (a) to gain social recognition for their profession and professional status; (b) to depict their occupation and differentiate it from other occupations; and (c) to win a sort of “stamp of approval” violation of which allows the profession to drive out those who deviate from the code guidelines.

The rules of the Professional Ethics of the Association of Media Consultants and Public Relations in Israel (ISPRA) do not discuss the issue of paid content nor place rules against this practice, and only refers to public misleading in two chapters. Chapter 2: Basic Provisions, Section 4, A states: “To serve his client and employer with loyalty, dedication, devotion, honesty, accuracy and with public accountability”. Chapter 5, Section 17 states: “A member should not disseminate misleading information and will do everything possible to check veracity of information disseminated by him”.

The two expressions “public accountability” and “misleading information” are the only ones discussing the commitment of PR practitioners to their publics, since most sections of the ethical code focus on the member and his clients and colleagues, disciplinary offenses and penalties.

## 7. Conclusion

As can be imagined, embedded paid DCM is not a phenomenon unique to Israel, and it exists in many countries around the world. But insights from Israel may very well be generalizable. This could be partly due to the state of Israel's content marketing industry. The main growth in Israel emerges from digital media, expressed by a growth of 150% in the last five years in the major Israeli sites, including *Ynet*, *Walla*, and *Mako*, with revenues comprising 30% of total revenue of digital media (Toker, 2015). When paid DCM is embedded into our main digital information channels, often hiding commercial messages, readers may be confused between editorial content and paid content on behalf of marketers. This confusion might lead to a decline in trustworthiness of media organizations and business organizations using this practice.

The argument that PR practitioners have an advantage in achieving better results over advertising experts (Toledano, 2010) is irrelevant when it comes to the field of embedded paid DCM since it is being used by both industries. Thus we suggest that the lines between digital PR and digital advertising are blurring. Is it possible that we are witnessing a convergence of procedures leading to one practice that could be called *marketing communications*?

The embedded paid DCM is a developing practice in a continuously changing world. It might continue to be the focus of PR practitioners in the coming future, or, find its place as just another tool in the marketing communications tool-kit, delimited by regulators on the one hand and public opinion on the other. Therefore, a long-term tracking study would be necessary in order to determine whether this process of blurred lines will diminish and whether PR practitioners (as well as their digital advertising counterparts) will continue to diverge in their practices.

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