

News vs. Advertising: Does the Audience Perceive the 'Journalistic Distinction'?

Evidence indicates the audience does not perceive either news or advertising as a homogeneous content category, distinct from the other, in the media.

► Journalists traditionally maintain a clear distinction between the news and advertising content of the media. More than 20 years ago, Mott recognized that "advertising, too, has great news value."¹ However, more typically, the two are regarded as clearly separate categories. For example, one of the most widely used textbooks in journalism distinguishes the editorial department from the advertising department of newspapers on the basis that editorial "gathers and prepares the news" while advertising "solicits and prepares the commercial messages."² Another widely used introduction to journalism textbook states "that more than half of their (newspapers') content isn't news at all, but advertising."³ A reporting textbook states that "on most newspapers advertising determines to a very large extent the size of the paper and the amount of news space on a given day."⁴

In journalism schools, both professors and students often perceive of themselves as either news-editorial or advertising. Advertising sometimes is divorced from journalism and located in the business school. In the media, there are separate

news-editorial and advertising departments, generally with little or no interaction between their personnel.

This separatism is based on both journalistic tradition and a production perspective. Advertising is the "paid for" content which supports the news content, and traditional wisdom considers the news content as the part of the media that the audience needs and/or wants most. While recent studies are challenging this simplistic categorization, advertising, at least implicitly, is often considered as a necessary evil. For example, one text book states:

The typical daily newspaper is mildly entertaining—though not as entertaining as television. It is reasonably informative—though not as informative as many magazines. And it is a superlative vehicle for local advertising. Will that be sufficient rationale for a mass medium in 1980?⁵

Journalists tend to project their perceptions of media content categories to the audience. It is assumed that the audience clearly distinguishes between the advertising and nonadvertising content of the media and, like journalists, considers advertising as a homogeneous concept across media. However, there is a growing body of evidence which challenges these journalistic assumptions.

¹ Frank Luther Mott, *The News in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 11.

² Edwin Emery, Phillip H. Ault and Warren K. Agee, *Introduction to Mass Communications* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1973), p. 175.

³ Peter M. Sandman, David M. Rubin and David B. Sachsman, *Media: An Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communications* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice/Hall Inc., 1972), p. 237.

⁴ John Hohenberg, *The Professional Journalist* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 44.

⁵ Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

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A 1975 study of a small, rural daily newspaper led to the conclusion that readers "view advertising as a source of local news."⁶ A similar conclusion was reported in a study of newspapers in 14 communities in various parts of the country.

The authors wrote that:

... these data argue strongly that use of the media for news and preference of the ads in the media are related. While the direction of effect is not discernible from these studies, the implication is that the news and advertising departments do not operate independently in the minds of audience members. While the professionals in the departments may see their tasks as separate, the readers seem not to agree.⁷

Based on these and other studies, three tentative hypotheses were derived:

H1. In the context of perceived interest, the audience does *not* consider advertising and nonadvertising content of the newspaper as distinct categories.

H2. In the context of attitudes toward television content, the audience *does* distinguish between the advertising and nonadvertising content of the medium.

H3. Audience attitudes are more favorable toward newspaper advertising than toward television advertising.

Methodology

The hypotheses were tested by extensive re-analysis of data collected during 1974 in a large metropolitan area. The instrument contained 342 statements relating to life-styles, readership habits, perceived interest in various types of content and attitudes toward the media and advertising. It was administered to a random sample of the metropolitan area population, with 251 usable instruments returned. A sub-sample of 109 completed instruments was randomly selected for factor analyses.

To test the first hypothesis, 43 reader-interest statements were factor-analyzed,

⁶ Ernest F. Larkin, Gerald L. Grotta and Barbara DePlois, *Newspaper Advertising: Who Reads It?* Oklahoma Journalism Reports No. 3, May 1975, p. 2.

⁷ Lee B. Becker, Raymond A. Martino and Wayne M. Towers, *Media Advertising Credibility*, Communications Research Center, Syracuse University, September 1975, pp. 8-9.

using R-analysis. Eight of the statements were identified as advertising content, and the remaining 35 were news story items. If the audience clearly distinguished between advertising and nonadvertising items, we would expect the advertising items to cluster into one type.

The second hypothesis was tested by calculating mean scores for the full sample of 251 on 16 statements that related to attitudes toward and use of television. In the context of expressed attitudes, we would expect no clear pattern relating to statements to emerge if the audience did not distinguish between the advertising and nonadvertising content of television.

The third hypothesis was tested in two ways. First, the mean scores for the full sample were calculated for nine statements that related to newspaper content. If the audience did not distinguish between newspaper and television advertising content, we would expect to find similar patterns emerge in both the television and newspaper attitude statements. To further test the third hypothesis, 39 statements relating to advertising content were factor-analyzed. In the R-analysis, we would expect the statements relating to television and newspapers to cluster together into types if the audience did not perceive any dimensions of difference between advertising content in the two media.

Results

The results of the analyses must be viewed with caution because of the *post-hoc* nature of the study. However, on the basis of the analyses, all three hypotheses received support.

Newspaper Advertising. The 43 reader-interest statements factored into 11 types, which accounted for 50.1% of the variance.

Most of the types were easily interpretable; e.g., Type 2 contained five sports-related items, Type 3 contained three violence-related items, Type 5 contained three fine-arts-related items, etc. (Table 1)

However, the eight items identified as relating to advertising content were dispersed among six types rather than clustering into a single type. Two advertising items were in Type 1, two in Type 5, one

TABLE 1

R-Analysis of Reader-Interest Statements

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Next Highest Loading*</i>
Type 1		
Vacation homes are advertised in nearby resort area .....	.544*	.216 (9)
X-rated movie showing in (name of county) .....	.515	.394 (8)
Auto manufacturer advertises special prices in spring clearance .....	.471*	.208 (8)
Eastern (name of state) lakes attract fishermen .....	.377	.271 (2)
Camping boom expected in national parks this summer .....	.239	.236 (9)
Political expert rates election chances of Democratic candidates in (name of city) mayoralty primary.....	.176	.145 (4)
Type 2		
Dallas Cowboys in major football trade.....	.725	.141 (4)
International field shapes up for Wimbledon tennis competition .....	.498	.135 (1)
High school football star from (name of local school) to play for Stanford.....	.494	.101 (7)
Atlanta Braves draft high school baseball star from (name of local school) .....	.471	.176 (1)
(Name of nearby state university) stadium lights meets opposition from environmentalists .....	.262	.161 (8)
Type 3		
(Name of nearby town) infant drowns in neighbor's pool.....	.680	.077 (6)
Two (name of nearby town) men seriously injured in car accident .....	.628	.096 (9)
Fifteen die as bus plunges into ravine in Europe.....	.626	.328 (4)
(Name of state) Highway Patrol seize truckload of pornographic film .....	.428	.204 (6)
Navy airman recruit from (name of nearby town) completes training .....	.320	.156 (1)
Type 4		
International peace discussions continue in Paris .....	.617	.120 (8)
Inmates free guards after negotiations with Ohio prison authorities .....	.587	.348 (3)
University students and police battle over release of jailed students in Egypt .....	.501	.294 (3)
British Parliament takes action on new controls over inflation.....	.434	.164 (9)
Type 5		
Tokyo theater group to conduct U.S. college tour.....	.676	.053 (4)

TABLE 1, *continued*

R-Analysis of Reader-Interest Statements

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Next Highest Loading⁺</i>
Area artists open exhibit of oils and water colors in (name of shopping mall).....	.549	.123 (6)
Weekend trip ideas advertised by state tourist association.....	.435*	.189 (6)
New play sells out nightly at the (name of local theater).....	.428	.121 (8)
Food specials advertised by (name of super-market).....	.350*	.194 (8)
New head to be named for Negro college fund .....	.283	.243 (2)
Type 6		
(name of state) Senate to consider legalized gambling .....	.594	.188 (8)
Tax consultant proposes major changes in U.S. tax structure.....	.550	.239 (4)
(Name of state) state leaders oppose cutback of poverty programs .....	.413	.246 (5)
(Name of local bank) advertises new interest rates for savings accounts .....	.293*	.209 (2)
Type 7		
School Board members in (name of nearby town) to present new grading plan to school administration .....	.700	.066 (8)
(Name of county) announces panel to study basic educational skills .....	.540	.122 (8)
(Name of state) Blue Cross extends maternity benefits to single girls .....	.442	.206 (1)
Teenagers ask (nearby town) officials for recreation centers .....	.346	.306 (9)
Child care center opens in (name of nearby town).....	.305	.277 (5)
(Name of county) needs tax hike to meet budget.....	.275	.214 (6)
Class size in (name of city) suburban schools average 20 to 25 students.....	.205	.170 (8)
Type 8		
Doctors use animal experiments to study the nature and treatment of alcoholism .....	.568	.227 (1)
U.S. hijack prevention measures encouraged throughout the world .....	.480	.224 (1)
Book club advertises special offer.....	.275*	.246 (1)

TABLE 1, *continued*

R-Analysis of Reader-Interest Statements

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Next Highest Loading⁺</i>
Type 9		
TV station advertises tonight's special programs .....	.680*	.230 (1)
Type 10		
(Name of local department store) advertises storewide clearance sale.....	.366*	.312 (5)
Type 11		
Unemployment in (name of county) down in first quarter of 1973.....	.216	.208 (4)

*Advertising content statements.

+Number in parenthesis is type in which second highest loading occurred.

in Type 6, one in Type 8, one in Type 9 and one in Type 10. Additionally, the advertising items tended to fall into types containing news items related to the same subject. For instance, the two advertising items in Type 1 involved vacation homes and automobile prices. Other statements in Type 1 included items relating to camping and fishing. The advertising item in Type 6 involved interest rates at a bank, and the other three statements in Type 6 were news items related to financial matters. On the second-highest loadings, the eight advertising items again dispersed among six types.

Several Q-analyses were run, with various combinations of the 43 reader-interest statements and statements dealing with reading habits, attitudes toward the media, etc. No types emerged from any of the analyses in which there was a pattern of either reading or avoiding all advertising items.

The data are consistent with previous studies and tend to support the hypothesis that newspaper readers do *not* distinguish between "advertising" and "news" content in the context of perceived interests. If the content contains information of perceived interest and/or value to the reader, it apparently is considered "information" rather than "news" or "advertising," contrary to the traditional journalistic distinction.

Television Advertising. Mean scores were calculated for the full sample of 251 on 16 statements that relate to attitudes toward and use of television. Although attitudes toward television in general are highly favorable, all but one attitude statement relating to *television advertising* are negative. (Table 2)

There was almost total agreement with the statement, "I like television news programs," with a mean score of 4.28 (5 = strongly agree). Other statements with "agree" mean scores included "You learn quite a lot from television," 3.74; "Television is our primary source of entertainment," 3.72 and 3.68 (statement repeated in instrument); and "Every family with teen-age children should have more than one TV set," 3.31.

On the other hand, all statements relating to television advertising received negative ratings. For example, one statement (repeated in the instrument), "There is too much advertising on television," received mean scores of 4.03 and 3.93, indicating strong agreement. Other negative statements with high agreement mean scores included, "TV commercials insult my intelligence," 3.83; and another statement repeated in the instrument, "I don't pay much attention to radio and/or television commercials," 3.23 and 3.21.

The two positive statements on televi-

TABLE 2

Attitudes Toward Television, Full Sample of 251

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean Score*</i>
I like television news programs	4.28
There is too much advertising on television.....	4.03
There is too much advertising on television.....	3.93
TV commercials insult my intelligence	3.83
You learn quite a lot from television.....	3.74
Television is our primary source of entertainment.....	3.72
There is too much violence on TV today.....	3.70
Television is our primary source of entertainment.....	3.68
Television advertisements represent the latest trends and newest products	3.58
You can't believe what you see on television	3.35
Every family with teen-age children should have more than one TV set.....	3.31
I don't pay much attention to radio and/or television commercials.....	3.23
I don't pay much attention to radio and/or television commercials.....	3.21
I watch more television than I should	3.17
Television advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	2.70
Newspaper advertising is less informative than TV advertising	2.46

*5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree; 3 = neutral.

sion advertising both received mean scores indicating disagreement. "Television advertising is a real benefit to the housewife" received a mean score of 2.70 and "Newspaper advertising is less informative than TV advertising" received a mean score of 2.46.

Thus, the people in the sample apparently have different attitudes toward the advertising and nonadvertising content of television. They perceive television as a primary source of entertainment and like television news programs, but dislike television commercials.

Newspapers vs. Television. In contrast, respondents did not make a similar distinction on statements relating to newspaper content. (Table 3)

Both general attitudes toward the newspaper and toward newspaper advertising are favorable. The strongest agreement was with the statement, "When I'm interested in the details of something, I prefer the newspaper to radio or television," with a mean score of 4.05 (5 = strongly agree). The advertising statements are intermixed with general statements about newspapers, and all advertising statements are favorable toward newspapers.

It is interesting to note that in response to the statement, "I enjoy reading the ads in a newspaper more than the actual news," 10% of the full sample either agreed or strongly agreed and another 22% were neutral. However, if the first hypothesis is valid, the statement may have been mean-

TABLE 3

Attitudes Toward Newspapers, Full Sample of 251

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean Score*</i>
When I'm interested in the details of something, I prefer the newspaper to radio or television.....	4.05
I like a newspaper that tells about people who live in my town and things that are happening there.....	3.90
My daily paper is a regular part of my life.....	3.90
Newspaper advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	3.69
Newspaper advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	3.56
I read the paper when I'm looking for something specific or a particular news item.....	3.53
Before going shopping, I usually check the newspaper for prices, styles, etc.....	3.11
I pay little or no attention to ads in the newspapers.....	2.65
I enjoy reading the ads in a newspaper more than the actual news.....	2.18

*5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree; 3 = neutral.

ingless to many respondents who do not distinguish between advertising and news and consider advertising as "actual news."

To further test the third hypothesis, 39 statements relating to advertising were factor analyzed. In the R-analysis, the statements clustered into seven types, and several perceived dimensions of advertising clearly emerged. (Table 4)

Type 1 statements (n=4) all relate to television advertising and all are negative statements. The 13 statements in Type 2 are print-oriented, with eight specifically mentioning newspapers and two mentioning "Consumer Reports" type publications. Type 3 statements (n=6) related primarily to the role of personal influence in purchase decisions. Six of the nine statements in Type 4 involve the general concept of consumer benefits from advertising. All three statements in Type 5 refer to not paying attention to advertising, both in broadcast and newspapers. The lone statement in Type 6 referred to the role of habit in purchasing. Two of the three statements in Type 7 are related to newspaper advertising, and the third statement is not identified by medium.

In general, then, the statements relating

to television advertising tended to cluster into different types than those relating to newspaper advertising. The only exceptions are those statements relating to perceived consumer benefits from advertising and statements referring to not paying attention to advertising.

Thus, the data offer tentative support for the hypothesis that consumers do make a rather clear distinction between some dimensions of television and newspaper advertising, with attitudes toward newspaper advertising more favorable than toward television advertising.

Summary and Conclusions

Extensive re-analyses of data from a 1974 study in a large metropolitan area offer support for the three hypotheses advanced in this study. In the context of perceived interest, the audience tends not to make a clear distinction between advertising and nonadvertising content in newspapers. Rather, it appears to regard the content of newspapers as a source of information, regardless of whether the journalist categorizes the information as "news" or "advertising." The audience, on the other

TABLE 4

R-Analysis of Advertising-Related Statements, Sub-Sample of 109.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Next Highest Loading⁺</i>
Type 1		
There is too much advertising on television .....	.482	.460 (5)
There is too much advertising on television .....	.448	.427 (5)
TV commercials insult my intelligence.....	.408	.401 (5)
You can't believe what you see on television.....	.288	.276 (2)
Type 2		
I often look for ads in newspapers before I go shopping.....	.758	-.002 (5)
I study the grocery store ads in the paper each week so that I can make the best buys.....	.753	.114 (4)
I study the grocery store ads in the paper each week so that I can make the best buys.....	.733	.112 (1)
Before going shopping, I usually check the newspaper for prices, styles, etc .....	.673	.088 (1)
Food specials advertised by (name of store) .....	.656	.007 (3)
Advertisements are an important part of the newspaper for me .....	.617	.075 (3)
I watch the advertisements for announcements of sales.....	.602	.193 (4)
I save coupons from newspapers .....	.530	.129 (1)
Furniture advertising in newspapers has an important influence on my buying.....	.443	.226 (3)
(name of local store) advertises a storewide clearance sale.....	.438	.267 (3)
Weekend trip ideas advertised by state tourist association.....	.285	.217 (3)
I usually consult "Consumer Reports" or similar publications before making a major purchase.....	.271	.161 (3)
"Consumer Reports" and similar publications are very reliable sources of information about brands.....	.101	.079 (1)
Type 3		
I often seek out the advice of friends regarding which brand to buy .....	.747	.081 (1)
I spend a lot of time talking with my friends about products and brands.....	.692	.018 (2)
I influence what my friends buy.....	.631	.119 (5)
Information I get about a product from a friend is usually more reliable than advertising .....	.534	.483 (5)
I am an impulse-shopper .....	.264	-.046 (4)
TV station advertises tonight's special program .....	.224	.079 (4)

TABLE 4, *continued*

R-Analysis of Advertising-Related Statements, Sub-Sample of 109

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Next Highest Loading⁺</i>
Type 4		
I think that national advertising of most products does benefit the average consumer.....	.685	-.018 (1)
I think advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	.663	.184 (2)
Newspaper advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	.469	.259 (2)
Newspaper advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	.456	.326 (2)
Television advertising is a real benefit to the housewife.....	.406	.145 (3)
Television advertisements represent the latest trends and newest products.....	.246	.064 (3)
Auto manufacturer advertises special prices in spring clearance.....	.236	.105 (3)
My choice of brands for many products is influenced by advertising.....	.221	.155 (3)
(Name of local bank) advertises new interest rates for savings accounts.....	1.099	.076 (3)
Type 5		
I don't pay much attention to radio and/or television commercials.....	.571	.543 (1)
I don't pay much attention to radio and/or television commercials.....	.504	.494 (1)
I pay little or no attention to ads in newspapers.....	.498	.242 (2)
Type 6		
I feel that most of the buying I do is based on habit.....	.504	.425 (3)
Type 7		
Newspaper advertising is less informative than TV advertising.....	.438	.119 (3)
Book club advertises special offer.....	.226	.158 (2)
I enjoy reading the ads in a newspaper more than the actual news.....	.182	.142 (2)
+Number in parenthesis is the type in which the second highest loading occurred.		

hand, does appear to distinguish between the advertising and nonadvertising content of television in the context of attitudes toward the medium. It appears to perceive television as a primary source of entertainment and is favorable toward televi-

sion news, but tends to be negative toward television advertising. Finally, the audience appears to be generally more favorable toward newspaper advertising than toward television advertising.

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Both the mail and telephone samples overestimated the number of public radio listeners. Listeners in these two samples were most adamant in their preferences for classical music. Therefore, these two samples will probably be useful only for purposes of determining changes in programming for unique music offerings. Conversely, the dormitory sample overestimated the desire for popular music. Obviously, programming decisions based on results collected for college students will not satisfy the needs of public radio listeners likely to be on a subscriber list. Based on these findings, the only valid data in this study were obtained in the baseline sample. Further, for slightly more money, the station manager could randomly survey his or her market prior to making programming decisions. Unfortunately, the feasibility of randomly surveying the actual and potential listeners of public radio is drastically reduced as the size of the market increases or the number of listeners decreases. As the public radio audience becomes a proportionately smaller unique subgroup in the general population, for example in the larger markets, the cost of general, random samples will most certainly become prohibitive for most public radio station managers. The issue for these station managers may be what method of data collection considered in this study is preferable. Since the mail sample was slightly more economical, it should be used rather than the telephone method. The latter technique requires a highly trained staff and additional telephones. Further, the mail technique is likely to uncover more useful data for future pro-

gramming decisions. Mail respondents in this study were more likely to list likes and dislikes concerning program preferences leading to the conclusion that data collected via mail surveys are more likely to produce more premeditated responses. The evidence accumulated in this study supports this notion. However, the conclusion from this study is unescapable that mailing lists are unrepresentative of a station's general listenership. Their only value may lie in developing programs similar to those already available, e.g., classical music. The obvious answer is to spend slightly more money for a general sample or develop other samples that may be more representative and still be within the budget of most public radio stations. The analysis of leisure activities offers some suggestions. The public radio listener attending artist series or plays may be representative of the general listening audience. Lists of patrons of the arts are usually accessible to the station manager. Future research should be concerned with assessing the validity of these samples for programming decisions. Another suggestion may be to develop other sampling procedures which offer the representativeness of the baseline sample, yet minimize cost. One solution is to begin an interview with a filter question permitting the interviewing of only public radio listeners. This method, called focused sampling, uses a randomly generated sampling technique, but reduces the cost by eliminating costly interviews with the non-listener. Again, future research should be conducted to determine the validity of this survey and other techniques.

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These findings add to a growing body of literature that challenges some of the traditional journalistic assumptions about audience attitudes toward and use of the content in television and newspapers—particularly those relating to advertising content.

The findings in this study should be con-

sidered tentative because of the *post-hoc* nature of the analyses, but they support an emerging realization that the mass media—and perhaps particularly the newspapers—need to continue serious efforts to more clearly define their products in terms of the consumer and move toward a marketing orientation.