

Recognising and evaluating native advertisements

Final report for the attention of OFCOM/Dr Samuel Studer

24 October 2021

Executive summary

Abstract native advertisements and sponsored content in journalistic material are nothing new, but for economic and technological reasons, they have taken on a new significance in online journalism. This study attempts to answer the question to what extent media users recognise sponsored content as such on journalistic news websites and if so, how. The study also examines the journalistic value that media users attach to native ads and how the fact that a contribution is sponsored affects this perception. To conclude the research, media users were asked to what extent they can classify the different names for sponsored content and if they understand where the division of labour lies between journalistic editorial staff and the sponsor in different kinds of native advertising.

To find answers to these questions, an online experiment was carried out with 1,800 participants from German and French-speaking part of Switzerland, as well as an eye tracking experiment with 24 young media users.

The research shows that more than a third of participants do not recognise content marked as a native ad as being as such. If it is recognised as a native ad, it is usually towards the end of the article once it has been read. The journalistic value of native ads is judged differently depending on the topic and sponsor. In several cases, the participants gave the content and credibility of the article a higher rating when they recognised it as being a native ad than the control group, who did not know that they were reading sponsored content. The division of labour in producing a native ad and with whom the responsibility lies regarding content remains unclear for the participants. Eye tracking also showed that if references to sponsorship do not appear directly as scrolling text in the article itself, they are hardly noticed.