

Transparency matrix of native advertising: Enhancing transparency in online news media



Rahnuma Ahmed¹



Nazmul Rony²



Aditi Shams³⁺

¹Independent Researcher, 1709 Trenton Ct Cranberry Twp PA 16066, USA.

Email: rahnuma.ahmed@outlook.com

²Department of Communication, College of Business, Slippery Rock University, PA, USA.

Email: nazmul.rony@sru.edu

³Department of International Business, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Email: aditishams@du.ac.bd



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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This study explicates the association between native advertising and online news media transparency. This study took a qualitative approach and based on extant literature and industry practices, developed a matrix, called the transparency matrix of native advertising (TMNA), to show how different levels of transparency can be enhanced by utilizing various practices. The TMNA is based on two factors: communication of sponsorship and visible distinction of native advertising from editorial or main stories. The TMNA proposed that the presence of communication of sponsorship brings the perception of transparency to either a high or a moderate level. Visual distinctiveness, on the other hand, does not have the ability to show higher transparency, unless tied with sponsorship communication. The study proposed that a higher level of transparency can be enhanced by utilizing both factors vigorously. A lack of such practices would lead to minimum transparency. The best practice for online news media would be to place themselves in the quadrant of high transparency in the TMNA and avoid the rest. This study has twofold contributions to the existing literature, firstly, this matrix can guide the transparency research on native advertising, and secondly, in practice, this matrix can be used to employ strategies for enhancing transparency and improve credibility of online news media.

Contribution/ Originality: Transparency matrix of native advertising would potentially be a significant addition to the native advertising literature, as it can guide future transparency research on native advertising. The TMNA can suggest strategies for online news media to enhance transparency and thus gaining credibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The controversy between news content and paid content is nothing new in the media industry. With the emergence of online media, the distinctions between contents have become increasingly blurred, permitting advertisers to exactly mirror the other non-sponsored content on the medium in their sponsored content (Sahni & Nair, 2016). Native advertising is the most recent example of such a phenomenon. Online news media are widely criticized for conveying non-transparency and deceiving consumers via native advertising (Couldry & Turow, 2014; Sahni & Nair, 2016). Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) endorsement guideline (Federal Trade Commission, 2009) asks for a disclosure of the relationship between media and a brand material that can influence consumers' buying decisions, is not adequate to resolve the issue of media transparency (Kurnit, 2014).

Based on such rationale, this study explicates the association between native advertising and online news media transparency to propose a matrix to show how different levels of transparency can be enhanced by utilizing various practices. To address these issues, this paper, first, discussed the concepts of transparency and native advertising. Next, it presented an argument on why native advertisements are associated with non-transparency. Finally, it explained the transparency matrix of native advertising (TMNA), which presents two major factors for ensuring transparency in publishing native advertising: communication of sponsorship (Kurnit, 2014) and visible distinction of native advertising from editorial or main stories (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015). TMNA would potentially be a significant addition to the native advertising literature, as it can guide future transparency research on native advertising. In addition, it has practical implications for online news media, as it suggests strategies for enhancing transparency and thus, gaining credibility (Craft & Heim, 2008).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Transparency

Although transparency is a widely researched and multidisciplinary notion, it lacks clarity in its definition. Researchers are yet to know what transparency is and what it involves (Craft & Heim, 2008). Generally, in social science, the concept of transparency emphasizes on performing task in such a way that it would allow people to see what actions are performed (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Indeed, the notion implies openness and accountability of operations (Craft & Heim, 2008). From the receiver's end transparency indicates the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

Having discussed the vagueness of definitions, Craft and Heim (2008) proposed a two-way approach to understanding transparency. They argued that transparency can be implemented either as information availability and/or as information disclosure. The approach of making information available to convey transparency is a passive form, as it refers to a state in which information is kept open for public view (Craft & Heim, 2008). The disclosure approach, on the other hand, is an active practice that suggests "a process for bringing information into view" (Craft & Heim, 2008). It refers to a state in which methods and motives of information (i.e., why and how the information is gathered, analyzed and presented) are disclosed and explained about events (Craft & Heim, 2008; Ziomek, 2005). In this approach, as stated by Singer (2006) transparency covers "truthful disclosure before and during an act as well as after it has been taken" (p. 13). However, the availability and disclosure perspectives are not mutually exclusive, rather they overlap (Craft & Heim, 2008). They are often complementary. It is worth mentioning that perfect transparency is not always attainable and sometimes, not desirable. But, they provide a way of knowing whether transparency exists in online news media (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015).

Making the distinction has theoretical implications for considering when availability is appropriate or "enough" to accomplish the aims of transparency and when more active disclosure seems warranted. Either case, however, assumes we can know how to make a thing transparent (p. 220).

In journalism, transparency is more frequently practiced as a form of disclosure rather than a form of information availability (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015). Even a few research in journalism referred to transparency in terms of disclosure and providing explanation (e.g., Singer (2006)). The major aim of media transparency is to clear confusion and vagueness (Ziomek, 2005). In addition, as Ziomek (2005) stated, the media transparency goal should be "to increase accountability by the media to their various constituencies: sources and subjects of news reports, the public, employees, peers, advertisers, and shareholders" (p. 23). Of course, such transparency is ensured by the practice of journalists' code of ethics and norms, which are embedded in searching for truth and objectivity (Preston, Cooper, Scarbrough, & Chilton, 1995).

Although there exist theoretical and practical challenges to understanding transparency and distinguishing its approaches, it is considered a crucial element of ensuring accountability and promoting public trust in institutions.

Specifically, in news media transparency's value is seen as primarily instrumental as "greater accountability may be achieved, credibility may be enhanced, and truth may be told" via ensuring transparency (Craft & Heim, 2008).

2.2. Native Advertising

Native advertising still lacks a clear scholarly definition (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2014). It is often used interchangeably with "sponsored content," "branded content," "content marketing," (Mareck, 2014) "advertorials (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015) or "collaborative content" (Mareck, 2014). In simple words, native advertising is a marketing tool that uses "textual, pictorial, and/or audiovisual material that supports the aims of advertiser (and is paid for by the advertiser) while it mimics the format and editorial style of the publisher that carries it" (Couldry & Turow, 2014). They may appear via the promoted accounts and tweets on Twitter or via sponsored stories in Facebook. In the case of online media any written, video, or image-rich posts that resemble the editorial content on the site can be a native advertising (Mareck, 2014). Therefore, the major feature of native advertising in online media is that it mirrors the surrounding editorial environment of a webpage, offering the user additional and relevant subject matter information beyond a typical online ad (Mareck, 2014).

The reasons for marketers' growing interest in native advertising in online media platforms are quite straightforward. First, native advertising is considered a good alternative to banner advertising in online platforms (Rey, 2012) as banner advertising are not effective and consumers are now easily able to block such advertisements (Sahni & Nair, 2016). Further, as media consumption is moved from traditional platforms to small-screen platforms (e.g., smartphones, tablets, etc.), marketers need to develop new arrangements for delivering advertisings that attract consumers (Mitchell, 2015; Tran, 2013). Marketers hope that native advertisements are less likely to be perceived as persuasive messages due to the content and placement fit (Yang & Oliver, 2004). Such content are more likely to be perceived as relevant content (Higgins & King, 1981) increasing the ad effectiveness. It should be noted that native advertisings have different goals than traditional advertising and persuasive messages. According to USA's digital marketing professionals creating awareness, followed by branding and brand affinity, was the top marketing objective for native mobile advertisings. Purchase intention, on the other hand, was further down on the scale. Another research showed that brands and marketers are using native advertisings in order to provide a more relevant message (67 percent), increase consumer engagement (63 percent) and generate awareness or buzz (62 percent) (Marketingcharts, 2013). Therefore, native advertising is a tool for engagement and branding, rather than a tool for increasing direct sales.

However, media's motive for native advertisement is mostly monetary, as native advertising offers an opportunity to boost flat or declining revenues of media houses. According to 2014 report of eMarketer, print ad spending in the USA will decline from \$32.16 billion in 2014 to \$31.29 billion in 2018. Digital ad spending, on the other hand, on newspapers and magazines will increase to \$8.41 billion by 2018, from \$7.48 billion in 2014. Yet such increased spending is more likely to make the media industry flat for the estimated period. Therefore, media organizations are highly interested in native advertisings as a newer form of revenue source. Furthermore, many online publishers, who cannot survive on subscription revenue anymore, feel the pressure to accommodate native advertising to compete with other venture-backed content sites who have no such need to monetize content (Kurnit, 2014). According to a recent research, 85 percent of USA publishers felt that native advertising offers them a new revenue stream (Marketingcharts, 2013) and publishers, who were using native advertisings, estimated that an average of 20.4 percent of their revenues derive from such campaigns. In this depressing economic context, native advertising offers new sources for growth (Marvin, 2013). As we can see in the industry, native advertisings are frequently published not only on the newer online news platforms (e.g., BuzzFeed, Mashable, Huffington Post, etc.), but also used on old news media (e.g., the New York Times, the Wall Street Journals, etc.)

3. NATIVE ADVERTISING: A QUESTION MARK TO MEDIA TRANSPARENCY

3.1. Reasons and Consequences

Although a clear distinction of news content from advertisements is crucial for media organizations (Carlson, 2015; Coddington, 2015) online news media are often criticized for not ensuring such distinctions for native advertising contents. According to Kurnit (2014) much of the criticism of native advertising is centered on two issues: “curation-the degree to which the apparent editor or author was influenced to select the content” and “integrity-the degree to which the content itself was influenced by anyone other than the apparent editor or author” (p. 1). Kurnit (2014) argued that although there are thousands of sources of news and information available online, trusted media act as curators of the available contents. In order to maintain their standing as objective and trustworthy trusted media generally want to differentiate the contents that they select on the basis of their journalistic view from the contents that they publish for other reasons (e.g., sponsored). Readers, on the other hand, generally demand integrity. That means, they would prefer to know (or need to know) whether the online publishers or editors were influenced or forced by something other than pure editorial judgment in selecting specific content Kurnit (2014). Unfortunately, native advertisings blur the lines between content under the control of a site’s editorial staff and content provided by marketers (Mareck, 2014). Therefore, native advertisings are often associated with weak journalistic objectivity and non-transparency (Carlson, 2015).

Such non-transparency issues are further associated with consumer deception (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). Franklyn and Hyman (2012) in their survey of 1000 people, found that only 42 percent of participants could realize the difference between sponsored and unsponsored contents and only 35 percent could realize the difference between paid and unpaid search contents. Based on two psychological theories of consumer deception (schema theory and source based misleadingness), Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015) tested why consumers can be misled by native advertisings. As stated by Adelson (1981) our schema or past experience and knowledge are used to decide our behavior and to supplement any gaps in behavior. Similarly, in the case of advertisements, consumers’ schemas about persuasive messages may initiate their skepticism about the ad. As marketers utilize native advertising to mute consumers’ negative schema of advertisement, it may misled them. Source-based misleadingness, on the other hand, can also explain how consumers can be misled. According to this framework, as native advertisings match the structure and contents of the editorial (such as, headlines, AP style, bylines, etc.), they can be perceived as non-sponsored messages.

3.2. Current Regulations

From regulatory side, there exists a lot of debate on the effect of native advertising on consumers. Regulators, in particular, remained apprehensive, as consumers can be negatively affected if the commercial natures of native messages are not appropriately revealed (Sahni & Nair, 2016). Marketers, on the other hand, is concerned with the issue that overly prescriptive and tedious regulatory guidelines will negatively influence the efficiency and growth of advertising industry (Sahni & Nair, 2016). Currently Federal Trade Commission (FTC) does not have solid guidelines for media to publish native advertisings. It only has an endorsement guideline that is applicable to each online media (Federal Trade Commission, 2009). According to the guideline, media should clearly disclose the relationship between media and a brand material that can influence consumers’ buying decisions (Kurnit, 2014). The problem with such blanket disclaimers is that they may create interruption for the readers, even when the brand material has nothing to do with consumers’ buying decision (Kurnit, 2014).

Furthermore, such disclosures may not provide consumers with information on the extent to which marketers are involved in. When media use “sponsored content,” for example, as a disclaimer, it does not tell us everything. As argued by Kurnit (2014) such sponsor disclaimers “may be an adequate stopgap, but they are inadequate to

meaningfully communicate the context and relevant information appropriate to the rapidly evolving content and distribution platforms in the digital world” (p. 5).

3.3. Current Industry Practices

To what extent media is implementing transparency or whether they are implementing transparency at all in the case of native advertising is a crucial topic. As there exists inadequate professional and/or legal guidelines on how to label, publish and distinguish native contents (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Moore, 2014) media are crafting their very own parameters about native advertisings. A recent content analysis of sponsored articles from several online news sites, conducted by Moore (2014) indicated that news sites used “publication-specific identifiers” (e.g. “WP BrandConnect”), followed by “sponsored,” most frequently to label their native advertisings. Interestingly, more than half of the news sites’ used a very “small” label to indicate native advertisings. In addition, most of the labels were either emphasized in a separate color that is different from other that of the nearby contents.

Further, the degree of disclosure varies (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015). Klyueva and Tsetsura (2015) for example, questioned “is subtly including the word “promoted” above the ad enough? Or, does it need to be boldly marked, such as on the Times website?” (p. 8). Sometimes, the disclosure are not visible enough to catch readers’ attention. Moreover, current practice of leveling contents as native advertisings are obscure enough to mislead the readers (Moore, 2014). As mentioned by Kurnit (2014) “the only thing that is clear about native advertising is that myriad ways in which advertisers may influence the selection and integrity of content in digital media is far too complicated to effectively be communicated simply by disclaimers” (p. 3). Kurnit (2014) considered the disclosures and disclaimers used in most current native advertisings largely generic and ineffective. A common practice of using “sponsored content” as a disclaimer is necessarily not sufficient to cover everything “from placement of advertiser-created content about a product or service (an advertisement) to an advertiser merely subsidizing a regular feature in a publication that is wholly controlled by the publication's editors with the only stricture that the content be relevant to a particular subject” (Kurnit, 2014). In addition, Klyueva and Tsetsura (2015) predicted the possibility of native advertising turning into a new form of indirect media bribery in near future. Therefore, the issue of non-transparency still remains, impairing legitimacy of media (Tolvanen, Olkkonen, & Luoma-aho, 2013).

4. TRANSPARENCY MATRIX OF NATIVE AD (TMNA)

Unfortunately, a very few studies addressed and examined the matter of resolving non-transparency issue in the case of native advertising. Based on scholarly studies and industry’s best practices, the present study has identified two major factors of ensuring transparency in publishing native advertisings: communication of sponsorship (Kurnit, 2014) and visible distinction from other stories (i.e., editorial in particular) (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015).

As discussed earlier, Kurnit (2014) talked about approaching a trustworthy curation process of content, as it can significantly contribute to audience loyalty and trust (Kurnit, 2014). He argued that transparent media system should practice a “communication of sponsorship” approach, rather than simply labeling everything as “sponsored content” (Kurnit, 2014). In other words, communication of sponsorship is a way of identifying the author and/or source of any content. As opposed to simple disclosures, communication of sponsorship should be placed in the main content piece (Kurnit, 2014) to make the communication better and more effective. Such identifiable sources of content can be communicated by a byline, which may include the author’s title, employer, and credentials, or as an integral aspect of the content to provide the consumer with the necessary context in which sponsored content is presented and the degree of independence of the author or source. Providing such communication on the main article page convey more significance than using labels tagged to the articles on the entry page or newsfeed (Moore, 2014). Because, as found by a 2014 study by Define Media Group, most USA people (57 percent) usually read online

media content via search or social media, rather going directly to the media Website where the labels are found. Therefore, a majority of readers are missing the disclaimer information.

In addition to textual communication of sponsorship, the current study suggested that native advertisings should be visibly distinct from the editorial. Here the term “visually distinct” does not refer to the content topic of the ad. It indicates the physical structure/format and/or placement of the ad in the main page (i.e., generally homepage where the editorial belongs). The rationale for making native advertisings visually distinct is embedded in the fact that its contents would resemble the editorial and very minimal interference can be done from the side of media. Hence, contents’ structure, format and placements are the areas where media can intervene to enhance transparency. This has already been a common practice used by most of the top news Websites (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015). BuzzFeed, for example, clearly mark its native content by placing a bright yellow box. The New York Times, also follows a policy of marking its native advertising section.

It should be noted that use of these two practices do not replace the publication of other disclosures about the native advertisings. This study neither suggests to eliminate the use of “paid post” or “sponsored post” to label native advertisings. Instead, the present study would argue that the main factors, e.g., communication of sponsorship and visible distinction of native advertising, must be ensured first, assuming other disclosures would be there. The hierarchical importance of these factors is presented in a pyramid in Figure 1.

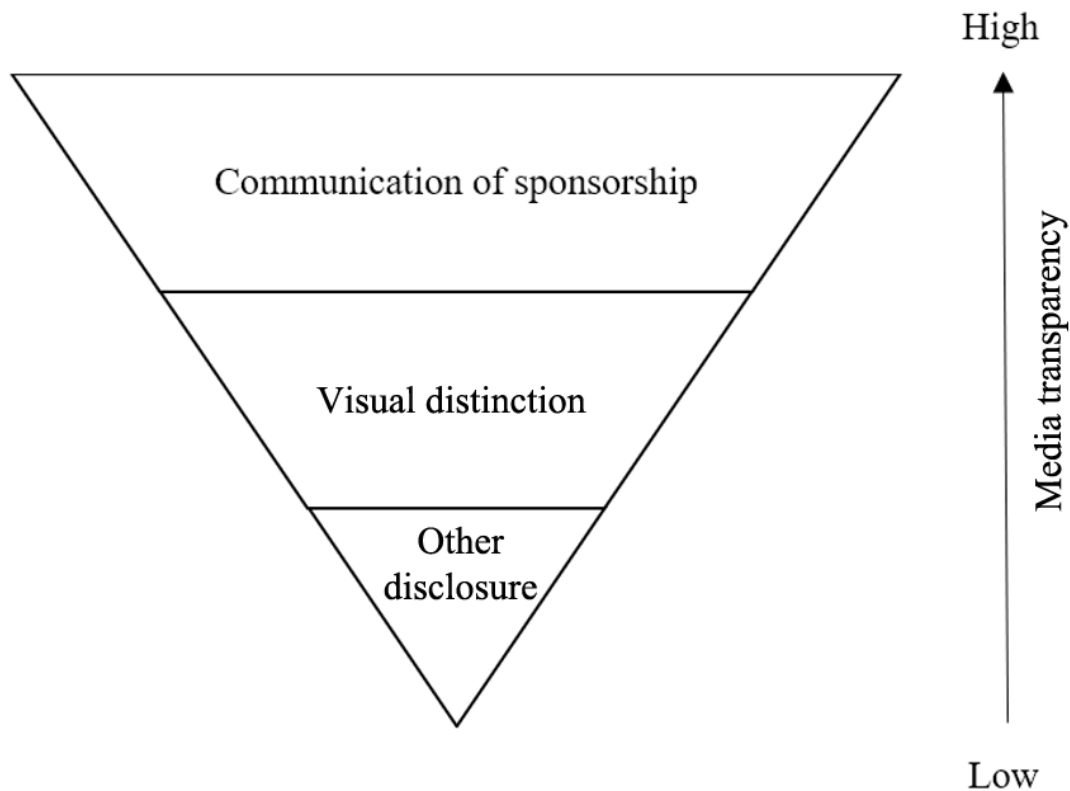


Figure 1. Hierarchical pyramid of transparency factors.

Based on the level of utilization of the two factors mentioned above, the present study proposed a transparency matrix of native advertising –TMNA (see Figure 2). As we can see, the high level of transparency can be enhanced by using both of the practices vigorously. Transparency would be minimum if both of these are low. Low level of transparency will be enhanced by using visual distinction only, whereas moderate level of transparency will be enhanced by using communication of sponsorship only. As assumed by the hierarchical pyramid (see Figure 1) the presence of communication of sponsorship brings transparency to a greater level – high and moderate (see Figure

2). Visual distinctiveness, on the other hand, does not have the ability to show higher transparency, unless tied with sponsorship communication. The best practice for media would be to place themselves in the quadrant of high transparency and avoid the rest.

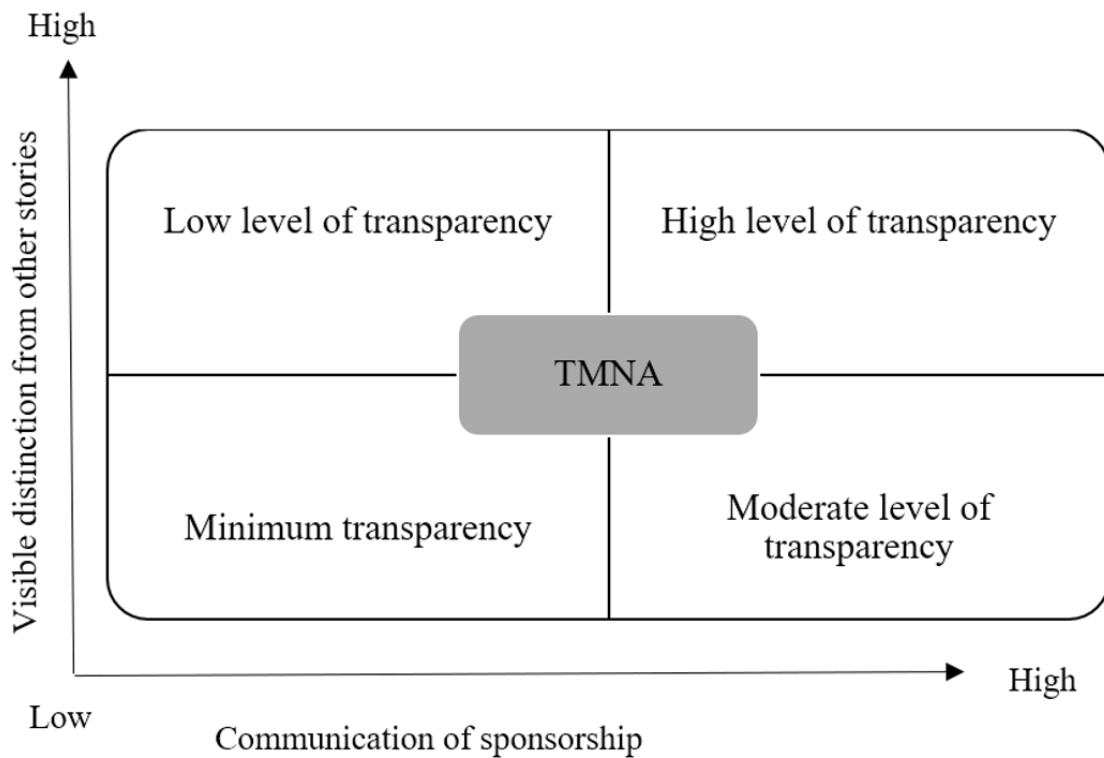


Figure 2. Transparency matrix of native ad (TMNA).

5. CONCLUSION

From strategic perspective, TMNA can substantially impact online media to identify and enhance their transparency initiatives. The best approach for any media house would be to ensure sponsorship communication and visual distinctiveness of native advertisements, along with other disclosures mandated by endorsement guidelines and/or media house. Further, TMNA would potentially be a significant addition to the native advertising literature to guide the future transparency research. Future research should examine the effectiveness of the matrix by manipulating both attributes. Further research can be conducted on how various level of transparency initiatives can affect readers' trust, perceived media credibility and even, native ad effectiveness. It should also be noted that this study discussed the transparency issue from media perspective. Future research should examine how consumers perceive media transparency while experiencing native advertising.

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