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**Author(s):** Poutanen, Petro; Luoma-aho, Vilma; Suhanko, Elina

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## ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF HYBRID EDITORS

Petro Poutanena\*

Vilma Luoma-Aho\*\*

Elina Suhanko\*\*

\*University of Helsinki, Finland

\*\*University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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Corresponding author: Petro Poutanen, petro.poutanen@helsinki.fi

### ABSTRACT

*In times of turbulence in the media industry, media organizations are looking for new business models. Digitalization has led traditional news media organizations to testing new forms of advertisement, such as sponsored content and native advertising, whereas others, such as lifestyle magazines, have a longer history in collaborating with brands. Editors are key players in these developments, since they are journalist–managers and decision makers within those daily practices that shape policies and influence new product innovation and development. In this study, we examine from the editors' point of view, how they see the process of adopting novel forms of advertisement and what ethical challenges are in the way. Building on interview data of lifestyle magazine editors and news editors in Finland (N=18), we present a study that identifies four editorial dilemmas arising from the intersection of brand collaboration and journalistic work in lifestyle magazines and provide a timely first look into an emerging new category of “hybrid editors” in newsrooms. Our results suggests that, in overall, editors' attitudes toward new forms of brand collaboration are positive.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

As business models for the media industry are renegotiated, media companies have begun to innovate and reorganize. Moreover, as expectations of media business change and prevailing strategies and choices are questioned (Tolvanen, Olkkonen, & Luoma-aho, 2013), novel forms of online advertising and the use of sponsored content, such as content marketing and native advertisement (Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012), are tested out in practice. However, these new forms of advertising have caused editorial challenges and dilemmas surrounding journalistic integrity (Van Der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014). Moreover, as more journalists, willingly or unwillingly, become entrepreneurs or independent operators, and occupy multiple roles simultaneously, such as content producer, marketer, advertising executive, and business manager, more research is needed to understand “how and whether normative boundaries are being reimagined, reconciled with new exigencies, or reified along traditional lines” (Singer, 2015, p. 17).

Whether it comes to traditional news organizations or novel entrepreneurial forms of journalism, an important question emerges: Where should the line be drawn on sponsored content, native advertising, and brand collaboration? This question is ethical in nature, and it affects the transparency and credibility of media institutions at large, even challenging the sustainability of the media business (Howe & Teufel, 2014). In the long term, unsolved ethical concerns may hamper both credibility of the media outlet in the eyes of audience, as well as the practice of journalism and editorial work. A media organization’s ability to be perceived by its audiences as providing factual and reliable information to the public discourse constitutes its central role (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007, p. 8).

In this article we focus on lifestyle magazines and newsrooms of large media companies. In our view, editors of the media outlets are key players as gatekeepers for new business models. They are journalist–managers and decision makers within those daily practices that shape policies and influence new product innovation and development. According to recent studies, financial motives have increased in importance for media companies in recent years, shifting even the role of newsroom editors, who have become more target group and advertiser oriented—and new investments follow profit (Witschge & Nygren, 2009, p. 48). Likely, one of the important areas of profit is online journalism and novel forms of advertising, such as sponsored content and native advertising

In particular, our study examines the role of “hybrid editors” to describe the dual role of editors as gatekeepers of journalistic values and early adopters of novel business models and forms of advertisement when media outlets are going online. We attempt to shed light on the changes that are

taking place within the established media companies and newsrooms from the editorial perspective by asking: What are the new challenges that hybrid editors face today?

We present an empirical study that explores editorial dilemmas: How do editors handle problematic situations arising from the intersection of new business models and journalistic practice? How do editors rationalize the use of sponsored content? We approach each of these ethical questions empirically through an analysis of in-depth interviews of lifestyle magazine editors and structured interviews of editors from news media corporations in Finland.

The current article is constructed as follows. First, our study provides an overview of how sponsored content is used and adopted in news media and lifestyle magazines at a time in which media outlets are increasingly moving online and finding new ways to make revenue. We also discuss whether and how editorial practices and media marketing are changing in the age of digitalization. The purpose of this discussion is to illuminate the novel and emerging working environment of today's hybrid editors. Second, based on our interview data, we identify four editorial dilemmas that summarize the prevailing challenges related to the introduction of sponsored content as a new business model. We then explore editorial responses to these dilemmas, for example, how editors handle such situations and how they rationalize the use of novel forms of online advertising that test the limits of transparency. Finally, we discuss how industry developments are shaping and modifying journalistic and editorial practices in media outlets and newsrooms, concluding with a discussion of our limitations and suggestions for future research areas within media marketing.

## **FROM ADVERTISING TO BRANDED CONTENT**

The primary goal of media organizations is to make a profit, and only in very unusual cases does the owner choose to make economic goals secondary. Traditionally, media organizations have relied on two sources of income: their audience, through single copy and subscription sales, and advertisers, to whom they sell access to certain audience segments, such as "target audiences." Over the last few decades, the media industry has gone through a major commercialization process, relying increasingly on advertisers and becoming more "market-driven" both in print and broadcast (e.g., Fengler & Rub-Mohl, 2008). In addition, in the context of online news media, dependence on advertising revenue is likely to increase in the coming years (Bagdikian, 2004; Kim, 2008).

After investors, advertisers are perceived as group that has the most influence on media organizations (Strömbäck & Karlsson, 2011). Media advertising has always played a somewhat controversial role in journalism. On the one hand, advertising income permits larger staffs, higher journalistic quality and independence as well as enhances profitability. On the other hand, it has

always been alleged that advertisers influence editors and journalists, and lately, journalistic objectivity has been under increasing pressure due to the commercialization of the media industry (De Smet & Vanormelingen, 2011; Fengler & Rub-Mohl, 2008).

Previous studies (e.g., Picard, 2004; Schultz, 1998) have suggested that commercial considerations and owner pressure may result in compromises in the editorial process, even though newspaper editors seem reluctant to admit that proprietors influence the content (McQuail, 2010). Many scholars in journalism studies have taken a critical approach to the development in which editorial and advertising contents blur and lead to new hybrid forms, such as cross promotion and market journalism (An & Bergen, 2007). Therefore, it is important to find out how novel forms of advertising could be adopted in a way that would ensure journalistic integrity, as well as uncover the main challenges and dilemmas that editors now face in their managerial role.

Brands and organizations often have two major goals: to get favorable content to the media and to spread information about their new products or services to the (target) audience (Tolvanen et al., 2013). Marketing agents connect advertisers and editors. A high level of cooperation between agents and editors is necessary, because often both the perspectives and the attitudes of editors are different from those of marketers. Advertisers are in a decisive role as they demand the placement of promotional material and content. The marketing sector can also ask an editor to publish an advertiser's written material. Sometimes, advertisers may also aim at censoring certain media content (see Erjavec, 2004).

A recent consumer research survey of Finnish magazine readers (n = 8,754) showed that readers actually wanted information about products (KMT Kuluttaja, 2014). More than half of the respondents (53%) agreed or fully agreed with the statement that advertising provided good knowledge about products and services, and 37% agreed or fully agreed that advertisements were an interesting part of magazines' content. Readers also became familiar with new products through magazine ads (62%) and received information about what was in fashion and trendy (56%), signaling that there is actually a growing market for brand collaboration in the media sphere. The transparency of such practices, however, is only beginning to be questioned and studied (Taiminen, Luoma-aho, & Tolvanen, 2015).

## **DIGITALIZATION AND EMERGING ETHICAL CHALLENGES**

As the online formats of magazines continue to develop, advertising in general is continuously in transition. The aim of the change is clear: magazines and news media are heading toward an online existence that enables interaction and provides a versatile environment for advertisers, journalists, and audiences alike. In fact, as Internet use increases, it changes both reader

expectations and media content production processes (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). News blogs are increasingly producing content for online journalism; for example, fashion blogs have become more present in online fashion journalism (Hanusch, 2012). The online presence will not only change the form of the magazine, but also the form of advertising, often creating a hybrid form. Examples of such hybrids include native advertising, brand journalism, and sponsored content (Taiminen et al., 2015; Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012).

Native advertising results from the connotation that content is similar to news and hence, “native” to a particular platform (Sonderman & Tran, 2013). Though such sponsored content is seen as novel, its history lies in advertorials, for example, separate attachments made and/or provided by the advertiser. Advertorials seek to present advertisement as editorial content, and some attempt to hide brand involvement (Sonderman & Tran, 2013). Often, advertorials’ typeface and layout also mimic the editorial style of the magazine in which the advertorial is placed (Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2005). Unlike journalistic articles, advertorials are closely linked to the advertisers who request them, thus making the editorial process more complex. This understanding of advertorial processes is useful, as similar processes now occur in the construction of sponsored content online.

The main forces that have guided the work of editors so far have included legislation and professional ethics codes, such as the Guidelines for Journalists governed and protected by the Council for Mass Media (CMM) in Finland. However, everyday editorial practices are often detached from the written norms (see Harro-Loit & Saks, 2006). In general, audience should be able to distinguish editorial and commercial content by sponsorship disclosure. In accordance with current European Union regulations, it has been advised that the disclosure should be at the beginning or at least in the middle of the presentation, as this gives viewers enough time to process it critically and recognize the content as sponsored (Boerman, Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014). Editorial guidelines and rules for sponsored content have also been released by The American Society of Magazine Editors. The rationale for these principles is that readers should get accurate information and news. In Finland, the CMM recently published media industry guidelines on how to mark sponsored content. Their recommendation was to always attach the word “advertisement” to any form of sponsored content to avoid the lack of clarity of certain phrases, such as “in collaboration with” or “produced by” (CMM, 2015).

The role of ethics in journalism is to define the value of journalism for the wider society. There seems to be a consensus that this value is connected with journalism’s “ability to place credence or trust in the content that is obtained” (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 2). Among the main values affecting

journalism's credibility are authenticity, accountability, and autonomy—of which accountability and transparency are especially relevant to the digitalized media environment (p. 16).

Traditionally, brand collaboration has been most utilized by lifestyle magazines, but it has recently been of interest to the news media as well, despite their differences. For the news media, journalistic objectivity and integrity remain key values, and lifestyle magazines have a longer history of using advertorials and other hybrid forms of advertisement (Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). Moreover, while news media talk of readers, lifestyle magazines also view their audience as “consumers” in need of factual information and advice about goods and services they can use (Hanusch, 2012). Among fact-centric news media or “hard news,” findings suggest that they are less open to such external pressures, such as those brought by brand collaboration (McQuail, 2010, p. 290).

With these new developments, a need has emerged for disclosure and transparency (Taiminen et al., 2015). In the context of journalism, transparency is associated with “personal disclosure” and “evidentiary support” (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 16). In practice, this means that consumers should be able to identify who provided the information, what the sources are, and what standards are thought to be important by that provider (p. 17). Transparency is important, as commercial messages and editorial content has to be distinguishable, and an advertiser's influence should not harm editorial integrity. However, some scholars argue that, in practice, self-regulation is challenging because of the difficulty of monitoring online media and of distinguishing advertising content once it is placed (Peeler & Guthrie, 2007, p. 352).

In addition, transparency also challenges traditional journalists, who are used to fading out their own voice, resting on the trustworthiness of their media brands, and relying on the journalistic method, which is believed to wipe out individual biases (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 18). Transparency is about communicating across boundaries and making proactively hidden aspects clear “from process to beliefs to motives” (Singer, 2015, p. 18). This aspect of journalism has been taken to a new level in the digital world.

## **EDITORS AS GATEKEEPERS**

Editors are the central gatekeepers of the content published in their media. Their responsibility is to foster the journalistic quality and integrity of their media, and to attract an audience as well as marketers to secure the financial sustainability of their product. Editors represent a key group when studying the new forms of advertising and sponsored content. In making the most important journalistic decisions and determining advertising policies, editors are in a central position to assess advertising influence and the future of branded content and its relation to the journalistic content

production. Editors' decision power also affects advertising, both in more traditional announcements and in novel forms of sponsored content.

From the perspective of occupational roles, commercialization and market pressures have been found to influence how editors carry out their journalistic role. Already in the early 1990s, Douglas Underwood noted the emergence of "market-driven journalism" in his book *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom*. He wrote that an editor had become "a cross between an editor and a marketing official," aiming at providing content that marketers say the audience wants (Underwood, 1995, p. 14). Editors' decision making is increasingly influenced by corporate profit and marketing goals, and an "[a]dvertiser's economic leverage over magazines provides a potential opportunity to influence to the editorial process" (Koschat & Putsis, 2001, p. 216; see also; Erjavec & Kovacec, 2010). Therefore, even though the blending of journalistic and business decision making is not a new phenomenon, and editors have faced ethical challenges related to transparency for a long time, the pressures that hybrid editors face today are likely to be in flux because of the technological and economical changes that the media industry is undergoing.

It is with these current pressures in mind that we present the question guiding our research. In this study, we are focusing on the new ethical issues that arise from the application of and experimentation with new forms of media marketing, such as sponsored content, native advertising, and brand journalism, from the editorial point-of-view. In this study, we ask: What are the new challenges that hybrid editors face today? Specifically, we ask how today's hybrid editors handle sponsored content, how they rationalize its use, and which kind of managerial dilemmas are related to the editors' work in this regard.

## **CONTEXT, DATA, AND METHODS**

The data for this study were collected in Finland, where the editors-in-chiefs' power over decisions is regulated by law. The freedom of speech legislation's fourth article states that "It shall be the duty of the responsible editor to direct and supervise editorial work, to decide on the contents of a periodical, network publication or program, and to see to the other tasks assigned to him or her by this Act" (L 460/2003, 4 §). In addition, editors are usually the managers of the staff, such as freelancers and journalists, as well as strategic leaders.

Despite the global turn toward digitalization and the ongoing search for alternate sources of funding (Van Der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014), Finland is among the countries with the highest news consumption rates (Jyrkiäinen, 2010). However, the global decline in print advertising and revenue is also distinguishable in the Finnish media advertising markets (OSF, 2014). According to figures from the Finnish Advertising Council, TNS Gallup, and Ad Intelligence (FPPA, 2015), newspaper



advertising revenues diminished in 2014 by 8.7%, and magazines by 15.3%, while online advertising grew by 10.8%, and television dipped 3.5%. Online advertising now represents 22.5% of the total, on equal footing with television; newspapers' share is 32.5%, and magazines' is 8.1%. Classified and display advertising online saw stronger growth (11.8%) in 2014 than search advertising (9%), and it is also almost twice as large (14.6%). In order to retain their position as a desirable environment for advertisers, media companies continue to test and search for advertising and business models that would satisfy all parties involved: readers, advertisers, and owners, as well as adhering to the journalists' codes of ethics.

As the sponsored content scene is heavily built on the online environment, we focused our data collection on those media outlets that had a clear presence online or were in the process of developing it. All editors chosen for the sample came from media outlets that were either fully digital, had a digital online version, or were currently in the process of planning or implementing a new digital strategy.

We use two different data sets to explore the issues of editorial decision making and strategies of disclosure in the age of digitalization and sponsored content, which currently have a strong influence on the editorial and journalistic processes. The first data set consists of in-depth interviews of lifestyle magazine editors from major Finnish lifestyle media outlets (N = 8). These editors were contacted because they had long-term experience with sponsored content. These interviews were carried out by the third author during November and December 2014, and they were then transcribed and analyzed separately by the first and the third author. Editors were asked, for example, about their use of new forms of media advertising, the balance between advertisers' demands and journalistic principles, editorial responsibilities, and economic pressures.

The second data set was collected in the spring of 2015 by the first author to supplement the data from lifestyle magazine editors and to bring the perspective of the news media into the study. This second data set thus opens up a view of the mainstream news media and whether sponsored content is becoming mainstream for news media editors as well. The interviewees selected for this data set were editors and decision makers from the 10 largest media companies in Finland (N = 10). These interviews were semi-structured and shorter (approximately 15 minutes), and they were carried out by phone. The editors were asked about brand collaboration, guidelines for publishing sponsored content, and the responsibilities and editorial practices related to brand collaboration.

The first data set provides a rich perspective on the managerial and editorial challenges and practices in life-style news media in the context of digitalization and sponsored content, whereas the second data set provides a "snapshot" of the news media editors' current situation. Together, these data sets give us two different and up-to-date perspectives on the editorial perceptions of branded

content and their future, as well as the editorial practices, dilemmas, and challenges related to the use and adoption of the new forms of advertisement. The interviews were analyzed by labeling text parts that were related to our research task, for example, to find out what kind of ethical and managerial dilemmas the editors had faced when using sponsored content, how they handled such situations, and how they rationalized its use. The text parts were then summarized and categorized around emerging themes.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Drawing upon the interview results, we structure the results as follows. First, we discuss the current situation of sponsored content and the rate of adoption of the new forms of advertising online. This discussion is based on both data sets. We then move on to discuss the editorial dilemmas that the editors face in their work while subject to sponsored content in their work routines and practices. We ask editors what editorial dilemmas they faced in their work and, in relation to their job as media managers, how they handled the dilemmas related to using sponsored content online and how they rationalized its use. This second discussion is based mostly on the first data set because of its in-depth nature.

### **Adoption of Sponsored Content**

All of the lifestyle magazines included in the study by definition rely heavily on advertisers, since their business model incorporates the idea of including brands, products, and services. Therefore, for lifestyle magazines, collaboration with brands is seen as a part of the “usual business;” now, it is merely that new names have been given to this collaboration. For the news media organizations, brand collaboration and novel forms of advertisement are still emerging, and practices are often partly experimental or unclear. While the editors of lifestyle magazines are both journalists and “brand managers” of the brand of their own outlet, as they need to sell both to advertisers and readers, the editors working in news media are not yet experiencing such a dual role. In the news media, the line between journalism and the marketing department was still kept very clear to maintain journalistic integrity.

All lifestyle editors report brand collaboration in some form, and they are looking into expanding this collaboration into new forms. For lifestyle magazines, branded content is already established, but it is at the experimental level and only now emerging in the news media context. Of the large news media companies interviewed, 9 out of 10 are currently experimenting with some sort of sponsored content and brand collaboration. Experimentation was also heavily discussed: Eight of the 10 report having continuous conversations about how novel forms of advertisement should be integrated into their businesses and what types of guidelines and rules should be

developed to secure journalistic integrity while providing value for the advertisers and readers through branded content.

**Based on our findings, it seems that what is now common practice in lifestyle journalism is soon to become common for news media as well.** A difference remains, however, in that the lifestyle editors have the authority to make the final decision regarding sponsored content, whereas the news media editors are merely one element consulted in the process. Several news editors explain that their newspaper publishes its own “theme sections,” which are devoted to the branded content or a specific topic; these are generally produced by their own brand departments or by video crews, or they are provided by the advertisers. Interestingly, many of these are similar to lifestyle journalism (e.g., special issues on cars or real estate produced in collaboration with businesses and brands). In the digital environment, this content is most often provided to the reader in the form of blogs or “branded news,” news provided in the front-page section with a similar layout to editorial content, but labeled as “sponsored content.” Practices seem to be more developed and established on the lifestyle side; only half of news media editors report having some sort of formulated guidelines that would help them determine individual questions related to sponsored content, such as how branded content and “sponsored news” should be displayed.

With respect to editorial responsibilities on the news media side, 3 out of 10 report that their sales department, together with journalistic management, makes the decisions concerning the use of certain branded content or suggestions from advertisers. Often, the sales department was said to be responsible for the negotiations with the advertisers. However, 4 out of 10 news media editors surveyed report that they have established new positions or hired “producers” who would be responsible in practice for producing the branded content, serving as a link between the sales department and journalistic managers. These “hybrid editors” would understand both the journalism and the marketing perspectives in the online media context, as lifestyle editors already largely do. In our examination of the lifestyle editor data, we find that they are already working as hybrid editors. Based on our analysis of the lifestyle editor interview data, we now move on to the dilemmas that the editors face when it comes to sponsored content.

### **Editorial Dilemmas of Hybrid Editors**

In this study, by “dilemmas,” we mean editorial dilemmas, which are decision-making situations characterized by contradiction and tension. In these situations, editors often need to make decisions while standing at the intersection of marketing, (media) brand promotion, business, and journalism.

Both lifestyle and news media editors see themselves as gatekeepers of the content published in their media. All editors feel strongly responsible to the readers and owners of their magazine. The editors believe that their task is to provide high-quality journalism to their readers, as well as to attract advertisers and develop their own outlet's brand. This excerpt describes the hybrid role of these editors well:

...this is a commercial company, whose aim is to make a profit, and I'm in the role of a chief, and so I need to participate in it, maximize the sales, but also the profits that the magazine generates. But I'm also a journalist, by my background, by my mindset, but in this role [as an editor] you need to think on both sides. (Editor, Lifestyle)

Next, we present four editorial dilemmas related to the work of editors as journalist managers of a lifestyle media.

### **Dilemma 1: Balancing the editorial role and promoting a media brand**

In practice, the sales department is responsible for selling ads and building relationships with advertisers in media outlets. Often, the separation of sales and editorial content is distinct in large organizations, where both functions are located in different departments and do not have much contact with each other—at least not at the level of regular news journalists. However, even though it is not necessarily the editors' job, editors need to be involved in selling the magazine to the advertisers by representing the brand of their media outlet to advertisers and make it attractive to them. One editor comments:

Sales and marketing responsibilities are in practice away from me, but there is no situation where I do not have to participate in those discussions or meetings. To give an example from sales, if a partner is completely unaware of us, then I introduce our product. Or I do marketing, and then circulation is the ruler to measure my success, and then I try to think with the marketing team on how to get more readers. (Editor, Lifestyle)

Echoing this, another editor states:

...Editor in chief never sells advertising, and no journalist has any role in it [...] of course editor in chief discusses with advertisers, because it is part of the fact that I represent this brand in all directions [...]. I'm the link between the sales department and the desk, and also to media sales [...], so I can meet our big advertisers, big as well as small ones, all kinds of advertisers, and tell them about our magazine, that this kind of revision will take place, that we are going to do more stories about food, and those kind of things I will tell them. (Editor, Lifestyle)

Thus, even though there may not be a formal responsibility to make advertisement deals, it is in the interest of editors to get more deals, and thus income, for their magazine. Indeed, this editorial dilemma seems to be present in the everyday practice of lifestyle magazine editors—so much so that it constitutes an oft-solved dilemma to most editors. Many editors see advertising as vital to

their magazines and rationalize their own sales efforts through economic arguments, as demonstrated by the following:

It is a question of whether we make profit or not. Everybody here needs to live close to the fact that it is a question of livelihood [...]. I don't have all the resources that I would like to have [...]. We want to be the strongest and the most comprehensive and professional [...]; my ideal budget is just not a reality. (Editor, Lifestyle)

This excerpt illustrates how the editor sees economic pressures as a guiding factor that, besides making the editor put effort into advertisement, influences the quality of journalism, or at least sets a certain limit to its quality. Similar results have also been found in other studies concerning the boundaries of advertising and journalism. For instance, Harro-Loit and Saks (2006) found in their study of the Estonian media market that, especially in the magazine and television program production sector, there was a discourse of "survival" that seemed to legitimize overlooking the difference between paid and independent information (p. 320). This is a clear signal that "economic realities" both form a strong argument for testing the boundaries and, at the same time, disguise the dilemma behind rationalization and survival discourse.

### **Dilemma 2: Balancing journalistic integrity and advertisers' desires**

Another dilemmatic aspect of editors' work is linked to the use of and experimentation with novel forms of advertising. The editors point out that suggestions for trying out novel forms of online advertisement come either from the sales department, external consultants, or advertisers. Although many of the suggestions may imply a good business deal, editors need to act in the role of journalists and figure out, from an ethical perspective, whether the deal can be acceptable in journalistic terms. After all, this is the role that all editors feel is their first priority. Several editors report situations in which suggested commercial collaborations have tested the limits of transparency, describing how the journalists' codes of ethics have guided their decision making and helped them argue for their stance:

Generally, the way it goes is that they say that they would like to try out a special solution, and then the special solution is usually something that has not been previously tried out, and then we often argue about whether the journalistic content and ads can be distinguished. And it is in the journalists' codes of ethics that readers must always be able to make this distinction. This is the thing that I always need to say.... (Editor, Lifestyle)

In another example, an editor from a health-related lifestyle magazine describes how soon after the advent of their online version they tried to collaborate with brands by using native advertisement (putting advertisers' stories in a journalistic context). The idea was that brands would be given precedence, but as the editor points out, it never really worked out: "Part of the [content]

could be wrapped up with the advertiser in mind [...]. But this was initiated by those consultants, concept designers, and we were interested to see where it went” (Editor, Lifestyle). This demonstrates how hard it is in practice to find workable solutions for using sponsored content in a way that would be profitable and satisfactory to all parties. Part of the problem is that when such collaboration is initiated by those who are not journalists themselves, the initiators may have very little knowledge about journalistic principles, so that they cannot take these into account in their suggestions. However, on the other hand, the editor is not primarily in the position of developing advertisement, but instead represents the journalistic values of the magazine in such negotiations. Editors, then, play the role of a journalist in telling advertisers about the journalistic guidelines that the given outlet adheres to. In such negotiations, editors seem to rely more on the journalistic side of their job than on being an “brand manager” or “business manager,” probably because the situations were new and the journalistic guidelines provide a familiar way of dealing with such situations.

### **Dilemma 3: Balancing commercial and journalistic content production**

Under the pressure of diminishing revenues, some media companies have established their own content production departments devoted to commercial collaboration and writing about the brands. However, editors may also be asked and even be expected to produce sponsored content by using their scarce journalistic resources. Besides being an unfamiliar and perhaps also unpleasant job for many of the journalists, this can have a weakening effect on the actual journalism by taking resources away. In practice, especially in a single editing office, it can be too much effort to assign journalists to making commercial stories for advertisers. One editor describes this situation:

...our editing office is not that interested in [producing advertorials for the online environment]. They are quite hard to make, and they take away from the valuable time of our journalists. There are communication agencies in this field and others who could do it [sponsored content], and if we were just the ones who pressed the button [...] the more we would have to make ourselves and jump around and accept those [texts] less compelling we have seen it. (Editor, Lifestyle)

It is the lack of resources and the “value” of the “real” journalistic input that the editors are securing and using in a controlled manner. Also, the process of revising the story in collaboration with the advertisers can be time-consuming due to excessive communication, and thus not seen as an attractive option.

### **Dilemma 4: Balancing disclosure and attractiveness of new forms of online advertisement**

In these times of constant emergence of novel forms of advertisement online, there are not yet clear guidelines for how to disclose the sponsor of the content clearly enough to the reader. For editors, besides being a practical challenge, transparency becomes an ethical issue: How to tell readers which content is commercial and which is journalistic? The question is burning, since many want to experiment with the novel forms of advertisement. However, nobody wants to abandon the journalistic code of ethics, nor does anybody want to break the law. Many of the editors report feeling a need to watch the boundary between journalistic and commercial content:

From our side, the boundary is that if they [advertisers] are willing to make content in collaboration, but they do not want us to publish the content under their name but rather under our name, then the alarm bells go off in terms of really finding a solution that can be accepted from our side. (Editor, Lifestyle)

Another editor states, “I’m often laughing and saying, you know, we have some rules here. In such cases, it can sometimes be that the person there is a little bit sour at us...” (Editor, Lifestyle).

One editor suggests that, in a case of conflict of interest between the magazine and the advertiser, it is the business of the head of advertising/sales department to handle the situation: “You cannot do anything about it. It is definitely the business of the head of advertisement. It is not correct at all to begin to go through such things with the editor-in-chief” (Editor, Lifestyle).

This last excerpt highlights the editor’s desire to keep a distance from advertisement when it comes to conflicts of interest. The editor can promote the magazine to the advertiser but (s)he does not take responsibility for the details of the process and would distance him/herself from the case, taking on the role of the journalist, who cannot be arguing about such issues. However, the same editor also sees it as crucial to maintain good relationships with major advertisers. **This indicates that the role of the hybrid editor is dynamic: sometimes it demands that one act more strongly as a journalist, and sometimes as a brand ambassador and promoter of the magazine’s brand.** In this sense, interestingly, the editor’s role is more situational and ambivalent in nature.

These four dilemmas could also be labelled in other ways, as they overlap in several areas. However, based on our data, these four seemed to emerge as the strongest ones. Next, the findings and their limitations are discussed.

## **DISCUSSION**

As the online environment continues to provide new business models for media content, the central gatekeepers of media outlets, the editors, have to make increasingly challenging decisions. In addition to blogger and advertising collaboration, audience participation is also a growing trend (Kim, 2008), and all the more influential in media content, as well as in the journalistic process

itself (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014). This setting makes a fruitful environment for examining how editors perceive these new developments. Though it must be noted that neither the idea of a hybrid editor, nor the existence of sponsored content is a new phenomenon as such; however, these phenomena are becoming more common in the online journalism, even for news media.

The lessons learned from advertorials within the recent decades point toward the importance of transparency, yet the principles guiding sponsored content are only now being negotiated, placing further pressure on industry decision makers. The question of ethics is thus highly topical. In this article, we have so far been operating from the viewpoint that sponsored content represents commercial advocacy that needs to be strictly separated from journalistic values, which editors protect and secure. According to this approach, journalism has a different societal role than other communicating actors, such as companies, organizations, societal institutions, pressure groups, politicians, etc. This view would emphasize developing such journalistic code of ethics on sponsored content, which would make the blurred boundaries as distinct as possible. However, there are other ways of seeing the role of journalism and sponsored messages in the society. For example, the concept of *communitas* emphasize how different types of organizations, including media and corporations, together engage in the values that foster two-way communication and openness, trust building, engagement and cooperation, shared interest and mutual understanding and agreement, and commitment to act together and work for the good of the community (Heath, 2006). Indeed, there is empirical evidence, based on the exploration of codes of ethics of journalism and public relations in 33 countries that such a perspective may be emerging (Yang, Taylor, & Saffer, 2015). This illuminates how ethical consideration is not about ethical nit-picking, but may imply dramatic reconsideration of the functions of journalism and media companies.

However, the way media companies react to emerging commercial practices and new forms of media advertising matters. Notably, there is a risk that in the absence of a common vision for what is ethical and what is not, the legitimacy of self-regulation can be undermined (cf. Bowen & Stacks, 2013). For example, a corporate culture may override even professional ethics (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003), which necessitates cooperation of media companies and sponsors in formulating ethical standards. In fact, recent findings of Yang et al. (2015) seem to highlight the similarities between codes of ethics of journalism and marketing communication noting how differences are only on the level of societal role.

On a very practical level, one apparent challenge with the emerging practice of sponsored content is its source: when collaboration is initiated by non-journalists, they may have very little knowledge about journalistic principles, so they cannot take them into account in their suggestions. On the other hand, also journalists may lack the required skills of hybrid editors, when becoming



entrepreneurs in the field, as well as may have limited understanding of the sponsors' values and goals. Therefore, the way forward would necessitate mutual understanding of ethical guidelines, whether in media, marketing or public relations. The hybrid editor has more say in decisions and represents both the advertising foci and the journalistic values of the magazine in such negotiations. Therefore, hybrid editors may play key role in the development of shared ethical guidelines concerning sponsored content.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has aimed at being a timely first look into editorial dilemmas in the age of growing ethical pressures related to the role of an editor and the use of sponsored content. This means that the findings from our lifestyle editors' interviews are naturally skewed toward more involvement, as we targeted only "developed" sources. On the other hand, they also represent some traits of future practices. Moreover, it seems to be the case that these more developed advertising models are entering new frontiers, including news media, which has thus far been clearly protected by a kind of church-and-state separation.

The study is restricted by our small sample size and the cultural setting in which the interviewed editors operated at the time of the interviews. Editors' perceptions in technologically savvy Finland might not represent the status quo globally. However, we suggest that, given that these challenges are global, our findings could show trends of what might be occurring elsewhere as well. A surprising finding was that news media editors are quite positive toward sponsored content, and this could be a sign of an industry shift: with major funding challenges emerging, branded content could be one solution worthy of the news industry's consideration and future development. This trend seems to be globally understood in practice.

The hybrid editor represents an emerging third category between the traditional separation between church and state. The hybrid editors are producers responsible for branded content, serving as links between the sales department and journalistic editors. In this light, we suggest that there is a growing need for both new education and research regarding this editorial role: the media industry will increasingly depend on individuals with skill sets covering both marketing and journalism. The main forces that have guided the work of editors so far have been legislation and professional ethical codes. However, everyday editorial practices are often detached from the written norms (see Harro-Loit & Saks, 2006). In the age of hybrid editors, the need for ethical considerations is greater than ever before. This is already visible in the growth rates of different content creation agencies

internationally. However, as “news” is produced by agencies or individual consumers, new questions emerge regarding credibility and transparency of reporting.

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