

Lesson Plan 5

Sponsored Content as Propaganda

Students learn about online sponsored content and create screencasts to document and consider the privacy implications of the highly customized propaganda messages they receive via social media

Rationale

Many people are exposed to *sponsored content* without realizing it. It's sometimes called *native advertising* or *content marketing*. Whatever label is used, it's a key component of contemporary online propaganda. As a form of paid media where the advertising resembles the form and function of the user's experience of a particular website, sponsored content blends in and seems like a natural or inherent part of a website. Messages can be customized, making the content seem informative and credible.

In this lesson, students learn about sponsored content and then create screencasts to document the highly customized contemporary propaganda that they find on social networking sites, search engines (Google, Yahoo), blogs, online media sites and more.

Essential Question

- Is sponsored content fair or unfair?

Learning Outcomes & Key Messages

- Learn about sponsored content as a form of highly customized propaganda
- Consider the reasons why advertisers want their messages to seem a "natural" part of a website
- Examine how a user's previous online behavior shapes what kinds of native advertising that are displayed
- Reflect on the concepts of relevance and privacy in online social media

Preparation

In a high-tech classroom, use a projector to display the [MIND OVER MEDIA](#) website and then enable students to work with a partner online, using a computer that can record audio. In a low-tech classroom, make copies of Worksheets 5.1 and 5.2 for all students and have poster paper and markers available for student use.

Activity 5.1. Native Advertising: Fair or Unfair?

View: Overview of Native Advertising by Comedian John Oliver

<http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/1/13-august-3-2014/video/ep-13-clip-native-advertising.html#/>

John Oliver's funny take on native advertising includes a historical perspective on the blurred lines between news and advertising. Can consumers tell the difference between news and advertising? Does the difference matter any more? NOTE: Preview before viewing. This content may not be appropriate for all learners.

Is native advertising unfair and deceptive? Or just part of how business is done today? To promote discussion, students read Worksheet 5.1 to learn about advertising and native advertising. Working individually or with a partner, students compose a set of bullet points to identify arguments why native advertising might be considered both fair and unfair.

Activity 5.2. Document your Experience with Native Advertising

Students create a screencast to document the highly customized native advertisements they experience while navigating through social media and news sites. Encourage students to review Worksheet 5.2 which offers a detailed description of the activity instructions. Students can complete this work in class or for homework; they will need access to a computer with a webcam and microphone.

View: Native Advertising Overview

<http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/rate/693>

This video is a sample of the kind of inquiry students will undertake in this assignment. It's a simple screencast, where a teacher has recorded the computer screen while talking about the native advertising and sponsored content. In the screencast, we see many different types of native advertising that can be found on just one website. Every individual experiences native advertising differently because the content is customized based on the characteristics of the user.

After viewing, check for comprehension. Ask the following four questions:

Q: What advertisements were observed in the screencast?

A: Aldi, Verizon, Intel, Rate Market Place, PR Web, Time Warner Cable Central, Next Advisor Daily

Q: What native advertisements were observed in the screencast?

A: Ad Choices sponsored content, banner ad for Missouri's number one auto group, Aldi list of appetizers, main dishes and desserts, coupons, mortgage advertisements, ally bank, Tripit, chocolate ad, fitness ad

Q: What did the screencast point out regarding companies who create native advertisements?

A: A company called Ad Choices which provides a description for who the ad is served by Quantcast who creates interest based advertising by using advertising that is more likely to be of interest to the user, along with a privacy policy, ability to opt out, Taboola; recommended because they look at your patterns of use and assume you might like the services they offer; several companies involved in bringing sponsored content or native advertising to websites such as FOX News.

Q: What did the screencast point out regarding the personal experience of the consumer?

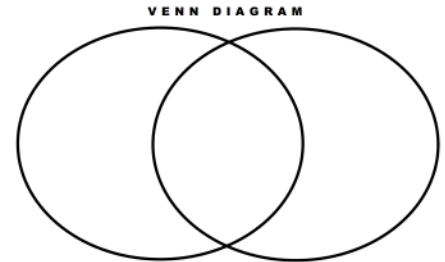
A: She has a mortgage, is preparing for the holidays, and she is a traveller.

Opting Out. Consumers have some control over their exposure to native advertising. Learn more about how Facebook uses the data you provide when you contribute content to serve you ads.

<https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/advertising>

Activity 5.3. Present, Reflect and Share

After their screencasts are completed, students work with a partner and view and discuss each other's work. They take notes about the information revealed in each screencast and create a Venn diagram to identify the similarities and differences between the two screencasts.



Discuss: How is native advertising designed to affect our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors? Does native advertising manipulate or trick people? Does it violate our privacy? Why or why not?

Teacher Reflection

Customization and personalization can make online advertising seem natural. This form of contemporary propaganda may be more effective than traditional advertising because the ads are highly relevant to the user. Students may see this as positive personalization that makes advertising relevant. They also may see this as an effective form of control and manipulation. Both of these perspectives are valuable.

It is important to note that we supply plenty of information to advertisers when we use social media – this is what enables them to market to us more effectively. There are ways to opt-out of such advertising: this requires careful examination of the privacy policies of social media websites.

Making a screencast helps us notice that users have very different experiences when using digital content online. Even through teachers, parents and students may all use Facebook or visit the same website, they will have unique experiences. Considering the implications of this form of online personalization is important.

Evaluation

Students are expected to create a screencast which will analyze the native advertising they observe and explain key features, including what it is, how it impacts their decisions and the pros and cons of this type of practice. They should be able to state that native advertising may be an effective form of propaganda precisely because it is not easily recognized as propaganda. Native advertising or sponsored content are forms of advertising that works by disguising itself as information.