

## SPONSORED CONTENT CHALLENGES JOURNALISTIC CREDIBILITY

CONTEÚDOS PATROCINADOS DESAFIAM A CREDIBILIDADE JORNALÍSTICA  
EL CONTENIDO PATROCINADO DESAFÍA LA CREDIBILIDAD PERIODÍSTICA

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### ABSTRACT

Media outlets and advertisers have been investing in so-called “brand journalism” and “native advertising”: on the one hand, news companies are looking for alternatives to the business model to diversify their sources of revenue; on the other, brands are seeking engagement and reputation through informative communication, with less promotional evidence. There is an appropriation of journalistic techniques and a threat to fundamental ethical values, such as transparency in the boundaries between journalism and advertising. To contribute to this reflection, we carried out an exploratory study of Metrôpoles, the commercial success of digital journalism in the last decade, and one of the pioneers in implementing branded content hubs in Brazil. We observed the risks of intensifying the credibility crisis in the press and even expanding the scenario of misinformation.

**KEYWORDS:** Sponsored content; Brand journalism; Branded content; Business model; Journalistic credibility.

## Introduction

The changes brought about by the digital paradigm have impacted journalistic practices throughout the entire production chain, imposing new positions on the current information ecosystem. One of the most significant transformations has been in terms of business models and the sustainability of media outlets. If, on the one hand, the Internet has taken a large part of the advertising pie away from traditional media, on the other hand, it has also led to the emergence of new forms of economic support.

The Inflection Point study<sup>1</sup>, released by SembraMedia in 2021, analyzed around 200 digital natives distributed in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, identifying more than 30 sources of revenue, which were grouped into five macro-categories: advertising, subsidies, consulting services, content services, and reader revenue. In the advertising category alone, different types of ad revenue were identified: Google

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://data2021.sembra-media.org/pt-br/reportes/resumo-executivo/>. Accessed on March 10, 2024.

AdSense, affiliate advertising, native advertising, programmatic advertising networks, advertising (local or national) sold by their commercial team or agency.

In the case of Brazil, it is clear how much digital media and marketing strategies have directed resources to the Internet. In 2023, the advertising market generated more than R\$23 billion, according to the Executive Standards Council (Cenp)<sup>2</sup>, an increase of 10.4% compared to the previous year. The highlight once again was digital media, which has leaped in the last decade and today occupies second place among the media with the highest advertising revenues, with 38% of the share. Open and closed television together accounted for 44.6%, but the open medium, for example, has lost more than 20% in recent years. Print newspapers, which just over a decade ago were still in second place, accounted for just 1.6% of total investment in the sector.

The figures only exemplify the financial challenges faced by media companies, which are still struggling to adapt to the digital environment. The business model of the commercial press has undergone intense transformations, and one of the most recent projects developed by media groups in Brazil and abroad to deal with the crisis is the creation of branded content centers, i.e., those dedicated to the production of sponsored content.

Branded content is an interface between journalism, advertising, and public relations. If, on the one hand, this activity drives the communications market, demanding more professionals and heating the economic model of media outlets, on the other hand, there is the challenge of reconciling it with the journalistic ethos, which defines the profession by its commitment to democracy and the exercise of citizenship.

First of all, it is necessary to clarify that within the umbrella of content marketing, i.e., the production of branded content, there are different modalities, as presented by Hardy (2017):

- owned media, when brands produce their content for their channels and social networks. In this case, Terra (2022) calls brand publishers when brands become publishers or even digital influencers;
- the distribution of paid content, which results from promotional and publicity campaigns carried out using payment, such as integrated ads on web pages or for content recommendations;
- and content produced by publishers but sponsored by brands, where “brand journalism” is found. Here, the advertiser does not exercise total control over the

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.cenp.com.br/cenp-meios>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

published content, which obeys journalistic production criteria, but raises questions about transparency and credibility.

In 2014, The New York Times announced its first native advertising campaign, i.e., targeted specifically at the characteristics of its readers and aimed at increasing engagement and visibility for the brand, through content that in this case resembles journalistic content. In the same year, in the US market, other outlets embarked on the same strategy, such as the Wall Street Journal, the Tribune Company, and The Washington Post. Also in 2014, The Guardian opened Guardian Labs, a center dedicated to branded content, followed by the main Spanish publishers (Hardy, 2017; Andrade & Rubim, 2024). In Brazil, Folha de S. Paulo was the first media group to launch a department dedicated to producing branded content, in this case, Estúdio Folha, in 2015 (Bueno, 2020). The Metrôpoles website, the subject of our study, launched MLabs in the same year.

Observing this scenario, we aim to reflect on the convergence between economic dynamics, which are necessary to sustain media companies, and journalistic credibility, which is under threat but no less important for maintaining the activity. We consider the growing influence of marketing professionals in news communication spaces and the importance of transparency for responsible journalism, which claims to be committed to the exercise of citizenship. To do this, we carried out an exploratory case study (Yin, 2015) of the sponsored content hub of Metrôpoles, a website founded in 2015 in the Federal District, which in 2022 became the second most accessed digital news outlet in Brazil<sup>3</sup> and, in 2023, proved to be the Brazilian website with the most engagement on social networks<sup>4</sup>.

### **Citizenship, credibility, and profit**

The full exercise of citizenship is directly associated with the free flow of information, and the right to communication is one of the pillars of individual and collective rights. Producing, receiving, and accessing information freely is a basic premise for becoming a citizen. This is the first direct link between journalism and citizenship since this activity became professional precisely in the context of the establishment of a democratic society and the demands for information. The concept of freedom of the

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/imprensa/metropoles-chega-ao-2o-lugar-dos-portais-de-noticias-mais-acessados-do-pais>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/imprensa/metropoles-e-o-site-brasileiro-com-mais-engajamento-nas-redes-sociais>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

press, then, does not lend itself to the professional or the media outlet, but to society as a whole.

Free from the constraints of the state, in democracies, the Western press developed a commercial model which, on the one hand, guaranteed non-interference by governments, but, on the other, subjected the activity to economic interests. In Brazil, the majority of media outlets are private, contrary to the constitutional principle of complementary systems (private, public, and state). This has led to the need to reconcile private interests with public interests, i.e., those of every citizen.

Since the 19th century, the commercial press has developed its business model based on advertising, as well as individual sales and reader subscriptions. However, with the emergence of the Internet, the advertising pie has been diluted in the last decade, and the professional press is increasingly competing with other distribution channels and brand promotion, amplifying a financial crisis, which is also associated with a credibility crisis that affects journalism itself.

The discussion around the paradigm of structural changes in journalism is marked by the work of Brin, Charon and Bonville (2007), in which they suggest a historical typification of journalism: broadcast journalism, which dates back to the period of the emergence of the activity, still in the 17th century; opinion journalism, characteristic of the 19th century; information journalism, which originates at the turn of the 20th century, with the adoption of the commercial press model; and, finally, what they call communication journalism, which emerges from the 1970s and 1980s with the diversification of the media market, the multiplication of media and information services. What some might call a crisis, the authors identify as a new paradigm, a new model through which journalism can be understood today.

In an analysis of this proposal, Mathien (2001) presents a paradox: if, on the one hand, this communication journalism is the result of the intense action of the cultural industries in recent decades, private media systems and an Americanization of the press model; on the other hand, in the author's view, information journalism has not been completely abandoned, especially in professional and deontological discourses, which dialogue with values such as democracy, freedom of expression and the right to information.

Despite the signs of change, journalism as a social practice and as a profession has shown some stability over the centuries, especially in its founding and legitimizing ideologies. Deuze (2005), for example, lists five elements of the ideology of journalism that are recurrent, despite the transformations that the author calls multicultural and

multimedia: the understanding of journalism as a public service; the notion of objectivity and impartiality; journalistic autonomy in the exercise of work; the meanings of timeliness and immediacy; and, finally, the ethical issues that validate the profession. At least in the sphere of discourse, these elements remain in the debates about contemporary journalism.

We know that, in the case of the Brazilian press, a financial crisis intensified in the 1990s: partly due to variations in the national economy and the influence of the dollar, but also due to the entry of new technologies, especially the Internet. We have simplified this scenario here, but there is already a vast literature that presents the variables that mark the supposed crisis in journalism, best defined as changes that are sometimes conjunctural and sometimes structural (Agnéz, 2014).

In journalistic practice, credibility, that is, what generates trust that what journalism presents is true, is anchored in two foundations: technique and ethics. In addition to the moral, deontological commitment, the technique developed by the field is what defines the parameters of the journalistic product. Sodr  and Paiva (2011, p. 21) explain that the public and the press have signed a credibility pact aimed at guaranteeing freedom of expression and "publicizing the truth hidden in the depths of Power". Thus, the press would be the opposite of rumors, invested with the "moral right to narrate", as a witness to the facts, if not directly, at least as a reliable mediator.

The advance of the commercial media, which includes communications journalism, has led to this pact being directed more towards the sphere of discourse, with strategies for capturing the audience, such as sensationalism, and the interests of these corporations taking center stage. Sodr  and Paiva (2011) say that the public is not a victim, as it was complicit in this new communication pact and favored entertainment.

This defense worked to maintain the credibility contract or pact for more than a century, but there are now many studies that point to the crisis of credibility in the press. Lisboa and Benetti (2015) differentiate between trust and credibility. The former is a vow, while the latter is the result of an experience. Journalists have been entrusted with the role of narrating facts of social relevance, witnessing situations, and becoming technically and ethically capable mediators. Thus, "by fulfilling its role, journalism would be guaranteeing its credibility" (Lisboa & Benetti, 2015, p. 16).

However, trust in the news and the press has fallen in Brazil. According to Digital News Reporter 2023, a study carried out by the Reuters Institute, 43% of Brazilians do not trust the news published by news outlets, 5% more than in 2022. In 2015, the rate reached 62%, went to 48% in 2019, improved during the pandemic (reaching 54% in 2021), and

reached the worst rate in 2023 (Carro, 2023). In the most recent survey, 41% of respondents still said they avoided consuming information from the press.

Many factors contribute to this scenario, such as sensationalism in coverage of crimes and tragedies, a lot of news that is considered bad (such as that which filled the news during the COVID-19 pandemic), political polarization during election periods, competition with entertainment content, among others. Technical and ethical failures have led to a drop in the population's trust index, and paid content, published in the press in the guise of editorial content, can be further compromised.

### **Journalism between marketing and content**

In this context, Bueno (2020) highlights the differences between journalistic discourse and advertising discourse, which, even though they may be confused, differ fundamentally in purpose. The author also explains the changes between the *publiteditorial* (a tool used for decades by advertising agencies and press offices) and today's "brand journalism", which uses professionals in the field and journalistic techniques to sell and promote organizations.

From the brand's point of view, there is some outstanding communication work at the intersection of advertising, journalism, and public relations, which has been growing and showing results even in matters related to reputation management (Bueno, 2020). The controversy is over the deontological challenges of journalism, which needs to reconcile private interests with its social role of defending democracy and guarantees for the exercise of citizenship.

"With the decline of advertising and the difficulties for media companies to survive in the digital environment, there has been an increase in sponsored content studios, as a form of funding for the media," say Ferreira and Rocha (2021, pp. 35 - 36), also pointing out that, 'among scholars, branded content still generates divergent views about the credibility of the material produced'. The authors emphasize how much branded journalism depends on how the public perceives this product, associated with the maintenance (or not) of ethical principles. characteristics

Brand journalism makes use of methods, techniques, and values associated with journalism to produce informative content sponsored by brands, which seek customer recognition and to strengthen relationships with society. The aim is to involve and inform the target audience, providing relevant information in journalistic language, through attractive narratives and content (Lehto & Moisala, 2014; Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017; Andrade & Rubim, 2024; Carvalho & Santana, 2024).

Brand communication is interested in the values added to the informative enunciation, which is constructed to weave a bond of credibility between the interlocutors, through accurate and verified data in narrative formats that cause the effect of a sense of truth (Charaudeau, 2012; Sodré, 2009). This is a valuable enunciative strategy, especially when the public has become fatigued with traditional forms of advertising and propaganda (Carvalho & Santana, 2024, p. 213).

Companies have invested in brand journalism due to the crisis in traditional media, the fragmentation of audiences, and consumers' desire for relevant content with fewer promotional features. It is a form of marketing in which companies create and distribute journalistic content to inform and entertain, using journalistic techniques and formats to tell their stories (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017).

It was a response to the need for companies to communicate more effectively in an increasingly complex digital environment, where credibility and engagement are key. In addition, the digital environment has expanded the possibility of creating their communication channels (blogs, websites, social networks, etc.), with a wide variety of formats. At the same time, with the financial crisis of news outlets, many have launched branded content centers as an alternative to increase revenue, which produce and publish content with journalistic characteristics but sponsored by brands.

Ethical complications arise when the boundaries between journalism and advertising in the digital space jeopardize transparency, authenticity, and credibility, which are crucial for news outlets, but also important for brands to maintain the trust of their audiences (Lehto & Moisala, 2014). There is a growing expectation that organizations be transparent about the origin and intent of the content they produce, or else brand journalism can contribute to the tension between information and disinformation if their revenues content is not identified as sponsored, as it can lead to audience confusion about the source and intent of the content (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017).

According to Serazio (2021), the growth of brand journalism and native advertising can lead to a decline in the credibility of journalism as a profession because the public may view sponsored content as biased or lacking objectivity, affecting the reliability of news sources. This leads to an even greater erosion of public trust in the media, as the public struggles to differentiate between real journalism and sponsored



content. The author also points out that the “privatization of the public sphere through brand journalism” poses a threat to democratic values if priority is given to maximizing profits to the detriment of objective reporting and transparency to the public, contradicting fundamental journalistic principles such as truth and social responsibility (Serazio, 2021).

A study carried out by Andrade and Rubim (2024) found that, of the 42 Brazilian online news outlets audited by the Instituto Verificador de Circulação (IVC) in 2022, 38 produce some kind of journalistic content by/for brands, which represents 90% of the total. Of these, 21 companies said they had specific units for this type of material, while another 12 reported that newsroom professionals or hired freelancers produced it. “These spaces, operating independently, not only boost companies' revenues but also provide a contemporary approach to the creation and distribution of advertising content” (Andrade & Rubim, 2024, p. 3).

Called studios or labs, according to the survey, these spaces are staffed by professionals trained in communication, most of whom are journalists, followed by advertising or marketing specialists. The teams also included image, data, technology, layout, and statistics specialists, among others. Among the main aspects identified by Andrade and Rubim (2024, p. 15) is the fact that “there were difficulties in discerning between editorial and commercial content, which underlines the need for unambiguous guidelines for labeling content, to avoid any ambiguity”.

## **A serious case**

Metrópoles is not among the sites audited by IVC, so it does not appear in the survey by Andrade and Rubim (2024). To contribute to this reflection, we carried out an exploratory case study (Yin, 2015) based on three groups of materials: 1) a documentary analysis of the Media Kit 2023, the most up-to-date document available in the “advertise” section on the website<sup>5</sup>, which contains information on the presentation of the branded content nucleus, types of ads, and audience and engagement data; 2) a qualitative interview with the head of content responsible for the sector that works with brand journalism services; 3) a content analysis of the materials identified as sponsored and published between June 10 and 16, 2024.

We first looked at the layout of the content on the main page (cover) of the site and the organization of the menu, paying special attention to how it was identified (or

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/anuncie>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.



not) as advertising. After collecting the sample for this study, in addition to identifying the advertisers, we analyzed the structure of the texts, how they were signed, the tags used, the types of media employed, and the sources cited.

The site reports in its Media Kit 2023 that it has 2 billion views across all platforms, 54 million unique users per month, and 13 million followers on social media (data from Google Analytics, May 2023). Since its launch in 2015, Metrôpoles has created MLabs, a commercial project focused on producing sponsored content, which is presented as follows:

**Figure 1**  
*MLabs - Presentation*



Source: Media Kit (2023). Available at: <https://www.metrolopes.com/anuncie>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

Also in the Media Kit 2023, the site presents the types of advertising, divided into:

- Native advertising: "Despite being sponsored by a brand, the advertiser does not influence the development of the content, which is produced by journalists following the editorial standards of the vehicle. The intention is to draw attention to a subject, taking into account a particular theme suggested by the advertiser and involving its brand."
- *Publieditorial*: "Sponsored post created in collaboration with the advertiser. Our team works together with the brand so that we can create content that is of high interest to the reader and that reaches the largest number of people in our

audience. Produced by Metrôpoles' branded content department and does not involve the outlet's editorial staff."

In 2023, while conducting scientific initiation research within the scope of the Higher Education Institute of Brasília (IESB), we had the opportunity to interview<sup>6</sup> journalist Fernando Braga, head of strategic content and responsible for MLabs. At the time, Braga explained that the center acts independently of the editorial team of the vehicle to "maintain the transparency and credibility of the texts produced" (Sousa, Lima & Agnez, 2023, p. 13). According to him, the team relies on the services of journalists, editors, designers, advertisers, programmers, and videomakers, totaling around 20 professionals.

Regarding the language and narrative adopted by the branded content team, there are only a few general guidelines, but nothing formalized like a writing manual. What there is, according to him, is a refinement of writing and the way of communicating with the reader, typical of journalism and incorporated by the sector. Regarding the routines, Braga stated that they work in harmony with the commercial department, prospecting projects that may have sponsors, but that also have content, from an informative perspective, that is "interesting for our audience and interesting for the advertiser so that they can convey the message, convey what they want to their target audience". In addition to informative materials and content for social networks, he reported that the events section was growing, as one of the services provided by MLabs.

Reflecting on the ethical implications of this type of sponsored content, the interviewee stated that there is no specific parameter for excluding any advertiser profile, except for organizations that "offend minorities" or that promote products that disagree with Metrôpoles' values, even if this is vague. What Braga assured is that the "media outlet is not responsible for any controversy related to its clients, since MLabs always indicates that the content is sponsored and unrelated to the portal itself" (Sousa, Lima & Agnez, 2023, p. 11).

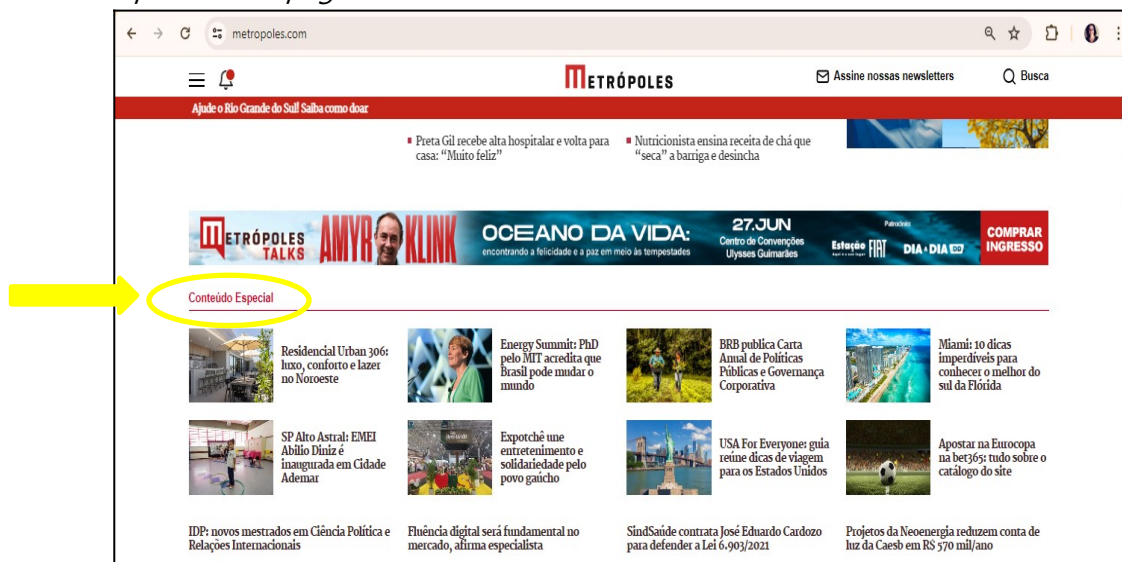
At this point, our case study reaffirms the difficulty of maintaining transparency about these types of publications, as pointed out by several authors (Lehto & Moisala, 2014; Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017; Serazio, 2021; Andrade & Rubim, 2024). Both in the Metrôpoles menu, where the most traditional division of journalism by editorial sections is found, and on the main page (cover), the identification as "Special Content" appears

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<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted by journalism students Ana Luísa Ferreira Sousa and Clarissa Estefânia dos Santos Lima, under my guidance, on July 11, 2023, in Brasília.

(figure 2), which could be, among other formats, a report or a dossier, but there is no direct indication that it is advertising, propaganda or sponsorship.

**Figure 2**  
*Metrópoles homepage - Part 1*



Source: <https://www.metrôpoles.com/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

Scrolling down, still on the cover, “Special Content” mixes with content from columnists and informative editorials (World, Federal District), as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Metrópoles homepage - Part 2*



Source: <https://www.metrôpoles.com/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

Further down, also on the home page, where “Latest News” is indicated, content appears marked as “Links sponsored by Taboola”, which is one of the most used platforms for recommending paid content. Here we see another issue: these tools use cookies and automation to direct ads to readers, and the websites, in general, are exempt

from responsibility for what is published. On the day the content analyzed was collected (June 10, 2024), the sponsored link indicated by Taboola referred to a website called G7 News, whose visual identity refers to G1 and has signs of being a clickbait space, as there is no identification of ownership or authorship, in addition to the content not presenting sources or scientific proof. Given this, can Metrôpoles resort to the argument that it is not responsible for what the advertising tool distributes to its readers through its website?

**Figure 4**  
*Metrôpoles homepage - Part 3*



Source: <https://www.metropoles.com/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

Only at the bottom of the main page, where the topics "who we are", "hours of operation", "terms of use", "advertise", and "contact us" are listed in smaller letters, is there a "sponsored post" item. Clicking on it takes you to the "Special Content" page, where all the materials produced by MLabs for advertisers are published.

In the week the material was collected (June 10-16, 2024), we identified 18 texts published in this section. All were identified at the top of the page as "Special Content". Most (seven) were published on Monday, with no posts on Saturday and only one on Sunday.

Among the advertisers, the most frequent was the City of São Paulo, with four publications. With three texts, Metrôpoles Talks, the website's events section that promoted a lecture with navigator Amir Klink, was the second most frequent. With two pieces of content each, the Federal Council of Engineering and Architecture (Confea) and the website *Visite os EUA* appeared. Then, the following advertisers made up the sample, with one text each: Banco de Brasília (BRB); two real estate developments (Emplavi and

Faenge); two events (Energy Summit and Innova Summit); a car dealership (Saga BYD); and the National Grape and Wine Fair.

The materials follow the structure of a news text, with an informative title, thin line, and inverted pyramid format. Despite an appearance reminiscent of news, reading reveals a complimentary and adjective-based language closer to advertising discourse. We present two examples below:

On 06/10/2024, the text about a real estate development ("Residencial Urban 306: luxury, comfort and leisure in the Northwest") contains in its first paragraph a propaganda text, instead of the journalistic lead:

Luxury, comfort, security, and leisure are some of the distinguishing features of Residencial Urban 306. Faenge's new development, located in Noroeste, an upscale neighborhood in Brasília, redefines housing standards in the federal capital with a modern structure that prioritizes the comfort and quality of life of its residents.

On June 16, 2024, the text about the National Grape and Wine Fair, when referring to the two organizers, uses adjectives that go beyond the basic parameters of the objectivity of the informative text, without data or even sources, with excerpts for example: "few partnerships have managed to achieve the prestige and success achieved"; "the secret to the success of these professionals is the perfect combination of individual talent and teamwork"; "transparency and ethics have always been present in all activities".

The media used were mostly photographs, either isolated or in gallery format, always signed as publicity, reproduction, or by some image bank. There was one occasion in which a photo was credited to Agência Brasil (material about Confea), and on only two occasions were their photos credited by Metrôpoles itself. Still thinking about multiple media, the Confea post was the only one that had a linked video, in this case, a production by the advertiser itself, taken from YouTube. Furthermore, in this same case, there were direct links to the sponsor's website and social networks.

Of the 18 pieces of content collected, all of them had the expression "sponsored post" among the tags at the end of the text, except for the three that announced the event promoted by Metrôpoles Talks. However, the tags contain other expressions. For example, in the text "BRB publishes Annual Letter of Public Policies and Corporate Governance", sponsored by Banco de Brasília, the tag "economy" is also used, which,



when clicked, refers to the entire content of the editorial section, that is, leading the Internet user to navigate, without much clarity, between commercial and editorial content.

Finally, there was no standardization regarding the signature of the texts, as exemplified in Figure 5. In the news, it is usually the editorial team or the reporter who signs, among the collected material, 12 were signed as "Special Content". Two texts from 06/10/2024 were signed by the advertisers, without an obvious reason (BRB and Emplavi); two texts from the City of São Paulo were signed by a person, whose name, when clicked on, the website only refers to "special content" from the same advertiser; and two texts from Metrôpoles Talks were signed as "From the Editorial Team", without knowing whether they refer to the MLabs center or to the editorial team of Metrôpoles itself.

**Figure 5**  
*Text signatures – collected material (examples)*

<p><b>Conteúdo Especial</b> 10/06/2024 11:25, atualizado 10/06/2024 17:33</p>	<p><b>Emplavi</b> 10/06/2024 17:38, atualizado 10/06/2024 18:27</p>	<p><b>Da Redação</b> 12/06/2024 02:00, atualizado 12/06/2024 13:03</p>
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Source: <https://www.metropoles.com/>. Accessed on June 14, 2024.

An advertisement is identified by its form and by the signature of the person promoting it. In the case of content that resembles editorial content, therefore journalistic, the presentation was as "advertorial" or "advertising information" (Bueno, 2020). There is no exact reference to when advertising became "special content" for readers or journalistic outlets. The fact is that the Brazilian Journalists' Code of Ethics (Fenaj, 2007) states that journalists must inform when the published material is the result of advertising or sponsorship, just as the Brazilian Advertising Self-Regulation Code (Conar, 2021) and the Consumer Defense Code (Brazil, 1990) are categorical in saying that an advertisement must be presented as such.

## Conclusion

The Metrôpoles website is one of the most successful digital natives in Brazil, having emerged in the last decade in the Federal District and gained national scale. It is a private media outlet, owned by businessman and former impeached senator Luiz Estevão. In 2022, it became the second most accessed news website in Brazil (behind only G1), and the following year it became the one with the highest engagement on social

media. With open content, the basis of the business model is advertising, in its different formats made possible by the digital environment. In addition, more recently and following a trend, it has diversified its sources of revenue with new services, such as holding corporate and artistic events. In the fight for a slice of the advertising pie, it launched a center dedicated to producing content sponsored by brands, a strong trend among news websites.

In the 2023 Media Kit, the outlet highlights not only its ability to reach audiences and engage but also the fact that it offers “established journalism,” due to the awards it has received. This aspect demonstrates how much the journalistic ethos still functions as an argument for the credibility pact, at least in discourse. “Good journalism,” recognized and awarded, investigates, denounces, and therefore, plays its role in defending democracy and citizens’ right to information. It is important to note that a media kit is a document that talks to advertisers, therefore, inviting these brands to share the credibility and expertise of the news outlet (the ethical + technical formula).

Metrópoles produces in-depth reports, whether awarded or not, that gain national prominence, as was the case with the complaint by Caixa employees that led to the dismissal of the institution’s then-president for sexual harassment in 2022, published exclusively by the website<sup>7</sup>. Or even the survey of public spending by the Federal Government in 2021<sup>8</sup>, which drew attention due to the high amounts of items such as chewing gum and condensed milk. However, the same Metrópoles published a columnist’s report, endorsed by the editorial board<sup>9</sup>, who unjustifiably exposed that a young actress, a victim of rape, gave up the baby born as a result of the violence for adoption. In addition to other sensationalist coverage, as occurred with the story of a married woman who was caught having sex with a homeless man<sup>10</sup>. We know that situations like these go viral, gain clicks, and have national repercussions, and not just the so-called established journalism.

Added to this scenario is another type of content – branded content – presented by the website as “special content”, produced by branded journalism that is increasingly dedicated to so-called native advertising, whose strategy is established through the

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/colunas/rodrigo-rangel/exclusivo-funcionarias-denunciam-presidente-da-caixa-por-assedio-sexual>. Accessed on June 11, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/mais-de-r-18-bilhao-em-compras-carrinho-do-governo-federal-tem-de-sagu-a-chicletes>. Accessed on June 11, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/imprensa/metropoles-e-leo-dias-reforcam-compromisso-com-rigor-e-etica-no-jornalismo>. Accessed on June 11, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/distrito-federal/exclusivo-morador-de-rua-espancado-por-personal-fala-pela-1a-vez>. Accessed on June 11, 2024.



camouflage of promotional content in a journalistic format. Is it enough for the teams to be separate, in this case, the editorial team and the branded content team, to guarantee editorial independence? How can a journalistic outlet exempt itself from responsibility for what is published in its space, especially with a journalistic appearance? The consequences of this practice have already been pointed out, both as another challenge to journalistic credibility and as a contribution to the scenario of disinformation, by further blurring the boundaries between advertising and journalism (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017; Serazio, 2021).

Despite the many terminologies that converge in the same tangle (digital marketing, content marketing, branded content, native advertising, brand journalism, advertorials, etc.), we question the variations that have been used in journalism in this search for survival, especially in the digital ecosystem, and we conclude with Bueno's warning (2020, p. 376): "It is imperative to recognize that sponsored journalism cannot be considered journalism if we include ethics, transparency, public interest and the veracity of facts as its basic values".

The credibility pact between journalism and society needs to be truly resilient to withstand so many elements. In the set of transformations brought about by the digital scenario, transparency becomes a demanded element, even part of a set of broader rights for the exercise of citizenship. This transparency is required of both news companies and advertising brands. In the same media outlet, journalism that fulfills its informative function is committed to democracy, is the same one that competes for clicks, appeals to sensationalism and entertainment, or even publishes advertising in the form of "special content". This situation contributes to greater public distrust in the media, as it becomes more difficult to differentiate between authentic journalism and content influenced by sponsors, in addition to putting pressure on a digital environment that is already polluted and disputed by misinformation.

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**RESUMO**

Veículos e anunciantes têm investido no chamado “jornalismo de marca” e na “publicidade nativa”: de um lado, empresas jornalísticas buscam alternativas ao modelo de negócio para diversificar as fontes de receita; de outro, marcas visam engajamento e reputação por uma comunicação informativa, com menor evidência promocional. Há uma apropriação das técnicas jornalísticas e uma ameaça a valores éticos fundamentais, como a transparência nos limites entre jornalismo e publicidade. Para contribuir com esta reflexão, realizamos um estudo exploratório do Metrôpoles, um sucesso comercial do jornalismo digital na última década e um dos pioneiros na implantação dos núcleos de *branded content* no Brasil. Observamos riscos em se acirrar a crise de credibilidade na imprensa e até mesmo ampliar o cenário de desinformação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Conteúdo patrocinado; Jornalismo de marca; *Branded content*; Modelo de negócio; Credibilidade jornalística.

**RESUMEN**

Los medios de comunicación y los anunciantes han invertido en el llamado “periodismo de marca” y “publicidad nativa”: por un lado, las empresas periodísticas buscan alternativas al modelo de negocio para diversificar las fuentes de ingresos; por otro lado, las marcas buscan compromiso y reputación a través de una comunicación informativa, con menos evidencia promocional. Hay una apropiación de las técnicas periodísticas y una amenaza a valores éticos fundamentales, como la transparencia en los límites entre periodismo y publicidad. Para contribuir a esta reflexión, realizamos un estudio exploratorio sobre Metrôpoles, un éxito comercial del periodismo digital en la última década y uno de los pioneros en la implementación de centros de contenidos de marca en Brasil. Vemos riesgos de empeorar la crisis de credibilidad en la prensa e incluso ampliar el escenario de desinformación.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Contenido patrocinado; Periodismo de marca; Contenido de marca; Modelo de negocio; Credibilidad periodística.