
Misplaced marketing

And a comedian shall show journalists the way

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Auburn University, Alabama, USA

Abstract

Purpose – To discuss the time when an overuse of a marketing perspective for a product is detrimental to the best interests of society. In this case, using marketing to drive journalistic decision results in a poorly informed electorate in which a comedy program of admitted fake news provides more insight into the truth of politicians' statements than do actual television news shows.

Design/methodology/approach – The starting-point is the fake news program on a comedy network, whose show host himself generated news during the election season with confrontations and criticisms of journalists who failed to do their reporting job.

Findings – The journalists, according to Stewart, have come to serve theater and the illusion of objectivity instead of the truth. When marketing drives journalism decisions, the public loses.

Practical implications – This abuse and misuse of marketing for news programming decisions lower the credibility of all news and information, and the dedicated journalists in the professions should take Jon Stewart's criticisms as a call to action. People from the USA need to be better informed about the world instead of having their own continued biases and misperceptions fed by pundits. At worst, this is a misleading selling of news as a commodity instead of informing the public.

Originality/value – Jon Stewart was right when he said to the NCC pundits, "You're killing us." Fake news should not be more information-driven than the news networks.

Keywords Elections, Television news

Paper type Viewpoint

While using the style and format commonly seen on half-hour news programs, *The Daily Show* appears on the appropriately named US cable television network Comedy Central. The host of the show, Jon Stewart, lists his vocation as comedian, he calls his program "fake news" and the advertising for the program at one time stated, "when news breaks, we fix it!" Yet in the weeks and months leading up to the 2004 Presidential election, numerous major political leaders and candidates, including John Kerry and ex-president Clinton, were interviewed on the show.

More notable and itself generating news was Stewart's television appearances on programs with journalists and political pundits in which he complained of their failure to cover the actual news, or worse, their apparent inability to state what political claims were true. On a CNN show alleged to feature discussion, he told the hosts "please stop. You're killing us," in that the hosts' ideology-driven, often *ad hominem*, yelling was often removed from the facts or even from substance. Saying he would love to watch a news discussion program, Stewart said they were theater, not news, despite their prime-time schedule on the nation's first 24-hour

news network[1]. In other televised meetings with respected anchors from the major national networks, he pointed out how too often a news show's claims of objectivity impelled the reporter to merely repeat politicians' talking points without any consistent effort to present the truth. Politicians in any country are always criticized for distorting the facts for political gain (e.g. Jevons and Carroll, 2004), but in theory the news media should strive to present the important facts that people need to know to limit the citizens from being misled.

To a casual observer, consumers can choose from a vast and diverse selection of news options. Yet ratings dictate the options, so it is important to note what is still not widely available or existing only at the margins. The unfortunate situation is that despite the plethora of news options in the twenty-first century, or, maybe because of it, some of the most popular news programs are not objective or balanced, or even based on facts, as the commentators present unending opinion statements confirming the preexisting beliefs of audience members.

In his 1976 black comedy movie, *Network*, Paddy Chayefsky envisioned a world in which news editors would not give people what they need to know, but instead, what the audience wants to know, assuming that those people in the audience were members of demographic groups targeted by advertisers. Supposedly, the movie gave us a nightmare world, but marketing driven news is the modern reality. Today, if it is not hot and popular it might not be covered. The once-popular format of all-news radio has given way to talk radio and all-sports stations.

When former football hero and media star OJ Simpson was on trial for murder, the channels were all OJ all the time,

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/0736-3761.htm



Journal of Consumer Marketing
22/3 (2005) 119–120
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0736-3761]
[DOI 10.1108/07363760510600312]

bumping most other information off the screen in the process. And their ratings went up. Just prior to the September 11, 2001, terrorists attacks, the news networks were consumed with the disappearance of a congressional intern romantically linked to her married politician supervisor. More recently, one man's trial for killing his pregnant wife dominated the news on all channels, to the exclusion of coverage of similar homicides or even other news events of potentially greater import. In the US, coverage of international news is minimal, as is economic news or anything requiring discussion, explanation and nuance. In the early days of the 2000 presidential election, a reporter gave a pop quiz of sorts to candidate George W. Bush and he was unable to provide a clear understanding of other countries or their leaders. But then, he represented the popular mood. Up till the end of 2004, public opinion polls repeatedly found large percentages of the US public stating belief in numerous often-repeated talking points on talk radio that had never been supported by the facts.

Marketing planning for a product's features is based on assessing what consumers would choose. But marketing should not be applied to everything in society; some parts of public life are too important to let the public opinions dictate their content or form. From a societal point of view, sometimes marketing should not dictate the product itself.

In his appearance on the aforementioned CNN program, the pundits tried to attack Stewart for asking soft questions of an important politician appearing on *The Daily Show*, but Stewart pointed out that one of his show's lead-in programs features puppets making crank phone calls. As he said, "You guys are on CNN." And yet, in 2000, as candidates made appearances on talk programs that were more social than substantive, almost half of young adults reported that they sometimes got their news on the presidential campaign from the late night comedy talk shows (Meisenheimer, 2000). In 2004, many people considered *The Daily Show* a news source, and it often did more to point out political hypocrisy and factual absurdity news than the real news programs.

In the early days of broadcasting, news was a public service. Networks did it for prestige; stations did it because it was indirectly required for them to hold a government-granted license and operate in the "public interest." It was not

expected to make a profit. But now it is a profit center in its own right, and this influences the decisions of what and how the news might be covered. News channels want to maximize ratings. News divisions of broadcast networks or stations compete for dominance in the areas covered. Despite the boom in television news channels, broadcast news has become a business instead of a service.

A century ago, advertising supported newspapers also derived revenue from political parties or opinion groups. Advertising and marketing plans did not dictate the news coverage, but rather, a political philosophy of the owner. According to some, that meant more news was covered and a greater diversity of views were available to the public (Baker, 1994). But when any news vehicle depends purely on public support and a need for profit maximization, news the people need gets a back seat to what they want to hear.

There still exist a number of hard-working and dedicated journalists, but in the modern model of objectivity, they just report what is said instead of trying to point out what is true. The truth is not a bias, and objectivity does not make facts irrelevant as the reporter repeats what people are saying. It is unfortunate that a comedian, an entertainer, was needed to point out that too many journalists have lost their way.

Note

- 1 In January 2005, CNN announced that the program is canceled.

References

- Baker, C.E. (1994), *Advertising and a Democratic Press*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Jevons, C. and Carroll, J. (2004), "Misusing marketing in misleading voters", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 21 No. 5, pp. 299-300.
- Meisenheimer, S. (2000), "Gen Y gets political news from TV and papers and Leno and Letterman", *Medill News Service*, July 24, available at: <http://mesh.medill.northwestern.edu/mnschicago/>