

# Native Advertising

## New Challenges for Online Consumers and the Role Of Media and Advertising Literacy

Publicidade nativa: novos desafios para os consumidores *online* e o papel da literacia mediática e publicitária

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### Abstract

The following paper proposes a study of the concepts associated with native advertising, a new iteration of the advertorial. Native advertising is a growing form of digital communication used by corporations to market their products in an online setting. Because of the fact that consumers are becoming gradually less receptive to traditional forms of advertisement, marketers have been exponentially resorting to more subtle, less intrusive ways of presenting their products. These new advertising practices might create some challenges to consumers, specifically in their capacity to distinguish editorialized contents from commercial ones. It is for this reason that, in this exploration of the definition and characteristics of native advertising, we will also briefly discuss why Media Literacy – which includes advertising literacy – and media skills are important resources to identify and avert the deceptive nature of this online marketing practice. The adoption of some fundamental literacy competence could better prepare consumers to discern between commercial and noncommercial contents, thus empowering them in the digital landscape.

O seguinte artigo propõe um estudo sobre os conceitos associados à publicidade nativa, uma nova iteração da publrreportagem (*advertorial*). A publicidade nativa é uma forma crescente de comunicação digital utilizada por empresas para promover os seus produtos online. Uma vez que os consumidores estão cada vez menos recetivos às formas tradicionais de publicidade, os profissionais de marketing têm recorrido exponencialmente a formas mais subtis e menos intrusivas de apresentar os seus produtos. Estas novas práticas publicitárias

rias podem criar desafios para os consumidores, especialmente no que concerne à sua capacidade de distinguir conteúdos editoriais de conteúdos comerciais. Consequentemente, nesta exploração sobre a definição e as características da publicidade nativa, também discutiremos brevemente a literacia mediática – que inclui a literacia publicitária – e as competências mediáticas enquanto recursos importantes para identificar e evitar os elementos ilusórios desta prática de marketing online. A adoção de algumas competências fundamentais de literacia poderá preparar melhor os consumidores para discernir entre conteúdos comerciais e não comerciais, empoderando-os no cenário digital.

### Keywords

Native Advertising • Advertorial • Media Literacy • Advertising Literacy • Media Skills

Publicidade Nativa • Publireportagem • Literacia Mediática • Literacia Publicitária • Competências Mediáticas

## 1. Introduction

The field of Media Literacy has experienced a continuous evolution since the second half of the 20th century, influenced, in part, by the evolutions and mutations of technologies and by the expansion and democratization of access to new tools concerning communication, consumption, socialization, entertainment, creative production, etc.. The dominant approaches to the field of Media Literacy were based on concepts usually associated with the harmful impacts that media – e.g. television and film – had on children (Potter, 2010; Hobbs 2011). It was generally perceived that it was imperative to educate younger generations in a school environment, in an attempt to prevent them from being affected or persuaded by the harmful influences of screens. Subsequently, the transformation and expansion of the media universe brought about the emergence of new communication instruments, i.e., the computer, the internet, video games, social networks and mobile devices. With that, the concepts regarding Media Literacy have evolved to include

education about these new and specific tools, which incorporate aspects related to prevention methods against their potential risks. This evolution is at the essence of the origin of various ideas that designate new modes of literacy, e.g. Digital Literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), Internet Literacy (Livingstone, 2011), New Media Literacy (Lin *et al.*, 2013) or Transmedia Literacy (Scolari, 2018).

With the internet, an ample amount of new challenges – and, consequently, new demands for Media Literacy – emerge. One of said challenges has to do with the ways in which advertisement has adapted to cyberspace, with companies making use of the ambiguities specific to the online world that make it possible for ads to become particularly subtle and possibly misleading for users. Native advertising is a form of advertisement that blends into the context where it appears, making it subtle and sometimes indistinguishable from other content (Yao *et al.*, 2021; Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Harms *et al.*, 2019; Wojdyski & Golan, 2016; Campbell & Marks, 2015; Coddington, 2015; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). This growing practice is done in an effort to counteract people's aversion to advertising and the skepticism they feel towards claims made by advertisers. By intertwining with other content and becoming less intrusive, a native ad can disguise as valuable information or entertainment, making users engage with it, sometimes unbeknownst to them. It is necessary to mention that this text does not intend to serve as a guidebook to accurately and consistently identify when and where a native advertisement is present. The purpose is mainly to describe to the reader what commonly characterizes native advertising, making them (more) aware of such online practices, and to briefly discuss why Media and Advertising Literacy and some of its skills are of significant importance for consumers to better approach some of the challenges that might arise in the current advertising cyberspace.

## 2. Media Literacy and Skills: a Conceptual Approach

In his 2010 essay *The State of Media Literacy*, James Potter argued that there is a certain amorphousness or uncertainty regarding the term Media Literacy.

In his paper, which gathered a wide list of definitions of Media Literacy from different scholars, he demonstrates the range of heterogeneous ideas concerning the interpretation of the term. Taking this argument as a starting point, let us review some definitions from academics.

For example, according to Anderson (1981) this term defines a “skillful collection, interpretation, testing and application of information regardless of medium or presentation for some purposeful action.” (p. 22). For Silverblatt and Eliceiri (1997) it is a “critical-thinking skill that enables audiences to decipher the information that they receive through the channels of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about media content.” (p.48). Barton and Hamilton understand this concept as “primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people” (as cited in Mackey, 2002, pp. 5-6). Finally, Adams and Ham (2001) argue that “Media literacy may be thought of as the ability to create personal meaning from the visual and verbal symbols we take in every day from television, advertising, film, and digital media. [...] They [the students] must be critical thinkers who can understand and produce in the media culture swirling around them.” (p. 33)

Potter (2010) explains that some of the differences between the interpretations appear to portray three questions that confront scholars studying Media Literacy: 1) “What are the media?” – some academics focus on just one format (e.g. television or internet), while others recognize that this field should be concerned with all forms of media; 2) “What do we mean by literacy?” – there is a wide spectrum of thoughts here, ranging from the notion of increasing skills (e.g. critical thinking), building new knowledge or proactivity in the political and sociocultural scope; and 3) “What should be the purpose of Media Literacy?” – numerous researchers exploring this topic claim that the purpose is to improve citizens’ quality of life, generally giving them more control over how media messages affect

them. Regardless of some divergences in expressing this matter, he argues that there seems to be an ecumenical agreement in relation to certain core ideas and a universal acceptance of various peripheral notions, and it is even possible to stitch together four common themes where there is a collective consensus that crosses the literature on Media Literacy:

1. Mass media have the capacity to exert a wide range of potentially negative effects on individuals;
2. The purpose of Media Literacy is to help people protect themselves from those potentially negative effects;
3. Media Literacy must develop continuously, as the media and the format of their messages are constantly evolving;
4. Media Literacy is multidimensional, influencing individuals in multiple ways – cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, physiological, behavioral – directly (individually) or indirectly (through other people, cultures or institutions).

Responding to Potter, Hobbs (2011) later expands on certain notions, adding some aspects that she claims have been neglected in his paper. In Hobbs’ view, those who tend to position Media Literacy education merely as a panacea for the negative effects of media exposure may be overlooking the multiplicity of effects inherent to the field. Presented by the author as an expansion of the concept of literacy, Digital Literacy and Media Literacy are recognized as tools that enable young people to actively participate in civic political life, allowing them to access information on relevant topics, assess the value of the available information and enter into dialogue with other individuals in order to form coalitions.

These quasi-contrasting views denote a division that persists in this field between the ideologies of empowerment and protectionism, in which, on the one hand, we observe academics defending a position that promotes the idea of a conceptual expansion of the notion of literacy, and, on the other hand, we find that there are those who adopt a perspective that portrays Media Literacy

as a detractor of the negative effects of media and popular culture. Regarding the first point, it appears that there is a clear interest in using Media Literacy as a tool for empowering young people. Academic studies exploring methods that support this viewpoint are crucial components of research in digital education and Media Literacy. There is also a wide range of initiatives led by the younger generations, in which media productions become a vehicle to develop self-esteem and create identity, to form critical thinking about new technologies and media and to promote cultural exchanges (Hobbs, 2011; Cole *et al.*, 2007)

In line with the epistemological studies of Potter and Hobbs, and at a time when the media environment manifests itself as an unstable and fluid setting, it is necessary to build a set of models that incorporate skills that agree with the available tools, with how we interact with them and even with the way we communicate. In the current field of studies that explores media competence and transmedia literacy, we can identify different propositions of models such as those of Mihailidis (2019), Scolari (2018) or Ferrés and Piscitelli (2015).

Taking the model and concepts of the last two authors, according to Ferrés and Piscitelli (2015) competence is “generally understood as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes considered necessary for a given context.” (p. 6). In the media context and in the culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), media skills contribute to the development of citizens’ critical capacity, revealing itself both in the assimilation and in the production of contents. A set of criteria is proposed with the objective of guiding the development of media education and competence, incorporated into the matrix of participatory culture: “combining the critical and aesthetic spirit with the ability to express and the development of personal autonomy with social and cultural commitment.” (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2015, p.1). This model of study of media skills was developed based on six dimensions: *language*, *technology*, *interaction processes*, *production and diffusion processes*, *ideology and values* and *aesthetics*. At the same time this proposal bases itself on two distinct contexts: a) *analysis* or the way we receive and interact with messages; and b) *expression*, that is, the way we produce messages. Although these

competences are divided into the aforementioned categories, the points theorized by the authors are somehow interrelated (Sigiliano & Borges, 2018). For the present paper, which will later describe the concept of native advertising and explore the challenges that arise from this new form of online communication and marketing, the main focus will be on the analysis part of this theoretical model. As such, what follows is a brief description of the six dimensions proposed by Ferrés and Piscitelli:

1. The *language* dimension defines the ability of citizens to interpret, analyze, express and change existing content. Language translates the ability to understand the way messages are produced in different media contexts and to determine relationships between texts, precepts, symbols and media.
2. In the field of *technology*, media skills are expressed through the understanding of the role that information and communication technologies play in contemporary societies, but also the capacity to handle technological innovations, thus making multimodal and multimedia communication possible.
3. With regard to *interaction processes*, these skills are revealed through the abilities of citizens to select, review and self-evaluate what they consume, to discern the reason why they appreciate a certain product or object, and to establish an intercultural dialogue and appreciate messages from foreign groups.
4. The *production and dissemination processes* are transmitted through knowledge of the distinctions between individual, collective and corporate content, knowledge of creation systems, programming techniques and dissemination modes, and of the factors that transform corporate productions into messages subject to the socioeconomic conditions of an industry.
5. The dimension of *ideology and values* corresponds to the ability to assess the levels of reliability of the information we consume, to detect and adopt a critical attitude about the intentions, ideologies and values of corporate and popular productions or to identify and analyze the consequences of the use of

stereotypes regarding gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, culture, etc.

6. Finally, the *aesthetic* aspect is related to the ability to confront media productions with different artistic manifestations, identify aesthetic categories such as originality, trends or styles and recognize the aesthetic quality of the content that is consumed (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2015; Sigiliano & Borges, 2019; Sigiliano & Borges, 2021).

Moreover, it is also important to evoke a model that emphasizes competence for this specific form of communication. For example, skills which fall under the umbrella of *advertising literacy*, a term which refers to the capacity to identify, assess, and comprehend advertisements and other forms of promotional communication. While these competences form a fundamental component of media literacy, it is relevant to discern some distinguishing characteristics associated with advertising literacy (Malmelin, 2010; Potter, 2019).

According to the model developed by Malmelin (2010), the main components of advertising literacy are *Informational literacy*, *Visual/Aesthetic literacy*, *Rhetorical literacy* and *Promotional literacy*.

1. *Informational literacy*: the ability to differentiate among various sources of information, as well as comprehend their diverse applications. This empowers individuals to effectively search for, identify, and select information sources pertaining to companies, products, and brands. It involves recognizing the objectives of these sources and evaluating their validity and reliability.
2. *Visual/Aesthetic literacy*: the capacity to understand and assess the artistic techniques and languages used within advertisements, as well as comprehend the implied messages that are conveyed, especially when verbal expression lacks clarity or directness.
3. *Rhetorical literacy*: this skill focuses on the tactics of persuasive communication employed in advertising, enabling the identification of its marketing goals and target audiences. It allows for the recognition of logical and illogical sequences of arguments, of manipulation

and seduction strategies and it helps to identify contradictions, identify gaps in reasoning, and formulate opposing viewpoints.

4. *Promotional literacy*: enables individuals to recognize the pervasive presence of commercial elements within media and comprehend that promotional content can present in various forms. These forms include partnerships and sponsorships, product placement, and content production, which may not always be explicitly labeled as traditional advertisements.

As we will later understand, as a consequence of the subtle and ambiguous ways in which native advertising is produced and the resulting difficulties in regulating this new trend, it's essential for netizens to recall some of the above-mentioned skills in order to independently regulate the information they consume and to protect themselves against the deceptive qualities of these adverts.

### 3. Native Advertising: the New World of Advertising in Cyberspace

The term “native advertising” was introduced by Fred Wilson in 2011, referring to a form of online advertising that has, over the last years, become a main marketing strategy for corporations (Yao *et al.*, 2021). This expression has been used as an umbrella term to describe different forms of online marketing communication. Native advertising relates to a wide spectrum of new digital advertising methods that try to reduce its disruption to the consumer's experience by blending into its online context. This result can be achieved by optimizing ad placement on the page or mimicking the style of the hosting website (Campbell & Marks, 2015; Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Other authors have reinforced this chameleonic nature as one of the fundamental characteristics of native ads. Wojdyski and Golan (2016) refer to native advertising as the practice by which marketers use the credibility of the original publisher by producing content that uses a format and location identical to the host. Native ads can take on a multitude of forms, including sponsored news articles, sponsored posts on social media,

sponsored hyperlinks or recommendation blocks (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016) and native content that is produced as a collaboration with the hosting website (Harms *et al.*, 2019). They can appear in keyword searches, on publisher websites and in many social media platforms (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

The integration of commercial messages in editorial content is not, however, a novel nor recent practice. Native advertising might be understood as a new form of advertorials, a genre of advertising that contains traits similar to those commonly associated with news articles (Coddington, 2015), a practice that dates back to the nineteenth century. As it is described by Linda Lawson (1988), advertorials, also known as reading notices, were advertisements written in the form of news. This happened because magazines and newspaper editors came under the assumption that people were more prone to reading news stories than advertisements. The author gives the example of an edition of the *Chicago Record*, issued in 1893, that published a reading notice by the title “A Dangerous Diet; How Meat May Cause Disease and Even Death”. The story was created by a patent medicine seller that wrote fictional news stories in order to sell a specific product: within the text, “Warner’s Safe Cure” was mentioned as the secret to a long life.

In the second half of the 20th century, Donald Snyder, the editor of the transmedia magazine *The Atlantic*, recognized that the current advertising slogans were not able to convey adequate messages to consumers in the modern economy. As a consequence, Snyder announced:

To provide the facility for advertising to convey information, the Atlantic has developed a new form for the expression of business ideas. We call them Advertorials. They will be paid advertisements...They will involve the thoughtful participation of the reader; they are intended to give him pause – and in the pause, compelling facts about the way American business works. They are predicated upon the belief that the free competition of ideas has made this country great. (Snyder, as cited in Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015)

Following this message there were five pages of ads sponsored by the American Iron and Steel Institute, followed by the caption: “An Atlantic Public Interest Advertisement” (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015).

This marketing model has also been well established in other media. Ever since the beginning of the radio we find examples of commercials that were narrated by hosts of broadcast media (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016), a trend that continued with television. A good example of this praxis is found on what was called “Camel News Caravan”, a television news program that was on air from 1949 to 1956 on NBC, anchored by John Cameron Swayze, a former radio commentator. When the program first aired, the press release for its opening stressed the network’s commitment to the accuracy of their reports:

The complete news-gathering facilities of our network with more than 200 persons will be made available to this new television news show. We will be on the spot with our mobile units, cameras, and reporters whenever possible, to maintain the network’s high standards of complete and accurate reporting. (as cited in Karnick, 1988)

As it is made clear by the title of the program, this show was sponsored by the cigarette brand Camel. Watching the episodes that are now available online (NBC, 1954, 1952) the permanent presence of cigarettes – be it on display on the anchor’s desk or as they were smoked by the guests – and the glaring references to the delights of smoking Camel make it hard to focus on the news element of this TV show and to assess the “complete and accurate reporting” that it proclaimed. Nevertheless, this was NBC’s most profitable news program at the time (Karnick, 1988).

The aforementioned cases, tracing back to the nineteenth century, can be looked at as archetypes of what can be found in today’s digital world, albeit with the necessary adjustments to fit the medium and the audience’s growing aversion to advertising (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wojdyski & Evans, 2014; Harms *et al.*, 2019).



**Figures 1 and 2.** *Camel News Caravan*, 1949-1956 (source: NBC)

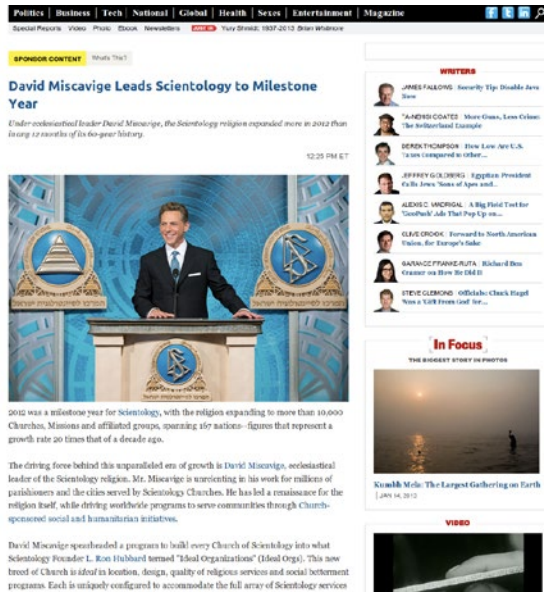
Assuredly, the decline of traditional media made it necessary for companies to find original ways to advertise within the current online marketplace. The use of banner advertising has proved itself to be significantly inefficient (Sherman & Deighton, 2001) and even irritating for users (Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). Therefore, marketers are increasingly turning to ways of advertising

that are less intrusive. According to Harms *et al.* (2019), in 2017 native advertising accounted for 37,6% of advertising investments, becoming the world's largest advertising tool. The predictions of spendings on native advertising have shown great levels of underestimation: taking as an example the case of the U.S, in 2014 the estimations about the investments on native advertising by the year of 2018 were of \$8.8 billion (Sebastian, 2014 as cited in Campbell & Marks, 2015). In 2018 this number was expanded to reach \$32.9 billion (eMarketer, 2018). The prominence of this form of advertising is demonstrated by major websites such as search engines like Google and Yahoo and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, mainstream companies that make use of native advertising as a primary tool to promote services and products to their users (Yao *et al.*, 2021).

In the field of cyberjournalism this trend is commonly associated with websites like BuzzFeed, although its reach has been far and wide, affecting news organizations such as The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press and The New York Times (Coddington, 2015). This form of advertising has arguably compromised the ethical-deontological precepts of journalism, manifesting itself, according to Miranda (2021), as a serious threat to the border that divides the editorial and the commercial domains. The aim of this type of advertising is to provide objective information of commercial or industrial interest and make newsreaders engage with an advertising object (Howe & Teufel, 2014; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Reis, 2015). As David Carr explains, sponsored content is “advertising wearing the uniform of journalism, mimicking the storytelling aesthetic of the host site.” (as cited in Coddington, 2015, p. 76).

One of the most notorious cases regarding native advertisement in the online news industry happened in January 2013 in The Atlantic newspaper. The now infamous publication was a propaganda piece, written in the style of a news article, authored by the Church of Scientology, in which the success and expansion of the organization was portrayed. This act would outrage the journalistic community and its readers and, consequently, would result in the removal of the article paid for by the Church of Scientology (Einstein, 2015).





**Figure 3.** “David Miscavige Leads Scientology to Milestone Year”, The Atlantic, 2013 (source: Gawker)

Although much of the news and studies regarding this topic relate to the U.S., many other countries are also adopting these new strategies of communication. For instance, we can observe that this practice is also gaining advocates in Brazil, within cyberjournalism’s ecosystem. In 2015, *O Globo*, a newspaper from Rio de Janeiro, announced that it would focus on native advertising and on the production of content for brands. This would result in the creation of “Estúdio Infoglobo”, a venture incorporated into its commercial department, but which still included journalists in its group. Likewise, the newspaper *O Dia*, also from Rio, published, between 2014 and 2015, a series of pieces portraying the celebrations of the 450th anniversary of Rio de Janeiro. The texts were produced as advertising to be distributed in hotel chains and travel agencies, all with the explicit sponsorship of the city hall/local government. This is an initiative that can carry editorial risks if we take into account that these paid advertisements, masked as commemorative articles, occupied several pages, removing space from daily reports (Reis, 2015).

Given the various forms that native advertisements can take, frequently the only aspect

that identifies this type of content is some kind of disclosure that can vary both in form and in placement (Wojdyski, 2016). As reported by Wojdyski and Evans (2014) and Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015), websites usually use a top-positioned label with words like “Sponsored by” or “Paid content”. By searching different websites we can identify the numerous distinct labels used to signal this content. In Facebook, for example, we find the words “Suggested Post” and “Sponsored”, in Twitter and in Reddit the disclosures read “Promoted”. In some cases the terms are substantially more ambiguous, as can be illustrated by The Atlantic, which uses a range of labels such as “Crafted by” “Presented by” and even simply “With” (Sirra, 2019). One can conclude that the disclosure information is often very subtle (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015) and studies even shown that people tend not to notice or to misinterpret them:

While the primary problem appears to be lack of attention to the disclosure, the findings also point out a potential pitfall of designing advertising disclosures to be noticed: some consumers may interpret them as stand-alone display advertisements rather than a label referring to the article itself.”. (Wojdyski, 2016, p.13)

Many of the examples we have touched on, heavily suggest that much of the business model of native advertising is based on a substantial degree of deception. Native advertising is essentially designed to *deceive* readers, or, if we want to use a less provocative but no less harmful expression, to confuse them, even if only for a few moments. According to Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015), there is evidence that shows that as soon as an individual detects that they are in front of an advertisement, a defense mechanism is activated, leading them to consume a certain object with relative skepticism. Native advertising seeks, on the one hand, to disguise as some other form of content and, on the other hand, to instill in the consumer the notion of credibility, thus trying to avoid this mechanism. There are several theories that may help us understand how these business models incorporate deception



strategies, suggesting that this type of ambiguity intrinsic to native advertising is formulated to deceive consumers.

First, the persuasion knowledge theory refers to the extent to which individuals are capable of grasping what is an advertising and when they are being exposed to persuasive attempts. When a consumer is able to recognize a persuasive attempt, their prior knowledge regarding persuasion is activated, which can alter their response to an advert. Nonintrusive forms of advertising have less explicit persuasive motifs, making persuasion knowledge and the activation of defense mechanisms occur in a later stage. This scenario will then enhance the effectiveness of these types of advertisements (Harms *et al.*, 2019, Wojdyski, 2016, Tutaj & Van Reijmersdal, 2012, Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Taking a similar perspective, in schema theory, Piaget (1967) proposes the idea of schemas which are cognitive maps, developed through personal experience and socialization, that organize our knowledge about a given reality, creating expectations in relation to that same reality. For example, the concept of supermarkets: from the moment we enter the building until the moment of checkout, we have a very good notion of how to behave in order to get the products we want. Our schemas help us determine “standard” behavior in a specific context and fill in any gaps in a familiar situation. In this perspective, and if we take into account what was said above, consumption patterns associated with advertisements usually amplify consumers’ skepticism. To counter this tendency, sponsors use the precepts of native advertising, that is, the typeface, imagery and structural styles of other content, to make the differentiation between the advertisement and noncommercial content difficult, thus avoiding the emergence of this skepticism.

Finally, the theory of source-based misleadingness tells us that producers of native advertising make use of the authority conferred by the environment in which they develop their practice, in order to persuade users to assign the same level of trust to the product or service that is being advertised. Consumers often evaluate information based on the source of the claim rather

than the content. The mimicry strategies used by advertisers allow the transfer of authority from editorial content to the advertisement, resulting in an increased level of reliability in advertising objects (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015).

Campbell and Grimm (2019) claim that, although native advertising as it is practiced in cyberspace may seem identical to practices found for example on television, it appears that companies are taking advantage of some ambiguities that are specific to the internet and that can make it particularly misleading for users. For example, social media platforms and video-sharing websites such as Youtube have led consumer and advertising content to intertwine. This is most evident if we discuss the role of influencers who are, fundamentally, paid consumers used to promote products and services to their followers. In the case of influencers with smaller followings they can be perceived as closer to their audience and their paid endorsements may pass for simple suggestions. In addition to that, seeing as it is so easy to befriend or follow celebrities on social media, there is an increasing risk for advertisement to be confused with consumer word of mouth:

With friends acting as endorsers, and endorsers and celebrities acting as “friends,” native advertising raises questions concerning the nature of celebrity and the line between advertising and word of mouth or free speech. (Campbell & Grimm, 2019, p. 112)

The trait of subtlety in advertisements done by influencers, many including storytelling qualities, is often considered to be preferred (Maheshwari, 2016) and some might mention a product or a service in a seemingly peripherally way, avoiding aggressive or obvious sale-oriented expressions (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

The subtle and ambiguous ways in which native advertisements are produced are at the core of the difficulty to regulate this practice. The Federal Trade Commission – a U.S. government agency that aims to prevent fraudulent business practices and provide information to help consumers identify and avoid scams – has issued, in 2015, a statement that explains the standards that can be

applied in this context (FTC, 2015a), but the same agency questions the efficiency of those standards: “as native advertising evolves, are consumers able to differentiate advertising from other content?” (FTC, 2015b). Petty and Andrews (2008) have emphasized the possibility of violation of the FTC’s existing statements, especially given the fact that “the practice of marketing advances at a pace far faster than that of marketing regulation” (p. 15). To give an example, an influencer might post a native advertisement that simply consists of a picture of a product, without adding a product-related description. Campbell and Grimm (2019) argue that even though recent guidance from the FTC indicates that simple images can contain an implicit claim about a product, their guidelines regarding this matter are fairly vague. Likewise, Petty and Andrews (2008) and Cain (2011) mention that FTC statements are generally focused on more concrete claims (such as claiming that a product is “healthy”), but the fact is that influencers and celebrities often make claims that are of a more affective nature, that is, implying enjoyment or simply usage of a product or service (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Indeed, Petty and Andrews (2008) assert that constant updates are necessary to include current examples of deceptive ads and to clearly inform consumers about types of commercial connections that might be unexpected to them.

By taking into consideration the many aspects that have been discussed above, it becomes clear that native advertising poses some big challenges, be it on the corporate, institutional, or individual level. And it is because of these challenges that it is essential to bring back some of the key concepts touched upon in the first half of this paper. Media and Advertising Literacy represent fundamental tools in the current scenario where computing, communication and content converge in a single space (Aisah, *et al.*, 2019) and where the boundary between advertising and noncommercial or editorialized content is blurred. Therefore, it is imperative that citizens are able to evoke certain skills that help them self-regulate the contents they consume. It is equally important that consumers are able to recognize sponsored materials, prior to a close reading of the content (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015).

## 4. Conclusion

Throughout the third part of this paper, native advertising has been defined from different perspectives. From what we have learned this concept can be summarized as follows: native advertising is a marketing mechanism used in the new media that can be described as being deceptive by nature. This is due to the fact that its methods try to reduce the disruption of consumer’s experience, by blending into the online context in which they appear. In other words, these advertisements are integrated with other types of content and can disguise, for example, as valuable information or entertainment. Given the fact that this practice seems to counteract people’s skepticism, like some of the theories analyzed before have proven, native ads are increasingly becoming a popular tool for the advertising industry and big tech companies. This new paradigm is also posing difficulties for regulatory agencies to create adequate policies as a result of the subtle and ambiguous qualities of native advertisements.

Retrieving the model of media skills proposed by Ferrés and Piscitelli (2015), it is our assessment that of the six dimensions presented by the authors, *language*, *interaction processes*, *production and dissemination processes*, and *ideology and values*, serve best as agents against possible risks of native advertising. The *language* dimension focuses primarily on the ability of interpretation and analysis of the way messages present in different media, as well as the relationships between distinct texts and symbols. This perspective is in line with Marshall McLuhan’s equation of media with languages, asserting that there is a fundamental need to understand the distinct grammar of each media:

“Let us not lose ourselves by supposing that we have merely to contend with new forms of mechanization. Radio and TV aren’t audio-visual aids to enhance or to popularize previous forms of experience. They are new languages. We must first master and then teach these new languages in all their minute particularity and riches. (McLuhan, 1969, p. 133)

A thorough understanding of the processes and languages that govern digital communication will always be the most favorable way to a responsible and safe consumption of this medium. In this regard, where the relevance of Media Literacy is emphasized, it is imperative to argue the need to educate for the “Ability to analyze and evaluate messages from the perspective of meaning and sense, narrative structures and genre and format conventions” (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2015, p.9). Concerning the *interaction processes*, it is vital to build people’s skills in self-regulating the contents that they chose to consume and their “Ability to discern why certain means, products or contents are appreciated. Why they succeed, individually or collectively: what needs and desires are satisfied at the sensory, emotional, cognitive, aesthetic and cultural levels” (idem, p. 10). By acquiring the abilities to reflect on the choices they make online and on the content itself, they are likely to become more sensitive to the subtle aspects inherent to native advertising. The *production and dissemination processes* embody structural knowledge in this context, namely “Knowledge of the basic differences between individual and collective, popular and corporate productions, and in the case of the latter, public or private ownership.” (idem, p. 12). This dimension highlights the capacity to tell corporate and individual productions apart, a skill that is essential to help people notice when they are in the presence of a native ad. Finally, the scope of *ideology and values* involves the most crucial competence to lessen the potentially harmful components of this type of advertisement. Here, let us underline the “Ability to assess the reliability of information sources, drawing critical conclusions, both from what is said and what is omitted.” and the “Ability to detect the underlying intentions or interests, both in corporate and popular productions, as well as their ideology and values, explicit or latent, adopting a critical attitude towards them” (idem, p. 13), which we endorse as urgent skills to be acquired by online users when receiving and analyzing content with ambiguous qualities, such as native advertising.

Advertising is clearly a unique form of communication. The interpretation and understanding of advertising requires specific literacy skills that

differ from those needed in the production and reading of other symbolic forms of communication. The growth and development of media and advertising culture has created a society where people need advanced skills of media and visual literacy (Malmelin, 2010). It might, therefore, also be important for us – *reader/consumer* – to be familiar with competence related specifically to advertising literacy and to be able to interpret the symbolic systems of this particular form of media – these can serve as a complement to the skills and model previously discussed. Because of this, it is also important to remember Malmelin and his advertising literacy concepts and model, this time, focusing on two of its dimensions: *rhetorical literacy* and *promotional literacy*.

In regards to the first, according to Silverstone (1999), advertising draws heavily upon the principles of classical rhetoric. Throughout history, rhetoric has been perceived as the art of verbal persuasion. While originally not devised for mass communications, these classical theories remarkably apply and prove effective within the modern media landscape. Both advertising and conventional marketing communications have been designed to persuade consumers. The rhetoric employed by companies is under frequent and continuous evolution, demanding consumers to possess or obtain progressive literacy skills. As consumers become increasingly adept at decoding these messages, the competition for their attention intensifies proportionally (Malmelin, 2010).

*Rhetorical literacy* focuses on comprehending the persuasive techniques utilized in advertising, involving the capacity to discern various means and strategies of persuasion within advertising and marketing communications in general, but also in the case of native ads. Furthermore, rhetorical literacy empowers individuals to critically evaluate the tones and visual expressions employed by specific advertisements.

Besides the rhetorical and persuasive elements used by companies in today’s media landscape almost everything that reaches consumers has a promotional goal. In this context, promotional literacy proves to be a crucial competence for netizens to acquire. This skill would enable them to assess and evaluate the commercial nature and the goals

of media content in general. An important feature of promotional literacy entails understanding the structures of media economy and ownership relations, i.e, the different types of commercial partnerships and collaborations in the media industry. The literature on media literacy frequently highlights subjects that directly relate to promotional literacy, by emphasizing the importance of equipping individuals with the tools to control how they interpret media messages (Silverblatt, 1995; Potter, 2019).

Certainly, the new challenges brought about by native advertising require skills of observation and recognition: as it was previously discussed, these ads can take multiple forms and the labels that identify this type of content can differ and are, often, considerably unclear (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Wojdowski, 2016). Therefore, there is a clear need for consumers to be able to identify various forms of advertising and commercial communications, which is challenging amidst the continuous flow of media content. As products and brands infiltrate not just conventional advertisements but also ads that can disguise as editorial content and entertainment, promotional literacy becomes increasingly vital.

As a final note, we acknowledge that by using terms such as “deceptions” “risks” or “threats” it might seem that we are falling into the recurrent narrative that looks at advertising, and by proximity media in general, from a negative standpoint. As stated by Henry Jenkins (2006) “Media are read primarily as threats rather than as resources. More focus is placed on the dangers of manipulation rather than the possibilities of participation.” (p. 259). Media Literacy has an unequivocally important role in people’s education of how to use each media as a resource, nevertheless it can be argued that for that, a primary step in Media Education must be taken, and it includes the acknowledgement of what can be called media fallouts. Refocusing on the topic at hand, increasing people’s awareness about Native Advertising does not necessarily intend to change its settings, but it certainly can prevent some of its inherent fallouts, and, borrowing McLuhan’s words in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, “is not the essence of education civil defense against media fallout?” (1962, p. 246).

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## Bio

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Ana Gavina has a degree in Foreign Languages and Cultures (Polytechnic Institute of Porto), a degree in Cinema (University of Beira Interior) and a Master’s degree in Tourism Management and Planning (Cultural Tourism) (University of Aveiro). With some experience in the production of independent films, her main areas of interest are cinema, post-cinema practices and cinematic subcultures.

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